

A *Very*
NAUGHTY
Christmas

AN AGE GAP HOLIDAY
ROMANCE COLLECTION

SOFIA T SUMMERS

A VERY NAUGHTY CHRISTMAS

AN AGE GAP HOLIDAY ROMANCE COLLECTION

SOFIA T SUMMERS

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It is intended for mature readers.

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OTHER BOOKS BY SOFIA T SUMMERS

Forbidden Temptations Series (Age Gap Romances - this series)

Daddy's Best Friend

My Best Friend's Daddy

Daddy's Business Partner

Doctor Daddy

Secret Baby with Daddy's Best Friend

Knocked Up by Daddy's Best Friend

Pretend Wife to Daddy's Best Friend

SEAL Daddy

Fake Married to My Best Friend's Daddy

Accidental Daddy

The Grump's Girl Friday

The Vegas Accident

My Beastly Boss

My Millionaire Marine

The Wedding Dare

The Summer Getaway

The Love Edit

The Husband Lottery

Christmas in the Cabin

Forbidden Fantasies (Reverse Harem Series)

My Irish Billionaires

Toy for the Teachers

Three Grumpy Bosses

Feasting on Her Curves

DESCRIPTION

**‘Tis the season for naughty, forbidden secrets, seductions,
and happily ever afters.**

Fall in love this holiday season.

*Three brand new sizzling hot age gap romances, specially
written to keep you warm this holiday season. (Yes, we are
talking about the heat between the sheets!)*

Book 1: Christmas with My Best Friend’s Dad

After two years in Paris studying music, Grace is back in Malibu, CA for Christmas, but she never forgot the last holiday she spent in California having an almost-one-night-stand with her best friend’s father, Jasper Hayes, enigmatic billionaire. Grace was ready to give Jasper her everything, until circumstance ripped it all to shreds.

Now, back and hoping to move forward, Grace finds herself faced with a morally ambiguous proposal from none other than Jasper himself. For \$25,000, Grace will pose as the perfect girlfriend for his company’s annual Christmas gala in NYC. It will only be one three-day weekend of elegant parties, dinners, and Christmas finery, but nothing is ever so simple.

*With everything falling apart, only a Christmas miracle can
repair the wounded relationships.*

Book 2: Knocked Up on Christmas Eve

Hope didn’t know what to think when she booked herself into a hotel on December 23rd. Her best friend was in love with her

father. Her father had paid her best friend to pose as his trophy girlfriend.

Feeling confused and betrayed, Hope walked herself into the hotel bar and found herself waking up in a room that wasn't hers. Instead, it belonged to Felix Jacobson, notorious billionaire executive and playboy (and a family friend).

Two Years Later, it's their daughter, Clara's, first real Christmas, but Hope doesn't know how to give Clara the one gift she deserves: her father.

Book 3: Her Secret Santa

They told Inez she shouldn't major in creative writing. They told her not to move to Los Angeles to try her hand at screenwriting, but when did Inez ever listen? How could she do anything but follow her heart right into the house of famous actor, Cole Crawford? She's trying not to drown in her student debt, and the gig Cole offers also means living in his Spanish-style mansion for *free*.

With his sister, Natalie, recently divorced, Inez finds herself as the young nanny of Natalie's twins, Rose and Asher. It's time for the family to deck their mansion's halls, but nothing about the season feels cheerful. Cole finds himself at a crossroads in his career, and the new buxom nanny he hired for his sister is only serving as a distraction. Inez is bright, beautiful, and far too appealing when she sleeps in his bed (unbeknownst to everyone else in the house).

Of course, there's no sneaking past the positive pregnancy test.

If you are craving for a little naughty with your nice this Christmas, grab this unputdownable box set of three standalone holiday romances, each one naughtier than the previous one and promising your usual Sofie fix – a touch of forbidden with the perfect happily ever after.

BOOK 1: CHRISTMAS WITH
MY BEST FRIEND'S DAD

GRACE AND JASPER



CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE: GRACE

Palm trees swayed through the Malibu breeze, their trunks wrapped in strings of colorful lights. The Pacific Ocean stretched out into the evening horizon over the bluffs as the sky went from rich violet to midnight blue. Out in California, it was hard to tell that it was the first weekend of December, but Hope Hayes was trying her hardest to let all of the Pacific Coast Highway know that Christmas was coming.

Dozens of party guests sang around me, “All I want for Christmas is you!”

They laughed, drank, and reveled in the finery of the lavish Hayes mansion.

Hope had spent days planning this grand affair. There were caterers, holiday decorations of silver and gold, a DJ remixing holiday hits, and some internet-famous bartender serving up seasonal cocktails.

There were friends from college and others from my Catholic school days. I stood in the middle of it all in disbelief.

My best friend had done all this for *me*. I had graduated from Pepperdine, turned twenty-two, and in two weeks, I would be leaving for Paris to continue my piano studies at one of the best music conservatories in the world.

Hope swore that I couldn’t leave without a proper send-off party, and it wasn’t like her father cared if she dropped a few grand on a party.

His investments alone could recover the cost of this party in just a few hours.

“Gracie!” I heard over the Mariah Carey tune. “Gracie!”

Out by the pizza oven and outdoor kitchen bar, Hope was waving to me from a barstool. Her grin was just as excited as the day I met her in Daisy Scouts. After all these years, she still had the same light-hearted laugh and upbeat energy. The

only thing that had changed about Hope was her father's obscene bank account.

"Hey, Hope," I greeted her.

I weaved through the warm bodies cluttering the poolside veranda. Lights floated around the still blue water, changing color from white to red to green. Nobody seemed to pay attention to the magic, but Hope didn't worry.

As I slung my arm over her shoulders, Hope asked, "Are you liking your party, or are you madly in love with it?"

I laughed. "Madly in love, definitely. You've gone all out for this."

Hope shrugged, running a hand through her smooth blonde hair. "What else is my dad going to do with this place? Stare at the ocean alone?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It's his house and his money. I guess he can do whatever he wants with it, even if that means being a very indulgent hermit."

Inez, my old college roommate and our mutual friend, joked beside Hope, commenting, "If I were going to be alone, this is exactly how I would do it."

"Pizza chef and all?" I bantered back.

Inez grinned. "Of course!"

When we were kids, Hope and I had always secretly tried to find a girl named Joy or Faith to turn our funny duo into a full-fledged trio, but we regrettably never did. Inez certainly fit the bill in every other way, though, even if she wasn't named Joy.

I was so glad Inez and I had been paired up in the freshman dorm. I felt so grateful for all of it—my friends, my life, and my future. It was exciting to be heading to a new country, but this night tinged everything with bittersweetness, especially as Hope wrapped her arm around my waist like she had a thousand times before.

"I love your dress, by the way, Grace," Inez remarked.

I ran my hands over the silky nude slip as I replied, “Thanks. It’s new.”

“We bought it just for tonight,” Hope declared. “Gracie, have you tried the pizzas yet?”

“No,” I confessed.

Without a second thought, Hope held up her plate. “Here, have a piece of mine. I can’t eat all of it, anyway.”

Inez sipped her bubbly cocktail as teased, “That one is Hope’s third.”

“Oh, like you haven’t had two yourself!” Hope laughed.

The soft, airy crust of the cheese pizza was wood-fired perfection. The mozzarella and basil melted over my tongue, and I had to stop myself from groaning. It tasted too good to be real.

“You were right, Inez,” I swore before taking my second bite. “If I were going to live here, I’d want a personal pizza chef too. God, I could eat this every day!”

“You gotta keep those Italian thighs thick, girl,” Hope joked, reaching down to pinch me mid-thigh. “Keeps some cushion for the pushin’.”

I laughed and hit Hope’s arm. “Oh, stop, Hope!”

“Never,” she swore sweetly. “You love me just as I am.”

“I do,” I relented. “I really freaking do.”

Inez smiled at us both as she added, “If you like the pizza, you should go get one of these signature cocktails. Have you had one yet?”

I shook my head. “Just a couple of glasses of champagne.”

“Go try one!” Hope insisted. “Go, sashay those hips of yours to the bar inside!”

“Fine, fine,” I surrendered. “I’ll be back in a while.”

Finishing my little slice of pizza, I headed back into the sprawling main house. It was easy with all the glass doors thrown open, but I was slowed by the other partygoers

stopping to talk to me. I didn't know whether ten minutes or ten hours had passed before I finally reached the makeshift bar setup in the kitchen. The double-wide stone island was covered in appetizers and desserts. In place of the breakfast table, a tattooed man was slinging around cocktail shakers and entertaining others.

"I can get a Mistletoe Martini?" I asked him, yelling over the chorus of an Elvis song.

"Sure thing, beautiful," he agreed with a suggestive smile.

I toyed with a piece of my chestnut-brown hair as I watched him mix the vodka with elderflower liqueur and a splash of cranberry juice. I wasn't interested in his flirting, but I liked how he garnished the cup with two candied cranberries on a toothpick.

"Thank you," I offered, accepting the stemmed glass.

"Enjoy," he told me.

His eyes suggested that I could banter back, but I refused. The only thing I wanted from him was the cocktail. I felt the vodka going right to my head two sips in, but with the third sip, the glass didn't meet my lips.

A broad-framed chest hit my elbow, and the rest of the martini poured down my dress. I convulsed at the chill before realizing whose masculine body I'd just smacked into. Looking up, I found myself caught in the crosshairs of his green and gold eyes. The top buttons of his crisp navy shirt were unbuttoned, and he looked perfectly disheveled.

There was only one man I wanted, and he was standing right in front of me looking remorseful and too gorgeous for words to describe.

"Grace, hell, I'm sorry," Jasper Hayes muttered under the sound of the music's bass.

"Jasper," I mumbled before swallowing back my nerves. "It's, um, it's okay. I'm good."

I really wasn't. One of those candied cranberries was sliding deeper into my bra. Before I could react, one of the

catering waiters popped up out of nowhere to take the glass and clear away the little splash of drink on the floor.

“No, you aren’t fine,” Jasper insisted in his dulcet baritone. “Come on.”

There was no arguing with Jasper. There never was. As he wrapped his confident hand around mine, I felt myself readily following him past a ten-foot Christmas tree and up to the second story of bedroom suites. The holiday music became muffled and then nonexistent as Jasper pulled me into the nearest suite. For a moment, my heart skipped, wondering if it was his very own bedroom.

It wasn’t. It was just one of the guest rooms, stunning but not his.

“Hope had been talking up that bartender guy,” Jasper explained as he turned on a glass bedside lamp. “I thought it wouldn’t hurt for me to sneak downstairs and steal one drink for myself. I guess it did.”

“This is your house,” I asserted quickly. “You should be enjoying yourself.”

He flashed a winning grin. “Well, I’ve never been a fan of crowded parties. You can get cleaned up in there. If you need something, I’ll be happy to get it.”

I blinked twice. His nonchalant smile had me like a deer caught in headlights. Without a word to utter, I nodded and hid away in the ivory and marble bathroom. The lock clicked as I sighed.

“Get a grip, Grace,” I told myself.

I inhaled deeply before examining the damage. As I looked at myself in the large mirror, it appeared the damage to my dress was not as bad as I’d thought. My sips of that cocktail had been more like swallows. The worst part was fishing that cranberry out of my strapless bra. With nowhere else to put it, I popped it into my mouth with a shrug.

Nobody had to know, right?

As I checked my reflection, my makeup appeared intact and my smooth, glossy curls remained as Hope had arranged them. Still, as I took a damp washcloth to my chest and neck, it had very little to do with the sugar from the cocktail.

Heat was pooling in my center like it always did when I was alone with Jasper.

I didn't know exactly when it happened, but when I discovered the appeal of orgasms, I also noticed the appeal of Jasper Hayes. He was intelligent, a self-made tech billionaire. He was handsome, putting Michelangelo's *David* to shame. Most of all, he was as gallant as if he were the last man in America, maintaining some sense of chivalry. He never minded when Hope brought me home or let me bum around the house since my parents' separation.

If anything, his kindness only made my feelings for him that much worse.

"Everything okay?" Jasper called through the door. "If you need something, I'd be happy to go get it from Hope's room."

"No, no," I assured him, not wanting to put him out. "I'm, um, all good."

I steeled myself before throwing open the door to Jasper's vibrant hazel eyes staring down at me. I was half-tempted to throw the bathroom door shut again.

"I'm a little damp, but I didn't melt," I joked with a small laugh. "No harm, no foul."

I brushed past him, feigning interest in the bedroom's view of the grassy bluffs. My heels clicked against the oak floors as I focused on the view. The sound echoed, but it didn't drown out the heartbeats drumming in my head. It didn't keep me from noticing how Jasper's sleeves were rolled up, exposing the dusting of gold hair across his sun-kissed arms.

Beneath the window, I knew there was a private cove beach down the winding gravel path. I imagined crawling out the window and escaping from Jasper's eyes, swimming far from his magnetic aura and the woodsy smell of his cologne.

I folded my arms across my chest and stared out at the sea.

“You know, it will be strange without you here,” Jasper remarked. “I’ve gotten used to having you and Hope palling around the house.”

“I know,” I agreed absently. “I’ll miss you.”

My body twitched in shock at the words escaping my mouth. I didn’t drink enough to have any tolerance to alcohol. My eyes shot toward him as I desperately tried to cover my tracks.

“I mean, you’ve been so generous in letting me come over on weekends and school breaks,” I continued hastily, fiddling with my gold thread earrings. “It’s been weird with my family since they started divorce proceedings in May. It was just, you know, nice to have somewhere to go. You’ve been, um, very . . . nice.”

“You were never any trouble,” Jasper replied while ignoring my fumbling foolishness. “As I said, I liked having you around the house.”

I laughed anxiously, “This house is so big. You probably didn’t worry about seeing too much of me.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You’ve become pretty hard to ignore, Grace.”

The gold in his eyes glinted, and my breath caught. There had been a hundred stolen glances and charming little lines, but I brushed them aside. I told myself that it was just my schoolgirl crush.

Jasper wasn’t flirting. He wasn’t watching me across the dinner table. No, it couldn’t be possible.

It wasn’t until he reached for my hand that I began to consider that all those dismissed moments had been real. My fingers stopped fidgeting with my jewelry. They tangled themselves with his warm fingers, and my lips parted to suck in a breath of static-charged air.

“Maybe . . .” I murmured. “Maybe I’ll miss you for other reasons too.”

“Maybe,” he echoed in a darkened tone.

I forgot how to breathe as Jasper tilted my chin upward. His alluring gaze caught me, body and soul. I was trapped there, and all I could do was let our lips meet. Slowly, one kiss turned into two, and my berry-stained lips parted to invite Jasper closer. I welcomed his chest pressing against me and his hands against my waist.

Jasper had hunted down every secret desire inside me, and now, there was no turning back.

“Jasper,” I whispered between kisses.

“You shouldn’t have worn such a revealing dress,” he teased me, his kiss trailing across my jaw. “You could kill a man looking like this, Grace.”

“Maybe I wore it for you,” I confessed, my fingers reaching out and curling around his shirt. “Maybe I wanted this to happen.”

“Is this what you wanted?” Jasper asked as his hand reached for the dress’s short hem.

His fingers pushed past the silken fabric to grip my ass as if he owned it. His fingertips dug into my skin, and I bit my bottom lip to stifle a whimper.

“For starters,” I managed to reply.

A low laugh reverberated through his chest before Jasper’s teeth nipped at my ear. As my neck tilted to make space for him, I couldn’t help but tug at the buttons of his shirt.

“What else, then?” Jasper urged me, his breath warm and his tone hungry. “What were you trying to achieve tonight?”

As my fingers found his last button, they trailed downward. There against his jeans, I felt Jasper’s hardening bulge rebelling against the dark denim. His erection was demanding freedom, and I knew just where it could go.

“I think you already know,” I whispered, my hand tracing back upward to run along his waistband.

Jasper’s chest rumbled with another growling laugh. As his hands pulled me toward the bed, I relished the feeling. A

Cheshire-Cat grin spread across my face as the zipper running down my spine came undone.

I didn't simply want his kiss or his touch. I desired every bit of Jasper Hayes. My legs, going weak, were ready to spread for him, to straddle him, to twist and turn whichever way he liked. My lace thong felt ruined by just how ready I was. Of the men I'd known, nobody else had made me feel so undone.

His hazel eyes were the only ones I wanted grazing over me in my lingerie. Only his hands could lay me down so easily before making a meal of my exposed body. Unveiling more of me, Jasper tasted my breasts and turned my nipples to pebbles with his tongue.

"You're going to be the ruin of me," he muttered against my torso, his lips wandering down. "You don't know how distracting you've been, how badly I've wanted to see you come undone."

"You can," I breathed raggedly. "Take whatever you want."

With my final declaration, Jasper hooked his thumbs under the lace of my thong to cast the fabric aside. My eyes shut as his hands pressed into my inner thigh. Fastening me to the bed, Jasper didn't hesitate to lick my slick folds. They were dripping with desire, and Jasper knew just how to drink it all in.

"Yes," I whimpered, my spine arching.

Jasper's gaze became smug as I dared to glance down at him. His hand left my hip to tease my clit. As he coaxed the pleasure from my body, it was all I could do to keep myself from screaming.

Euphoria rushed through me, but I wasn't spent. I was charged up and craving so much more.

"I want you," I pleaded. "Please, Jasper."

Jasper's fingers didn't stop tormenting me as he asked, "What do you want, Grace?"

“I want you inside me,” I panted. “I want to come undone.”

After all this time, I was a few heartbeats from what I craved. Jasper was pulling at his clothes at the foot of the bed. It would’ve been just a few more moments before our bodies connected.

A thump stopped us both in our tracks.

“Ow!” a girl’s voice lamented.

“You okay?” another asked.

“Yeah, I just bumped into that table,” the first girl replied. “Hey, I’ll bet there’s a bathroom in here.”

Jasper and I pulled apart instantly. My heart raced as I snatched up my clothes, but the door didn’t open. The girls must’ve wandered into the bedroom just across the hall. Running a hand through his hair, Jasper exhaled in relief.

“We . . .” he panted, catching his breath. “We almost . . . Grace, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t worry. We’ll have an ocean and a continent between us soon. Nobody needs to know.”

I didn’t wait for a reply. Hastily, I threw back on my clothes, realizing I’d never bothered to take off my jewelry or heels. It was easy to slide my zipper back up and rush out the bedroom door. I forced myself to breathe evenly as I heard my name being called.

“There you are!” Inez exclaimed. “Come on! It’s time for you to make a birthday wish. Hope’s lighting the candles on your cake!”

I smiled, but the feeling didn’t ring true. I had made the same wish on every birthday candle and shooting star for the last four years. Even if it was just once, I wanted to belong to Jasper Hayes, and at that moment, it felt like my only wish would never come true.

CHAPTER TWO

JASPER - TWO YEARS LATER

“I’m sorry about this, Jasper,” she apologized through the phone. “I spent a lot of time thinking about this, and I just think it’s for the best.”

I exhaled as I stared out the windows over sprawling Santa Monica. The view from my corner office swept from the canyons down to Will Rogers Beach, but it didn’t bring me any ease. I had screwed Olivia Lennox plenty of times, but now, it was her turn to screw me.

“I understand,” I half-lied. “If you’re with someone new, it wouldn’t make sense for us to see to one another when I’m visiting New York.”

Of course, I was happy if Olivia had a full-time significant other. We had only ever been ships passing in the night, but I had an annual shareholders meeting, a Christmas party, a formal dinner, and one mind-numbing luncheon to attend. With less than a week before I touched down in her hometown, Olivia was leaving me without a companion or any kind of amusement.

Couldn’t she have called sooner?

“Thank you for understanding,” she purred, still trying to be coy. “You’ve always been *such* a gentleman, Jasper.”

I laughed. “Not always.”

Her soft laughter echoed my sentiment before she agreed. “No, but those nights don’t count, do they?”

“I’ll leave that to you to decide,” I told her. “I hate to say it, but I have a meeting to attend.”

“Oh, I won’t keep you, then. Thanks again, Jasper.”

“Take care, Olivia.”

I hung up the phone and slid it back into the pocket of my navy slacks. No, I couldn’t fault Olivia for finding someone new, a man who would keep her bed warm full-time, but she

had put me in a damn tight spot. Forgiveness didn't mean I couldn't wallow in frustration.

"Colin," I called out, "come in here, please."

It took ten seconds for my assistant to come into the room. With a disappointed sigh, I turned away from the wall of tinted glass to meet him by my desk. Colin adjusted his tortoiseshell glasses while patiently waiting for further instruction.

"I just received a phone call from Miss Olivia Lennox," I explained with a grumble. "It seems she won't be able to accompany me to any of my New York events."

"What about Hope, sir?" Colin suggested.

"She does enjoy Manhattan, but she'll be in New Jersey visiting her mother's family," I reminded him. "I won't pull her away from her aunts for my petty problems. Now that she's working, Hope doesn't get to see them nearly enough. What about Lauren?"

"Miss Wingate is off shooting a film in Scotland," Colin reminded me.

"That's right," I muttered, crossing my arms and leaning against my rosewood desk. "Dammit, don't I know any single women?"

"I can check your contacts," he suggested with his usual professional polish.

I frowned at the thought. Colin wouldn't be able to find some secret woman in the long lists of email addresses he kept on file. I'd already looked through them myself.

Of course, I could be bold and go to my company's parties alone. I knew it wouldn't be the end of the world, but I'd never been one for crowds. I would find myself wandering, aimless and agitated as I moved through crowds of penguin suits and surgically-altered women.

Those people didn't know about me or care about the small talk passing between us. They liked my money. They wanted my influence and my pseudo-celebrity. With a woman on my arm, it gave me somewhere to focus all my pent-up

energy, and there was always a confidence boost from having a pretty smile in my corner.

My eyes drifted to the analog clock hanging on the midnight-blue wall. This predicament would have to wait.

“I need to leave,” I declared. “I’m meeting Hope for dinner, and I’ll never make it if I don’t beat the traffic. Oh, and double-check those mock-ups from the art department that arrived this afternoon. I’ve been waiting for those for two days now.”

“Of course, sir,” Colin agreed.

“Thanks,” I replied, my feet shifting to gather my things and go. “Have a good weekend, Colin.”

“You have a good weekend as well, Mr. Hayes.”

I tried not to worry about my date debacle as I headed down to the parking garage and drove myself to the chic Latin restaurant Hope had selected. Spanish tile covered the face of the bar. A wood-fire grill had meats sizzling in the back of the place, but I didn’t care about that. My interest was fixed on a pair of Pacific Ocean eyes and a girlish smile brightening at the sight of me.

“Hey, Dad.” Hope greeted me with a kiss on the cheek. “Long day at work?”

I smiled as we settled across from one another at the tucked-aside table. “How did you know?”

“Oh, I guess something about living with you for twenty-two years helped me learn your expressions,” she joked, flipping her blonde cornsilk hair over her shoulder. “You always look like you’re trying hard not to be exasperated after a long day in the office.”

“I thought your moving out to the guest house would make you forget things like that,” I bantered.

“Well, you never change,” Hope teased with a slight shrug.

As she laughed again, I couldn’t help but notice how much Hope had turned into her mother. We both lost Robin when Hope was just four in a car accident, but it seemed like our

little girl had learned to laugh like her mother from old home movies. She had the same polite smile to offer the waiter and the same soft waves in her hair. Even as Hope ordered her glass of Chardonnay and a ceviche starter, I blinked twice and found myself falling back through time.

I fell back to the days when I was married, young, and excited to be living. Then, another name made me fall forward into a pair of dark eyes and a night I couldn't forget.

"No matter how much I enjoy the wine, don't let me get a second glass," Hope declared. "I'm going to pick up Grace from the airport after this."

"Grace?" I echoed dumbly.

The waiter returned with our first course and drinks, and I sat there reliving a stolen moment that I'd never confessed to taking. Hope didn't know about what happened between Grace Balsamo and me. Hope could *never* know.

It had been easy to hold onto my secrets with Grace off in France. I wasn't sure if she'd been back west since she left for that music school in Paris. Hope had gone to Europe a few times to visit her friend and meet Grace's cousins in Italy. With Grace out of reach, I could remember how to breathe. I could go back to the familiar order of my life and take comfort in the things I already knew.

Not anymore, though.

"Yeah, she's coming back to California," Hope told me. "I thought I told you, like, last week."

"If you did, I don't remember it."

"Well, she is," my daughter asserted. "She's coming back to try her hand at being a professional pianist here, and I said she could stay at our place until she finds herself an apartment. That's okay . . . right?"

I took a long sip of my rum and Coke and sighed. "You live in the guest house now. You're welcome to invite anyone you would like out to stay with you."

Hope frowned. “Dad, I meant more like Gracie could stay in one of the five spare bedrooms in the main house. I only have the one bedroom, and Grace might be staying for a few weeks or so. I mean, I’d hate for her to be alone for the holidays.”

“She won’t go visit one of her parents?”

“No, her mom’s going on a cruise with her new husband, and her Dad’s off on another archaeological dig. Grace isn’t interested in spending Christmas digging up dinosaur bones. It’s still weird with her parents, so shouldn’t we try to make her comfortable? Shouldn’t she have a nice bed instead of my couch?”

I winced as I debated the idea. Unless it was entirely unreasonable, I had a hard time denying Hope’s requests. There was nothing unreasonable about Grace coming over to our house like she had a million times before.

The trouble was that Grace wasn’t a little Girl Scout anymore. She wasn’t a brace-faced teenager focused on her ivory piano keys. When I wasn’t looking, Grace had grown into a beautiful woman, effervescent with the promise of youth.

I couldn’t forget that young woman no matter how hard I tried.

“You’re right,” I agreed reluctantly. “Frieda cleaned the house today, so I’m sure any of the spare bedrooms will be free for Grace to use.”

Hope beamed, clueless to the sinful memories running through my mind. She reached across the table to squeeze my hand, and I felt like garbage.

“Thanks, Dad. I know Gracie will be appreciative too.”

I doubted it. Long after we finished our tacos and parted ways, I found the memories of Grace following me up to my driveway and into the house. The vision of her curves was so potent. I could still see myself pouring her body into a wine glass and savoring the flavor all night long.

I imagined she would be a rich, full-bodied red with earthy notes like her brown eyes and a bit of peach just like her soft backside. God, she even had those full teardrop breasts that could make a grown man cry. It was dangerous to remember, but I could still feel her statuesque figure taking my breath away in the darkness.

Every time I went back to that night, my body did too.

I dropped my keys into their sea-glass bowl as my suit pants became too confining. The growing length begged to have its release, and I couldn't stop it. The images of Grace were spinning around like a carousel.

I paced around the living room, recalling the tastes of her lips and her inner thighs. By the time I was upstairs, I was on the verge of insanity. There was nobody but me in the dark house. Nobody would have to know what I was planning to do.

Locked away in my bathroom, I made quick work of my belt and zipper. My erection ached in my palm as I let the memories of Grace wash over me and mingle with all the fantasies I never got to fulfill. In that bedroom down the hall, I could've ridden her into oblivion. I could've let her pouting lips wrap around my tip and swallow me whole.

There were so many things I wanted from her, but I couldn't have any of them. She was too vibrant and too young. Her smile shone in the lowest light, yet it wasn't mine to admire. I had tried to stake a claim once on something I couldn't have. I wouldn't dare again.

Yet, alone in my bathroom, I let the daydream play out. I twisted my hand up and down my shaft while I listened to whispers of my name on Grace's lips. The thought of everything I couldn't have made the rising ecstasy both damning and satisfying. With a few final strokes of my hand, I let the evidence of my sins shoot into the toilet bowl. It all disappeared as I faintly heard the garage door open.

As quickly as I undid myself, I put myself back together. I washed my hands and ran a hand through my hair as two

voices echoed through the living room. Suitcase wheels rolled across the hardwood.

“Dad?” Hope called. “Grace is here!”

Grace had arrived in full form, looking better than I remembered. Two years ago, I thought I’d seen her beauty, but it had only been the beginning. Now, at twenty-four, Grace Balsamo was a star outshining all others. Her vibrant light spread across my field of vision, and she became all I could see. Blinded by her beauty, I swallowed hard.

This young woman would be the ruin of me.

CHAPTER THREE

GRACE

Twelve hours from Paris to Los Angeles, and I didn't sleep a wink. I still couldn't believe I was leaving my tiny attic bedroom and heading back to my old life. Since starting school, I only ever came to the States to visit my mother and her husband, Bill, out in Connecticut. I'd never dared to wander west of the Mississippi River, but that didn't mean I forgot Malibu.

Those captivating hazel eyes had followed me around the winding streets of Paris. Their magic haunted me as steadily as the heartbreak of that fateful night. Even as Hope pulled up to her father's house, the emotion swelled in every breath I took.

Two years later, the Malibu mansion was still clean and classic. The water still stretched into the violet horizon, and I followed my footsteps into the house like I had a million times before.

"Dad?" Hope called out as she pulled her key from the back door. "Grace is here!"

My pulse raced as I heard footsteps coming our way. I tugged at the hem of my emerald silk camisole. Its draped neckline and thin little straps were a lot like the dress I'd worn that night, and part of me put it on knowing the memories the garment would ignite.

Perhaps I wanted to punish Jasper. Maybe I wanted to punish myself more.

Desire and disappointment flooded my mind at the sight of Jasper Hayes. His navy suit was tailored to perfection, but I couldn't ignore how his pale blue dress shirt looked almost . . . rumpled. His leather belt wasn't perfectly buckled along his trim waist, and his eyes seemed too clear. Jasper ran a hand over his blond hair, but it remained tousled.

He definitely swallowed at the sight of me. I watched his spine straighten too intentionally, and I fought to keep a smile

from forming on my face. If I didn't know better, Jasper looked like a man who'd just experienced a sexual climax.

There wasn't a woman in sight, so unless she was shimmying down the bedroom balcony, Jasper Hayes might've been pleasuring himself. It was there in his green and gold gaze. Still, I knew better than to call him out.

Not in front of Hope.

"Hi, Jasper," I offered graciously. "It's nice to be back. Thanks for having me."

He shifted at the sound of my particular word choice. His hand wandered across the top of the white linen sofa as Jasper nodded.

"You know you're always welcome here, Grace," he replied too coolly. "Did Paris treat you well?"

I laughed lightly. "Paris was wonderful, but I'm always treated the best in Malibu."

"I guess you could blame Hope for that."

"Yes, I guess I could."

I could say my best friend was an immaculate hostess and a fantastic person, but that didn't make the declaration wholly true.

"Gracie can get you all caught up on her adventures tomorrow," Hope declared, her hand gripping the handle of my massive silver suitcase. "She's been traveling for the last sixteen hours."

"Of course," Jasper agreed. "I'll see you both tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night, Dad!" Hope called out, already dragging my luggage toward the stairs.

"Sweet dreams, Jasper," I told him, leaving him with nothing else.

A tiny voice in my head screamed that I was a fool, but it didn't stop me from being a glutton for punishment. It wasn't like Hope noticed, anyway. She was too eager to drag my

suitcase up the sweeping steps, her blue eyes alight with possibility.

“I brought you that French skincare product you love, Hexomedine,” I called back to her. “I got a case of it before I left Paris.”

“Did you buy out the pharmacy?” Hope teased as her head turned back to me.

“Almost.”

Hope grinned as she stopped at the first door on the left.

“How about this one?” she asked casually.

“Um . . . yeah, it’s lovely.”

It was *the* bedroom. Some part of me imagined the ivory bedroom with its view of the bluffs would be locked away to collect dust. It should have been hidden in the vaults of my memory, yet there wasn’t a speck of dust in sight. The dream-cloud white bed was still pristine with all its pillows perfectly fluffed.

It looked like two years hadn’t passed at all.

“This one has the best walk-in shower,” my best friend explained, “and the best view. Well, other than the master suite.”

My eyes glanced toward the bluffs. “Yeah, it’s a nice view.”

Heading into the closet, Hope pulled out a luggage rack and set up my luggage for me. Hope, focusing on her task, had blinders that kept her from seeing me shifting where I stood. My hands ran over my arms as old memories danced across my vision. With a soft sigh, I forced myself to keep cool.

It was just a bedroom. I’d been there before, and I’d probably be there again.

“Thanks again for everything,” I told Hope.

With a polite smile, I set myself beside Hope and fished out the box of skincare products through piles of clothes, both

old and clean. I wasn't surprised when Hope squealed at the sight of her gift.

"Oh, it's nothing!" Hope exclaimed. "You'll always belong here, Gracie, especially with your birthday tomorrow. Besides, all our old friends are moving out of town! It's been getting lonely out here."

"I thought you were your own best company," I remarked as my hand touched the Hexomedine.

She laughed before gasping. "Oh, my God! You really did buy out the pharmacy!"

I laughed. "Well, you were braving LAX for me."

"Oh, hush, it's a stupid airport, not a war zone."

"It feels like it sometimes, though," I half-joked.

"Well, we can celebrate our harrowing survival in the morning," Hope declared. "I'm taking you out for a birthday breakfast, and you can't say a word about it."

I rolled my eyes and smiled. "I guess I won't fight you on that."

"But I'm sure you're tired. Hug me, and I'll leave you to shower and pass out."

Opening my arms, I let Hope wrap her tanned arms around me before bidding me goodnight. The door clicked shut, and I didn't know whether that was a blessing or a curse. It took everything inside me to stay calm. I went through the motions of my bedroom routine, feeling fatigue sink into every sinew and bone in my body. Each muscle begged for sleep, but my mind remained alert. Thoughts rushed past one another, racing in a fight for my attention.

Hope was outside, across the expansive lawn in her own home.

Jasper, her father, was somewhere in the main house.

We were alone. *I* was alone, and I didn't totally trust myself to make the right decisions. On another day, I could be

clever, practical, and competent, but when it came to that man, some switch flipped inside me. My mind became useless.

Green and gold eyes became all I could see, all I wanted. They followed me around the room and into the shower. As I ran a comb through my washed hair, I tried to think through the Rachmaninov concerto I'd been learning. My fingers tapped against the phantom keys spread across the marble countertop. The music moved through me and overwhelmed every sensation, but some thoughts still lingered.

Innocence never lasted forever.

When the piano concerto ended, the thoughts of my past sins returned. I pulled my black sleep shirt over my body in a huff. I tossed and turned in the darkness. With the hours ticking by, my muscles never settled correctly into the mattress. I tried to put the thoughts out of my mind, but that only made my restlessness worse.

“Dammit,” I cursed.

My stomach began to grumble. My internal clock was wondering why I hadn't eaten breakfast yet, so with a grumbling huff, I threw back the downy covers and headed down to the kitchen.

“Just make an egg and go to bed,” I mumbled to myself. “Once you eat, you'll calm down.”

The kitchen was just as I remembered it, light oak floors with heavy stone counters. The breakfast nook looked out over the poolside and toward the never-ending ocean. The whole mansion had been designed with its views in mind, and the kitchen was no different.

In the dark, I flicked on the kitchen island's light before shuffling over to the steel fridge. Everything was where it should be. The eggs were still on the middle shelf. Pans were hidden to the left of the eight-burner oven. I flicked on the gas burner closest to me before grabbing the butter.

Beethoven kept me company in my head.

I listened to his sonatas as I decided to add a single piece of pumpernickel toast to the dish. Enough years had passed

that my eyes didn't immediately find the bread, but they hunted down the familiar brand soon enough.

The butter sizzled and browned as I prepared the bread first. The thick slice soaked up the bubbling butter, pulling in the nutty flavors. The familiar scents brought comfort for the first time, but it lasted for only a minute.

Footsteps came closer. My heart grew anxious again. In the low light, the profile of Jasper Hayes became even more condemning.

“So . . .” he began slowly, “what are you making yourself?”

I looked up from the small frying pan to see Jasper in his full devastating form. His white tee looked thin in the warm light, but I didn't need light to see how his charcoal joggers were slung low against his waist. Even a blind woman would know how that cotton fabric hugged Jasper's form. She would smell the clean scent looming off him and sense the ease of his confident posture.

“Egg and toast,” I answered, my words too quick.

“Is it breakfast time already?” Jasper remarked with levity. “I think the sun missed the memo.”

“It's breakfast time in France,” I replied. “My body hasn't gotten the memo that we're not in Paris anymore.”

“Oh, I get it. That happened to me the last time I got back from Japan.”

I reached into the cabinet for a square salad-sized plate. “What were you doing there?”

“An app launch last summer.”

That was right. Since Jasper sold his rideshare and delivery app, Yfir, he'd been serving as some kind of creative director for the new parent company. Hope mentioned he'd been traveling on consultation work more often these days, but I wasn't interested in pretending my way through small talk over Jasper's career.

It was hard enough remaining nonchalant as he propped himself against the counter. He folded his arms, making his toned muscles flex against the movement. I schooled my features as I cracked the egg over the warm pan.

God, I wished I could be like those French girls I knew. They could be so casually cool about their paramours, kissing their lovers goodbye and moving forward with their lives. The trouble was that Jasper and I hadn't finished writing the story of our brief affair. It was just one stolen moment that left me pining and my heart cracked.

It didn't matter how much time had passed. In the corner of my eye, I could see Jasper's golden aura, and I knew I would never be unfazed by the sight of him. I was trapped in that kitchen and in that moment from so long ago.

It didn't matter if I made a break for the ocean. I would never swim away from my problems, and I would never escape Jasper Hayes.

CHAPTER FOUR

JASPER

Grace fit too well in my kitchen. With a mask of apathetic features, her dark eyes focused on her cooking. It didn't help that her half-dried hair swept over her shoulder. It killed me to see how her nightclothes looked like she'd stolen one of the dress shirts from my wardrobe with the sleeves all pushed up.

It would've been too easy to wrap my arms around her waist and kiss the exposed nape of her neck. I had to fold my arms and cement myself in my spot. I couldn't let Grace see my honest reaction, not when she looked so calm.

"I guess I should thank you for letting me stay here," Grace offered in her pleasant way.

"Don't worry about it," I replied. "There's always space for you here."

In my house. In my bed.

It was awful how the thoughts blended together.

My eyes followed Grace's careful attention to the egg she pushed around the warm black pan. Perhaps her calm was sincere. Maybe we could move forward like that night hadn't happened.

"Well, when I got here tonight," she commented softly, her fingers sprinkling salt, "you looked a little . . ."

Her words trailed off, and the only sounds I heard were the soft sizzle of butter and my pounding heart.

"A little what?" I pressed Grace.

"A little . . . ruffled, I guess," she answered. "I got the feeling that I was invading your personal time. Well, I don't know if that's what I'd call it, but I'm sure you've gotten used to having the main house to yourself."

My eyes narrowed. Grace turned off the stove's burner. The blue flames vanished in a puff, and she scraped the folded egg over her piece of toast. Her feet padded across the floor

toward the oversized sink to clean the pan. I couldn't help but follow like Grace Balsamo had some magnetic pull. Still, the careful space between us remained.

"Did you think something was wrong?" I suggested.

"Um, no," she answered, her head not turning. "It wasn't that, exactly."

"Well, what was it, then?"

Ever since Grace started buying bottles of wine as thank you presents, our relationship had equal footing, but nothing felt balanced about this conversation. Grace toyed with my invisible puppet strings like the smile toying at the corners of her mouth. Her eyes flitted to me for one brief moment. She left the clean pan on the drying rack and turned back to me.

"Honestly, you looked like a man who'd just climaxed," Grace confessed, uninhibited and staring right at me. "And since there was no woman around . . ."

Hell, she *knew*. She saw right through me in a fraction of a moment, and I was laid bare as she laughed at my shocked expression.

"You're being pretty cavalier about this," I pointed out.

Grace shrugged. "You can blame Paris for that."

She pulled open a drawer to take a knife, and I considered how many men she'd loved in her lifetime. How many had she welcomed into her embrace? How many had she denied? A shadowed figure consumed her in my wicked imagination, and it sickened me. I had no right to feel it.

Still, I couldn't deny the twitching pang of possessiveness that coursed through me. My heart clenched as jealousy pricked me at my core. The emotion crept over me and urged me closer to Grace. I only gave it two footsteps, making me close enough to smell almond oil and bright lemon. It loomed off her skin and dared me to inch closer.

"You know you're back in the States now," I reminded her. "You might offend somebody being so brazen."

“Am I offending you?” Grace urged, her knife cutting her bread as well as me.

“That’s not what I said.”

“Then, why say it?”

“Because,” I warned her. “You’ll have to watch yourself, Grace.”

She laughed, teasing me without a second thought. “Oh, I think you’re watching me enough for the both of us.”

My arms dropped as she said it. It didn’t matter what I did. Grace would see through me, pulling back the faux nonchalance. She could probably take her knife and cut out my heart if it suited her.

Alone in the low light, I could feel myself being baited. Every rise and fall of her chest drew me closer to Grace, but I didn’t stop myself. Resistance was futile.

“Maybe you should watch what you say around me,” I told her, my voice growing raspy with want.

Grace’s voice softened. “Have I offended you, Jasper?”

Her eyes watched mine through a veil of thick lashes as I felt my breath become ragged. My hands felt heavy, but they shouldn’t have found their resting place against Grace’s shoulder and neck. When I came downstairs to find Grace there, maybe I was looking for this opening, this excuse. My mind had drifted back to her so many times. If there was an offender in his situation, it was me.

“No,” I breathed. “It’s quite the opposite.”

Her palms pressed into my chest. I thought she was going to push me away until her fingers curled into the fabric she touched.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” she whispered.

All the possibilities could be considered later. In those fragile seconds, I needed Grace’s lips more than I needed air. I urged her mouth to open and let me inside. With a sudden inhale, I breathed in the body oil that made her olive-toned

skin so smooth. My fingers dug into the crook of her neck as our fervor grew.

“Maybe we should,” I conceded, “but not now.”

“What should we do, then?” Grace murmured, my kiss wandering from her lips to her jaw.

“I don’t know about you, but I want to rip the clothes from your body and teach you just what it means to ‘climax,’” I declared with a low growl in her ear. “I want to see you come undone right on this countertop.”

I felt the smile forming on her face. “Look who’s being brazen now.”

“Are you going to stop me?”

“No,” she said, her body pressing closer to mine. “Never, Jasper.”

It set my body alive to hear my name sworn like an oath. Her delicate breath brushed against my skin and set me on fire. Years of latent desire ignited. With her consent, nothing was stopping me now nor keeping me from pulling her onto the kitchen island.

Grace spread her legs to invite me closer. Her hands anchored themselves against the counter’s edge while mine ripped open the buttons of her nightshirt to find *nothing* underneath. I didn’t expect her to sleep in her bra, but there was no cotton or lace around her thighs. She glowed perfectly bare before me, her bedroom eyes unflinching.

The arousal I had nagging in my sweatpants suddenly sprang into an erection. The realization and sight of Grace were sending me careening over the edge. I had to stop myself from jumping the gun and plunging into Grace right then.

“So many ideas,” I pretended to fret, “so little time.”

My hands already knew what they wanted first. As they reached for the small of her waist, my grip pressed upward to cup the heartbreaking breasts I’d missed. It was sheer elation to have them in my palms again. As I continued to steal the air from Grace’s lungs, I massaged the tender flesh, feeling her

nipples turn to pebbles against my teasing thumbs. Her soft moan hummed against my mouth.

“Hell,” I cursed. “You feel too good, Grace.”

She parted our kiss for a second. “Imagine what it will feel like when you’re actually inside me.”

“Oh, I am,” I promised, my mouth wandering to her chest.

Grace leaned back against the counter and let me consume her. My tongue swirled over the places my hands had made sensitive. Her eyes fluttered shut as I heard another whimpering moan escape her lips.

“Jasper,” she breathed.

I couldn’t linger long. Her eagerness compelled me downward. With my hands gripping her thighs, I got on my knees and put Grace’s body right where I needed her. Her slick heat was perfumed with almond mixing with her natural pheromones.

I wasn’t the only one reacting desperately.

As I dragged my tongue along her slit, I tasted her desire and the salt of her skin. There was no better flavor in the world. There was no better sound than hearing Grace whimper as I teased the precious little nub of her clit.

“Oh, yes,” she murmured above me.

We were going back in time, replaying that lost but inevitable moment. She unfolded before me again, but here, I wasn’t going to let myself doubt. I wasn’t leaving Grace until I left her reeling in euphoria with my fingerprints embossed into her skin.

“I forgot how amazing you taste,” I muttered against her skin. “I could devour you every damn day.”

“Well, I wouldn’t stop you,” Grace said, but her voice pitched higher.

She was getting closer to her climax. I felt the sensation in her warm, trembling thighs and the dripping eagerness of her body. It begged for me, even when Grace herself wouldn’t.

When I slipped two fingers inside her, it felt like slick, burning velvet. I continued with my consumption of her body. Her hand ran through my hair until Grace finally pleaded with me.

“Please, Jasper,” she begged. “I want you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh darkly. “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to hear you say that.”

After peeling the clothes off my body, nothing kept Grace’s skin from mine. Her arms threw themselves over my shoulders. Her face buried itself in my neck. As I guided my rock-hard member into her warm velvet, I felt her teeth nip at my shoulder as she whimpered, and I muttered a curse.

“Bite me all you like,” I insisted. “It won’t hurt me.”

“Jasper, I—” Grace began, but the words were lost.

I was already finding my thrusting rhythm. Slowly at first, I pushed into her, memorizing the feel of her body enveloping mine. She stretched to accommodate me. Her legs spread wider, and Grace’s hips rolled forward to meet mine. Her mouth began to devour my neck, and as her teeth tugged at my earlobe, I groaned.

“Grace,” I growled like a curse.

There was unfulfilled hunger in both of us, bringing out something feverish and carnal. I didn’t try to make sense of it. I didn’t have the mental energy to understand. All I knew was the sensation pooling inside me as we each rose closer and closer to our desperate climax. Still, I refused to relent until a wave of ecstasy quaked through every fiber of Grace’s body.

The feeling of her made it impossible for me to hold back a second longer. My climax coursed through her, filling her body and making her limp with breathless satisfaction. I felt Grace tighten her arms around my neck as she caught her breath.

“Wow,” she gasped. “I . . . wow.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, my heaving breaths offering more description than my words could.

With a soft sigh, Grace pulled herself away from me. She slid on her black nightshirt, and her legs closed themselves again. I would never admit how the sight pained me. Though I had not been a saint, the ache Grace created was entirely new. No other woman made me feel like this. Nobody made it so agonizing to pull my sweatpants back up around my waist.

“I guess I should finally eat this,” Grace realized softly while picking up her plate.

“It’s probably cold,” I remarked. “I could make you a new one.”

“Don’t worry. I can use the microwave,” she declared, her footsteps echoing through the quiet house. “And if you’re wondering, I get birth control shots.”

It took me a full second to realize what she meant and what I’d risked in my haste to have her. I exhaled as worry and relief rushed through me at once. Once again, doubt crept into my mind, and I ran a hand over my tousled hair.

“Grace,” I confessed. “I don’t want to make you into some dirty secret.”

“I don’t feel like one,” she told me as she slid her plate into the wall’s microwave. “This is just a secret we’ll share.”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

Only a few minutes before, I’d watched her unfold before me. I felt her body grow weak with arousal and hunger, but Grace returned to her usual self easily. She was far better at it than I’d ever been. Although, it was probably for the best.

This was a one-time thing. We were two ships passing in the night, and I didn’t expect for us to cross like this again. Our unfinished business finally had a very satisfying conclusion.

The only trouble was that as Grace finished warming her food, I felt myself already craving more. The magnetic pull remained. I wanted to follow her up the main staircase and crawl into bed beside her.

“I guess I’ll take this back to my room,” Grace told me.
“Goodnight, Jasper.”

“Sweet dreams, Grace.”

She smiled, trying not to laugh as she turned away. It was the kind of expression that would stay under a man’s skin for years, and I knew then that I wasn’t over Grace Balsamo.

Not yet.

CHAPTER FIVE

GRACE

After hours of tossing and turning, it felt surreal to wake up with my body feeling heavy as stone. My eyes longed to remain shut and live in the fever dream that happened in the kitchen, but I opened them anyway. As I pushed back the warm comforter, I noticed the crumb-covered plate on my nightstand and the blossoming lilac fingerprints on my thighs.

“So . . . it did happen,” I muttered to myself.

The toast, the sex, and the second shower I took after eating all *actually* happened. It was a hell of a way to end my final day of being twenty-three.

I looked at my phone to find three messages. There was a text from my dad, including a picture of him at some dig site. There was a voicemail from my mom and her husband, left sometime just after midnight. The last was a text from Hope. My eyes blurred as I tried to make sense of it.

Will be in your room at nine, birthday girl! You'd better get ready, or you're going to breakfast in your PJs!!! I've got dinner reservations at seven tonight, but whatever we do in between is yours to plan!

There were also five sparkling hearts and one very excited emoji face. I'd never known anyone as aggressively generous as Hope, but the smile she put on my face faltered. All her optimism would be crushed if she knew about my bruises.

In a rush, I pulled on my black velvet jeans. I threw on my camel cashmere sweater just as Hope's steps came hurrying down the hall.

“Knock, knock!” Hope called through the door. “Are you decent?”

“No!” I lied, already heading to the bathroom to fix my hair.

“Well, I'm coming in anyway!”

With the door unlocked, my best friend was free to fling herself into the room. Her smile greeted me like the sunrise.

“Happy birthday, Gracie!” she exclaimed. “Are you ready to head out? My boss, Natalie, is already arriving downstairs, so it’s going to get noisy soon.”

“Natalie?” I echoed while braiding up my hair. “I thought she owned a design firm.”

Hope flopped down on the foot of the bed, making her balloon-sleeved dress billow up. In her usual way, Hope flipped her glossy blonde hair over her shoulder.

“Yeah, well, she’s become a big name in seasonal decoration,” Hope explained. “It seems people like Dad aren’t interested in decorating their houses for Christmas anymore. They would prefer to pay someone else to deal with the hassle.”

My eyebrows knitted together as I pulled out my favorite white gold hoops from a leather jewelry case. I focused on my reflection in the mirror, but I could make out Hope in my peripheral vision with the door wide open.

“I thought you and your dad always decorated yourselves,” I recalled. “I think I even helped you once or twice.”

“It’s different with me living in the guest house,” Hope replied. “Dad just kinda wants the house dressed for, I dunno, winter? There’s a lot of eucalyptus garlands and greenery being brought in today.”

I fastened the golden band of my watch and thought back to the Christmases of my youth. I remembered my mother’s miniature Christmas village decorating the top of our upright piano. If I shut my eyes, I could smell the memories of Christmas tree lots illuminated by string lights and stars. Those pieces of my past were over now, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t cherish the past.

Did Jasper feel differently?

“Are you ready yet?” Hope called out from where she sprawled on the bed. “At this rate, we’ll be eating lunch instead of breakfast!”

I grabbed my leopard flats from my suitcase and laughed. “Oh, like you aren’t dying to eat brunch every damn day!”

She grinned mischievously while propping up on her elbows. “You know it’s the *fanciest* of all meals.”

With Hope, it was always easy to laugh, easy to swat her with my beaded clutch and ignore the guilt. Perhaps the guilt I felt over Jasper compelled me to indulge my friend. As we climbed into her silver convertible, I tried not to think too hard over what had transpired. The memories were too fresh for me to examine them clearly.

I didn’t even know how I would face Jasper again. Hope’s dragging me out felt like a blessing in disguise, yet I struggled to meet her eyes. The pang of iniquity would chime like a bell every time I tried.

Fortunately, Hope drove us both to a cafe with another sweeping view of the Malibu coastline. The pier cafe was bustling with visitors and locals enjoying the mild morning and sunshine. It took us a second, but Hope and I managed to get a bar-top table in the far corner of the outdoor seating. From there, it didn’t look strange if I averted my gaze.

Hope would only think I was admiring the water.

We were able to find an easy flow to the conversation over mimosas and pancakes served with whipped cream and berries. Hope told me more about her new job running online marketing for the design firm, and it sounded like all her aspirations with graphic design were coming true.

“I’ve been able to develop my portfolio with Natalie,” Hope explained eagerly. “She’s been great about giving me creative space and collaborating on ideas. Once I get enough funds, though, I’d like to buy my own place and start a freelance gig from there.”

“Is that why you moved into the guest house?” I guessed between bites of food.

She nodded. “Dad’s letting me cover the utilities, and the money I save in rent is going to my savings. Dad said he would buy me any place I want, but . . .”

“You want to earn it,” I finished, knowing Hope well.

“It would be easy to be the spoiled brat,” she mused. “It’s harder being the well-adjusted kid, but I’m not dumb enough to think that wealth lasts forever. The things that matter . . . they can’t be bought.”

She was right. Jasper could’ve bought Hope a luxury condo as quickly as most people bought socks, but that wouldn’t offer Hope the pride of the home being hers. It wouldn’t make her more than what others like to presume about her.

“You’re a real unicorn, Hope.”

My best friend grinned. “Enough about me! I want to hear about this studio stuff you were telling me about over the phone.”

“Oh, that.” I laughed lightly. “There’s not much to say. I’ve put out some feelers and scheduled some auditions in the new year, but I came back to the LA area to try and be a studio artist. I won’t be putting out albums or anything.”

“I know you always loved movie soundtracks.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I would love to be a part of creating and performing scores. It might take some time to get my foot in the door, but all the feedback I’ve gotten so far is positive.”

“That’s great to hear. Oh, you’re such a talented musician. I can’t imagine what it’s like for you to practice as you have. You’ve been hunched over pianos longer than we’ve been friends.”

“It’s crazy to think about, but you’re right,” I realized.

“I remember your first concert,” Hope recalled fondly. “Dad and I went to support you, and then he and I went out for ice cream afterward.”

I smiled at first, but those echoes of anxiety returned. The enigmatic man who’d spent years doting on his daughter was about to be alone. When Hope finally left, who would be there for him? What kind of life did he even have these days? As

terrible as it might have been, I used Hope's remark as an opening.

"You two have been a pair for a while," I began before sipping my drink. "Now that you're moving out, do you ever . . . worry about your dad?"

Hope's blue eyes grew contemplative. She pierced a berry with her fork and studied it before answering.

"Sometimes, I do," she confessed.

"Really?"

She nodded. "He's never really tried to meet someone. When I was old enough to notice, I knew he was focused on getting his app company off the ground. I told him I wouldn't mind it, and he's worked so hard to create our family home. It's just that I know it would be easier to leave if he wasn't walking around that house alone."

My head tilted, and I had to ask, "Wait, he's never been with . . . *anyone*?"

Hope laughed. "Oh, I'm not naive. Dad doesn't have girlfriends. He has 'friends'."

Her pink-polished fingers made air quotes before Hope laughed again. It felt strange to think that the middle-class man from Santa Monica carried on his affairs like this. I figured the secrecy around our stolen moments was solely because of our strange relationship, yet it seemed that Jasper carried on with women like love and lust were contracts to be written.

"Hey, maybe you could take over the guest house!" Hope joked. "When I leave, you can go live out there, and I won't have to worry about Dad brooding alone by the pool!"

Shifting in my tall chair, I tried to laugh along. "Yeah, I could."

"You do get along," she continued. "Oh, and it means I could visit you both at the same time! It would be killing two birds with one stone!"

"It sounds like you'd be coming over so much that your moving away would be pointless," I noted, trying to steer

Hope from the idea.

“You’re probably right,” she thankfully agreed. “Well, let’s get those pedicures we talked about. Maybe we can find Dad a nice woman at the day spa.”

Of course, we didn’t waste the day searching for some new woman to date Jasper. Hope and I found ourselves shopping for my birthday dinner outfit and getting our hair done. We were pulling up to Geoffrey’s by seven, where Hope had arranged for about a dozen family friends to have dinner with us.

My new powder-pink, sequined dress sparkled in the iconic dining room. As my eyes swept across the room, every seat had a sweeping view of the lush cliffs and ocean, but I only cared about the man already sitting at the head of the table. He chatted with another couple, parents of an old Catholic school friend, Padma.

“Oh, my goodness, Grace, it’s been years!” Padma called out as she noticed me.

“Hey, Padma.”

She wrapped her tawny arms around my neck and over my shoulder. I found those green and gold eyes glancing my way. Heat rose to my cheeks as a flush of want coursed through me. My desire hadn’t faded. With Jasper’s eyes glancing down the table, my addiction to him only grew worse.

He never addressed me directly. No, Jasper let my old friends dominate the conversation, asking me about Paris and my new degree. The only disappointment was that Inez hadn’t been there. She’d gone to visit family, but Hope promised she would be back before the holidays ended.

As the cheesecake came with sparklers circling the top, I found myself fidgeting again. Hope was sweet to have this all arranged. It was kind for the rest of the restaurant to applaud when my friends finished singing, but I’d never been one to bask in the limelight. It was only Jasper’s calm expression across the table that made me grow still again.

“Here, put everything on this card,” Jasper told the polished waiter.

“Yes, sir.”

It seemed that Jasper cherished discretion in many facets of his life. Nobody else at the table seemed to notice, yet it made me crave to pull back the veils of mystique Jasper kept around himself. It made me want to know the man beyond every polite pretense.

I wanted so much from him, and it all mingled together when we found ourselves alone late that night. Hope went off to her house, and I was left to follow Jasper back inside.

“Thank you for dinner,” I offered as we stepped into the darkened living room. “The swordfish was wonderful.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Jasper offered, his handsome features schooled. “It’s been a while since I visited that place. I forgot how good the food is.”

“Yes, it’s easy to forget . . .”

My voice trailed off as I realized how close Jasper was to me. I breathed in his woody cologne and could see how his navy sweater hugged his arms so perfectly. My fingers longed to reach out and feel the fabric wrapped around his shoulders and chest, but I curled them tighter around the shopping bag in my hands.

“Your dress suits you well, by the way,” Jasper commented, but his eyes never strayed from mine.

“Thank you,” I murmured. “I bought it today.”

A shiver shot across my skin as I felt Jasper pull up the thin ribbon strap. Standing there by the stairs, I hadn’t even noticed it fell. His knuckle brushed against my shoulder innocently, but my body craved guilty pleasures. For a moment, time slowed, and I wondered if he would offer more.

“There,” Jasper declared with a soft smile.

“Thanks.”

He chuckled. “Will you ever stop thanking me, Grace?”

“Only when you give me a reason to be ungrateful.”

He laughed again, the sound rich and sweet like honeyed wine. I didn't know what to expect next. I was frozen with anticipation until Jasper's lips pressed against the corner of my mouth. My eyes closed at the sensation.

“Happy Birthday, Grace,” he whispered in my ear.

On that final note, Jasper walked away, and I was left wanting.

CHAPTER SIX

JASPER

I swallowed my bite of salmon sashimi and smiled. Sitting at my desk, I knew it would've been easy to lure Grace into my bedroom. Her scarlet-painted lips and sparkling knee-length slip had their tempting appeal, but I knew that *nothing* could be more enticing than doing *something*.

It had been my turn to tease Grace. Her wide-eyed surprise lingered, even there in my office on Monday. That expression had been worth the sleepless night.

Besides, seeing Grace that evening across the dinner table gave me an idea.

“Colin!” I called out as he arrived back from lunch. “Can you come in here? There’s something I’d like to discuss.”

I could see him through the open door. As he set down his phone and wallet, he looked at me with curious concern.

“Is something wrong with your agenda?” Colin asked as he pulled off his tweed blazer.

I glanced at the agenda with the development team. “No, no, it’s fine. I want to go over my travel arrangements for Thursday.”

“Of course, sir.”

It didn’t take Colin more than a minute to grab his tablet and take a seat in front of my desk. He adjusted his glasses and pulled up the documents.

“The company plane has been reserved for your use,” he began. “I’ve confirmed with Beckett that he’ll be there to pick you up at LaGuardia, and I have reservations planned at the restaurants you requested.”

“Do all of my invitations still have their plus-one?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I was going to call and let them know this afternoon that your date will be unavailable.”

“Don’t,” I asserted.

Colin's eyebrows shot up. "You've found someone, then?"

"I believe so."

She just didn't know it yet.

I let the idea lie on Sunday, knowing I didn't want to be rash. Plus, Hope had been around the house all day, taking pictures of the Scandinavian-style holiday decorations and watching movies with Grace. There was never a good time to broach the subject, but when I returned home from work, I found Grace outside by the grill and very much alone.

In her jeans and white sweater, she looked every bit as lovely as she did in her sequined dress. It seemed that Grace Balsamo could make a burlap sack look beautiful.

"Hope texted me," Grace explained upon noticing me. "She's going to be out late working tonight, so it's just us for dinner . . . unless you have plans."

"No, no," I assured her. "My schedule is quite free."

"Good, because I've got four tuna steaks here," Grace told me. "I went over to the outdoor market and got a tad excited. Outdoor grilling wasn't much of an option in Paris, so . . . I'm making up for lost time."

She wasn't kidding. Grace had grilled bread with olive oil, eggplant, squash, and thick tuna over slices of lemon. It was fresh and seasoned, better than anything I could make. She laid it all out on one of the patio tables where the outdoor candles were already lit. All I did to help was open a bottle of white wine.

I couldn't remember a time when she and I had been alone like this, but I didn't mind it. Grace made conversing easy and light, like the wine we shared. Her eyes would glance out toward the coast before looking back at me.

"It's funny," she remarked. "I got so used to practicing every day and doing concerts and classes that I'm not sure what I'm going to do with all this free time."

"Why do you think I became a creative director?" I replied. "It's a bullshit title, but they let me continue to

influence how my company is managed and developed. I wasn't cut out to sit at home all day."

"Well, you could've done *something*," Grace considered aloud, finishing off the last of her glass.

"I know, but this way, I have a reason to travel. Plus, I'm allowed to work as much or as little as I like."

"So . . . you don't have to work full-time?"

I shook my head. "No. Most of what I do is for the public image."

I picked up the bottle of wine between us and refreshed Grace's glass before topping off mine. As she smiled in appreciation, I could feel that this was my chance emerging. I had one shot at offering my proposal to Grace, and this was it.

"Actually," I continued, "I'll be heading to New York this Thursday. I have a few social functions and the annual investors' meeting to attend."

Grace cut another piece from her tuna and brought it to her lips.

"That sounds . . ."

"Dull as hell," I finished for her.

She laughed lightly. "You said it, not me."

"They are," I confessed. "The meeting is a droning formality, but I'm required to attend. Just like I'm expected at the company's annual holiday gala. There's a charity silent auction attached to the event, so it's not all a waste. I just find that events like these are always more interesting if I have someone attending with me."

Grace looked up at me from across the dinner table. Her face sparked with vague interest. As she swallowed, her dark eyes gave me that knowing look, but her words continued to feign ignorance.

"I'm sure you have plenty of people dying to attend those sorts of events," she remarked casually, taking another bite from her eggplant.

“I don’t, actually,” I confessed. “This year, I find myself in a last-minute predicament of having no companion for any of these events. Of course, I don’t need one for the annual meeting, but there’s the gala and a few private functions where I will have an empty seat beside me.”

“That’s a shame.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I replied. “If you’re willing, I would like you to fill that place.”

Grace set down her utensils before wiping the corners of her mouth. Her eyes grew pensive as she looked toward the glowing pool. In the evening light, her profile looked almost angelic. Light from the candles cast a soft glow over her calm face.

She sighed softly. “Jasper, I don’t know if that’s a good idea. We already have our fair share of secrets.”

“I know.”

I thought about them too often.

“How will we explain this to Hope?”

“She doesn’t have to know,” I answered. “She’s leaving for New Jersey on Wednesday to visit her mother’s family. Unless you have plans, you’ll be sitting in this house alone all weekend. Why not make use of the time instead?”

Grace still didn’t look convinced, but curiosity compelled her to ask, “What would you want from me?”

“Oh, I’d just need you to act the part of a gracious date,” I explained. “You already have manners and conversation skills. All you need is the right dress, which I’d be happy to buy.”

“What aren’t you happy to buy?” Grace teased me.

“Money is a tool,” I bantered back. “If I’m putting a nail in a wall, I’ll use a hammer. Money functions just the same.”

She almost laughed at that. Her head tilted as she continued to do some calculations in her mind. Her chin rested in her hand, and I could see that she wasn’t interested in

making this easy for me. Grace wasn't trying to be some darling puppy laid out at my feet.

No, she was something far more interesting than a pet. She came ready to play the game, to see how far I would go. Grace already knew how I desired her, how I could make her feel. This proposition would add a new depth to our clandestine affair, so as a clever woman did, she stepped lightly with alert eyes.

Grace just didn't know I already had an ace up my sleeve.

"You're forgetting that I'm a pianist, not an actress," she joked, keeping the mood light. "Theater was never my strong suit."

"Would you be willing to do this if I compensated you for your time?" I countered, my winner's smile already forming on the corners of my mouth.

"Compensate?"

I nodded. "How does twenty thousand dollars sound to you? It would be five for each day in New York."

Surprise flashed across Grace's face for a split second. It was quick, like a bolt of lightning, but she quickly calmed her expression into something far more interesting. She picked up her wine glass and swirled the drink slowly.

"Would you be willing to pay me thirty?"

It was my turn to look pleasantly surprised. I took the final bite from my dinner plate just to let the question hang in the air. As I did so, Grace waited and watched.

"For you to act as my companion at these social functions," I finally began, "I will give you a cost-free trip to New York, a credit card to buy whatever you need or want, and . . . twenty-five as compensation for your time and efforts."

"Will I need to be signing some kind of contract?" Grace wondered aloud.

"No, I think this can remain a verbal agreement, don't you?"

She sipped her wine and smiled. “Would you like a slice of chocolate torte?”

I chuckled. “That’s not the response I need.”

Grace stood anyway. Clearing away our empty plates, she didn’t bat an eyelash at my watchful gaze. She moved like there was all the time in the world.

“Answer my question, and I’ll answer yours,” she replied.

“Alright, yes, I’d like a piece of torte.”

“And I’ll do it,” Grace agreed softly. “Why did you ever doubt that, Jasper?”

I didn’t know. I never knew what to think around Grace. She could be burning hot one moment and shockingly cool the next. Turning on her heel, Grace walked toward the house like nothing was amiss. Her hips sashayed with every step, and I found myself mesmerized all over again.

It wasn’t the first time. It certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“I would’ve done thirty,” I called to her.

Grace stopped and turned halfway. The house’s interior light haloed the profile of her face. It felt like a trick of the light to see her smile so brightly.

“I would’ve done it for twenty,” she replied.

Saying nothing else, Grace disappeared into the house. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing or shaking my head in disbelief. She really was something else.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRACE

Early Thursday morning, I hugged Hope goodbye at the airport, promising to see her Monday. She had no idea I was driving her convertible home to hop in another. Jasper's hired car took us out to meet the private jet, a sleek Gulfstream that sparkled in the sunshine. I made myself not gawk as Jasper opened my door for me.

"Do you always fly like this?" I asked him.

"No, I prefer flying commercial," he answered while the driver handled our bags. "There just wasn't a suitable flight this time."

It was treacherous to mix business with pleasure, but I found it difficult to deny Jasper Hayes. His green and gold eyes had looked at me with need. Plus, while I hated to admit it, the money Jasper offered was too good to pass up. I didn't get the chance to start a savings account in Paris, and twenty-five grand would be the difference between a decent one-bedroom rental and an old apartment with three roommates. It could get me a car, something I would desperately need in Los Angeles. It could set me up for the life I wanted.

For that, I took the money, but Jasper could have offered me nothing. I still would have been walking up those stairs and into the jet's main cabin. I still would have agreed.

The lap of luxury made everything look not-so-bad. The smell of freshly ground coffee already wafted through the main cabin. The beige interior was pristine, with a dining booth made of four massive leather chairs and a polished wood table. Behind it, I could see the bench seat was already folded out into a fluffy divan bed. I set down my wool coat and leather tote before my eyes turned to Jasper.

"It's a formality. I always ask them to fold out the bed ahead of time," he explained, but his mischievous eyes said otherwise. "Come on, let's have a seat."

I smoothed my hands over my black sweater dress as I sat down. We hadn't tried to coordinate, of course, but Jasper wore a black mock turtleneck. He and I looked like we were heading to a portrait sitting as we settled ourselves. I quickly buckled up the seatbelt and tried to stay calm.

Once we were off the ground, I finally sank into my seat with ease, happy to watch Jasper read his newspaper as the flight attendant began fixing our lunch. I pretended to read my book, but my eyes kept wandering elsewhere.

"Here's your ginger ale, ma'am," she told me before heading back to the kitchenette.

"Thank you," I offered with a smile.

Jasper's eyes flitted up from his copy of *The Los Angeles Times*. "You know, we have champagne and probably anything else you could imagine. Is the ginger ale really what you want?"

"Think of it as a ritual," I told him.

"How so?"

I ran a hand through the waves of my hair as I tried to recall my first flight from Los Angeles to Seattle.

"When I was about ten or so, I flew for the first time," I answered. "I was kind of nervous, so the attendant offered me ginger ale. She said the ginger syrup would be good for my stomach. Ever since then, I always have a ginger ale when I fly. I think it helps with the altitude, but who knows?"

Jasper smiled. "Even if it's a placebo, it works."

"And what about you? No airplane routines?"

He snapped the newspaper in his hand, forcing the pages to stand stiff. "You're looking at it. Ginger ales are your airplane habit. Newspapers are mine."

"Lunch is ready, Mr. Hayes," the attendant announced.

"You may bring it in, Matilda."

Of course, it wasn't the plastic-covered tray I expected, no. Matilda brought out an ivory tablecloth, silverware, and two

plated and warm paninis like we were at some kind of high-altitude bistro. With a small flourish, she left a bottle of sparkling water, a plate of shortbread cookies, and two cappuccinos on the table.

“If you need anything, please feel free to ring,” Matilda stated with a succinct gesture to a nearby button.

“Thank you,” Jasper replied, “but I believe we’ll be fine until landing.”

“Yes, sir.”

She offered us each tiny nod before disappearing behind a sliding door. As the lock clicked, we were, for all intents and purposes, alone. My heart fluttered at the thought.

I knew this trip was laced with the danger of getting carried away and secrets I’d take to my grave, but seeing Jasper smiling across from me made my worries feel small. For the first time, I was finally getting the moment I’d always wished to have. I couldn’t let fear take it from me. I needed to enjoy the conversation and Jasper’s company.

“Do you have anything you would like to do while you’re in New York?” Jasper asked a few minutes into our meal.

I took another bite of my warm sandwich, tasting pesto and mozzarella. With the rush and the worry about lying to Hope, I hadn’t considered it.

“I’m not sure,” I confessed. “I guess I’ll go shopping tomorrow. None of my concert-black clothing felt appropriate for the gala.”

“You’ll look lovely in whatever you decide,” Jasper assured me.

With my ginger ale gone, I reached for the bottle of sparkling water and refreshed my cup. The words danced on my tongue, but it took me a moment to find the nerve to reply.

“Is there nothing you would like to see me wear?” I asked, hoping I sounded bolder than I felt.

Mischief in Jasper’s eyes began to darken. His smile curled with understanding. This time, he took a bite of his

sandwich and made me wait.

“That’s a loaded question,” he pointed out. “What I’d like to see you wear . . . I don’t think anyone else should.”

“And what would that be?” I pressed him. “It’s not like I can’t buy something for you and something for everyone else.”

Jasper didn’t shy away as he confessed, “I’ve always been partial to a woman in lace.”

“Duly noted.”

“What about you?”

I grinned. “Oh, I’ve always liked my men in assless leather chaps.”

The shock in Jasper’s eyes made me throw back my head with laughter. Then, Jasper’s chiseled face relaxed into a low laugh when he realized that I was kidding.

Maybe it was awful to tease the man offering me a piece of his world, but I couldn’t help but cut the building tension with some absurdity. With Hope always floating about, it was easy to keep my distance, but my thoughts kept drifting back to the little bed behind us. We had three whole nights together, Jasper and me.

I hardly knew what to do with myself.

“You can correct me if I’m wrong,” Jasper remarked, his hand reaching for mine, “but you sound a little . . . tired to me, Grace. I think the altitude and the early morning are going to your head.”

“Why? Just from one silly joke?”

The gold in his eyes glinted. “Oh, I have other reasons, too.”

My elbows propped against the table as I leaned closer. My finger drew circles in his palm. Smiling to myself, I knew we both had our reasons, but there was only one way to be certain.

“Well, maybe I think you’re looking worn yourself,” I replied. “With your investors’ meeting tomorrow, you should

really be at your best.”

“You know, I think you’re right, Grace.”

We had both been suppressing our latent desires, but it all poured forth when my fingers skated up Jasper’s cashmere-covered arms. They wrapped around my waist and pulled me closer. He was my personal embodiment of indulgence, for better or worse.

We were swimming through treacherous waters here. Still, I shut my eyes and allowed myself to be swept away with his kiss. Inching toward the divan, I let Jasper steal my air and expose the nape of my neck. The brush of his fingertips sent shivers across my body. The feel of his teeth and tongue electrified it.

“I’ve been counting down the hours until I could touch you again,” he swore against my skin. “Do you know how hard it’s been, Grace?”

My fingers traced the bulge growing against his gray slacks. “I’m starting to get an idea.”

Jasper didn’t falter. His hands slid down my curves until he gripped my backside. I bit my lip against the feeling. My senses were overwhelmed with Jasper teasing my ear and neck.

“I’ve been waking up thinking of your body against mine,” he boldly admitted. “I’ll be at work and start thinking of how you taste. Hell, the thought of having you here was the only thing keeping me sane.”

My hands already undoing his belt, I promised Jasper, “I’ll be yours all weekend. Just say the word, and I’m there.”

It scared me how honest my declaration felt. It was too easy to pull off his belt and turtleneck. Even as Jasper pulled my dress over my head, I knew it was true. He offered me pleasure like no man ever had, and I’d do anything for it. I would be the girl he adored. I’d let my head fall back against his pillows as Jasper kissed the skin he’d readily exposed.

I didn’t know shame in these stolen moments. I only knew euphoria and Jasper.

“So damn beautiful,” he muttered against my naked breasts.

A whimper escaped my lips, and my toes curled. Beneath him, heat pooled at my center, and I could feel my entrance pulse in anticipation.

“How badly do you want this?” Jasper asked as his hand slid between my legs. “You certainly *feel* like you want me.”

His ministrations had me on edge. As he continued to turn my breasts into his dessert, I could feel my silk thong getting wetter with every passing second.

“Desperately,” I swore to him. “More than anything else.”

Jasper couldn't know the depths of how badly I wanted this. Even as he cast aside the ruined thong, my body was itching to make him understand. My hands reached for his zipper, hungering for more. When they found their prize, Jasper groaned.

“Grace,” he growled under his breath.

The moment of weakness gave me my chance. Slowly, I guided him, luring him to twist around and let his back lie flat against the small bed. My hand pushed past his underwear to find his growing length. It hardened with every gentle stroke as my legs shifted to straddle him.

“I'll show you how good you make me feel,” I murmured against his lips.

Sealed with a kiss, I lowered myself onto Jasper's rock-hard erection. I moaned into his mouth as my body enveloped him inch by inch. Jasper took it all readily. His hands massaged my breasts, and another whimper escaped me. As our tongues twirled around each other, my hips began to rock against his. They moved like rolling waves as I relished the sensation.

“You're addicting,” Jasper groaned between feverish kisses. “Your pussy is fucking addicting.”

The words shot through me, and in my delirium, I craved more.

“Tell me how I feel,” I pleaded.

“Like velvet,” he confessed. “Like burning hot velvet that’s going to be the death of me.”

Without thinking, I laughed, but Jasper’s hips rising to meet mine cut the sound short. I let him kiss me even when my lips were beyond kissing him back. In a rushing flourish of ecstasy, the feeling of Jasper Hayes grew before washing over us both. I stifled back a cry as my spine arched. Then, I let go.

I tightened around Jasper as I felt his hot release. My head was spinning, and his embrace felt like the only anchor in my world. I didn’t dare let him go.

“We’ve got another four hours on this flight,” he breathed in my ear.

I laughed lightly at his insinuation. “Save something for New York, will you?”

It was a long time before we pulled apart and collected our discarded clothing. If Matilda heard anything, her expression was a perfect mask. She looked perfectly neutral when we disembarked.

“She listens to audiobooks,” Jasper assured me like he could hear my thoughts. “Her watch would vibrate if I pressed that button she pointed out.”

I looked up at Jasper in the cold evening air. In New York, the sun was already setting, and it highlighted the gold strands of his unkempt hair. I’d ruined it when we were making out somewhere over the Midwest, but Jasper didn’t seem to care.

“Good to see you again, sir,” a hulking man greeted him.

With a polite handshake, Jasper explained, “Beckett, this is Miss Grace Balsamo. She’ll be my companion while I’m in the city.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Beckett,” I offered, unsure whether that was his first or last name.

As the bald, bear-like man loaded our bags into the back of the luxury SUV, I was happy to slide inside the warm interior.

I'd been out in California for not even a week, but I'd forgotten how frigid December could be.

"Are you comfortable?" Jasper asked as we waited for Beckett.

"Yes, thanks," I promised him.

"Here, this should keep you warm."

Jasper pressed two buttons, and I found my back growing toasty warm. I hadn't considered that the black leather seats would have warmers inside them.

"Jasper, what does Beckett do, exactly?" I had to ask.

"He's my driver and security when necessary," he answered, his phone already vibrating from ignored emails. "Whenever I'm here, I find myself being . . ."

"Watched?" I guessed. "Hounded by the press?"

"I'm no pop star, but yes. My presence usually involves press and media events. Besides, people have always had a perverse fascination with wealth. I could be a garbage tycoon. It doesn't matter to them."

Them.

I thought of page-six gossip and local tabloids. I never gave things like that any credence, but I wondered if I should have as we drove toward Manhattan. Although I couldn't turn back, I wondered if I'd stepped into this world too blindly.

The splendor of downtown luxury certainly tried to domineer my anxieties. In an old paper mill, Jasper owned one of the four penthouse apartments, all sleek with industrial modernity and open living. In the interior of the building, a small park existed for residents only. I'd heard of celebrities living in this building, but I doubted any of their spaces had such a view. The north and west exposures offered perfect views of the sunset over the city.

As usual, Jasper Hayes never settled for second-best.

"We could order takeout and have it brought here," Jasper suggested as we entered the penthouse.

“Let me guess,” I teased him. “You’ve got this great app on your phone that will deliver anything within a twenty-mile radius.”

Jasper flashed a grin. “So you’ve heard of it?”

“Yeah.” I laughed. “I think I have. We can order whatever you’d like. Just point me toward the main bedroom.”

I heard Jasper stop behind me. As I shrugged out of my winter coat, I noticed him scratch at his temple. Some thought bounced back and forth behind his gaze.

“Grace,” he said, sighing softly. “I’m not trying to put you off, but . . . there are four other bedrooms. You don’t *have* to stay with me. Our agreement . . . it doesn’t . . .”

I laid my coat on the back of the pale gray sectional. Jasper still didn’t understand that I didn’t agree for the money. I wasn’t there to make a quick buck or fill up my spare weekend. Closing the distance between us, I wrapped my hands around his face.

“I know, Jasper,” I promised him, my eyes searching for his realization. “I’m asking because it’s the only place I want to sleep. It’s my choice. Now, will you choose a restaurant for us?”

His expression softened, and he nodded. “Okay.”

I kissed him chastely, nothing like the moments we’d shared on Jasper’s plane, but that didn’t keep my heart from skipping. It didn’t change the happiness I felt from having his hand cover mine. Looking at him, I knew that this had been my decision.

I just had to pray that I was making the right one.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JASPER

It was summer again. Years ago, I saw myself standing in my kitchen, chopping up pineapple as some pop song played by the pool. A warm breeze blew through the open door as Grace stepped inside. Her voice was indiscernible, but I turned back anyway. In that fraction of a second, my knife slipped. Blood flowed from my palm, red against a background of yellow.

“Jasper!”

Grace’s eyes, filled with worry, met mine in a sudden rush. Her touch felt gentle against mine, and I couldn’t be bothered with the sting of fruit juice creeping into my cut. It felt like I was seeing Grace Balsamo for the very first time.

My eyes opened to the sound of robotic birds singing for my morning alarm. Grace’s eyelashes fluttered, but they didn’t open. In that cool, dark bedroom, I was seeing another first.

She slept on her stomach. With her arm buried under the pillow, her brown hair cascaded across the sateen fabric, but her other hand reached toward me. Her pouting lips were parted. Grace looked so peaceful there, and I found myself unable to move for a long moment.

In her sleep, Grace’s hand found mine. I hated to move away and disturb her peace, but I had a routine to follow. As a creature of habit, I couldn’t help but creep out from under the covers and leave Grace in the quiet. I pulled on some workout clothes and headed downstairs to the gym. On the way, I passed some old pop star with his wife and sons. I smiled but said nothing more.

My mind was too busy recollecting memories from the night before. There was a gourmet specialty pizza from a place on Hudson Street. I tasted the basil on Grace’s lips more readily than I had on the food. Then, there was the black-and-white Christmas movie that maybe held my attention for fifteen minutes. I got too caught up in the feeling of Grace’s

legs tangling with mine, her fingers running through my hair, and my name being the only word she could say.

It made for a late night, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept so well.

Starting the open elliptical machine in the building's gym, I felt refreshed. My shoulders were light, and time flew faster than I realized. I found myself having to rush through my shower and shave. As I grabbed a suit from the walk-in closet, Grace's head turned against her pillow to face me.

"Don't wake up," I told her softly.

"What time is it?" Grace mumbled, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

"A little after eight," I answered. "I've got to get to my board meeting, but you should sleep in for the both of us. Stay here as long as you'd like. Whenever you want to head out, you can text Beckett. I'll leave his number on the kitchen counter. Promise me."

"Why? Are you afraid I'll get lost on the subway?"

I sighed. "Grace . . ."

"I guess that's fair," she muttered back, laughing lightly into her pillow. "I surrender. I'll use the bear."

Her dreamy smile tempted me to take off my suit and forget the day. As I ran my hand over her dark hair, I wondered what it would be like to spend a whole day in bed with her. We wouldn't have to talk. I could just listen to Grace breathe. Her dark eyes would study mine through those thick lashes, and I would be rendered helpless again.

It pained me to say it, but I told her, "I'll see you tonight at six. I'll meet you outside the hotel."

"Alright then, six o'clock," Grace agreed. "But if you're more than fifteen minutes late, I'm getting myself a new date."

I laughed. "You wouldn't dare."

Her head rose from the pillow slightly. "I guess we'll see. Won't we?"

I didn't dignify her teasing. Instead, I kissed her lips slowly, savoring the sensation.

"I'll see you this evening," I promised her.

"See you, Jasper," she murmured back. "Good luck today."

"Thank you."

She shifted under the covers, but I waited to see Grace's eyes close. Her breathing slowed again. When she was peaceful, I left Beckett's number by the coffee machine before heading to my meeting. New York City passed by me as I thought of her there in my bed.

I'd forgotten how comfortable life with a woman could be. It had been years since I'd spent the entire night with someone, since I'd kissed a woman good morning. The feeling of it almost made me strong enough to endure my endless meetings. If I could just survive the fifth conference with tech nerds telling me how *amazing* everything was at Yfir, I could find my way to the evening's gala and back to Grace.

"Funny running into you here," a familiar voice called down the corporate hallway.

Pulled from my daydream, I realized none other than Olivia Lennox was walking toward me. A scarf was draped over her lithe shoulders, and one of her boutique's purse designs dangled from her arm. I'd forgotten how colorless her gray eyes were.

"Olivia," I greeted her. "I didn't expect to see you here on the C-level."

"I was just leaving lunch with my partner, George Day," she explained. "You must know him. He's one of the vice presidents here. I believe his family also has some ownership over the Brooklyn Nets. His father built their arena, I believe."

Olivia flashed a whitened smile as I slid my hands into my pockets. Was this how she always talked? Terrible as it was, I hadn't seen her since July, yet I didn't remember her being so, so . . . *shallow*. I ranked Jimmy Stewart films over pizza and wine with Grace. Somehow, that conversation felt more meaningful than this.

“That’s nice for them,” I told her, having nothing else to say.

“You must be here for the investors’ annual meeting too,” she said as if she’d just put two and two together.

I nodded slowly, rocking back on my heels. “Among other things, yes.”

I needed to go. With my foot already inching away, Olivia stepped closer. I could smell the scents of baby powder and lilies looming off her heady perfume. It was something new. I wondered if George had given it to her or if she thought that I . . .

She couldn’t honestly think I would like that scent, right?

“George was just finishing up a phone call, but I’m sure he’d be happy to walk over with you. He’s doing amazingly well as the vice president of Sales. They hit a new record in the last quarter.”

I knew that already. I’d just sat through an hour-long meeting where his subordinates praised George Day and themselves.

“That’s kind, but I am giving the introductions. I’m already behind schedule.”

Olivia’s practiced smile fell at that. Her upper-crust artifice began to crumble. She smoothed her blonde pixie cut like she could feel a hair coming out of place.

“Oh, yes, of course.”

“Maybe I’ll see you two at the gala tonight,” I offered in consolation.

She brightened, her eyes sparkling with some new thought. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

If I’d been a foolish man, I would have said that Olivia was trying to make me jealous, that she wanted to prove she was better off without me. The suspicion lingered as her gaze poured over me. I wasn’t interested in her appraisal. I didn’t even care about her games.

That troubled me as I took the elevator downstairs and headed toward the conference center across the block. Any other time, I would've indulged Olivia. I would have played her game and maybe let her win, but something about other women felt . . . unnecessary.

The beautiful creature sleeping in my bed was the only one I craved. I only wanted to run my hands through her long curtain of hair and taste the flavors on her lips. As I headed backstage to find a courier delivering my tuxedo, I shook all those selfish desires.

I had no way of indulging myself there in the back of a hotel conference room. With investors gathering outside, I needed to focus. I needed to get a grip.

My eyes shut, and I saw dreamy-eyed Grace again.

Good luck today.

I had her favor. I had her support. With a deep exhale of air and a sip of water, I knew I had everything I needed. The applause when I finished readily agreed.

“Your speech was a nice change of pace,” my friend, Felix Jacobson, complimented me afterward. “I’d never seen so many eyes open at this event.”

“Well, we all know we’re here to make sure our money is getting its return,” I replied. “If they could drag their designer asses here, it’s the least I could do to give them something worth watching.”

Felix chuckled. “I think you did more than that. I heard the woman next to me mention that she was going to buy more stock in Yfir before the end of market today.”

Feeling good about my success, I patted Felix’s broad shoulder and laughed. “If you want to inflate my head some more, why don’t we do it over a cup of coffee?”

It was a nice reprieve to talk with a friend from Los Angeles and get out of those stifled meeting rooms where I’d been herded around like cattle. Felix, with a room at The Plaza, was kind enough to catch up with me at the hotel and let me change into my tux just before the party.

“My date is meeting me outside,” I told him.

Felix nodded. “I’ll see you inside, then.”

Cold air plumed from my lips as I stepped out onto the city street corner. Yellow taxis and hired cars were lined up at the valet station. One by one, I watched as those camera-wielding vultures squawked their tiresome questions and refused to relent. A stray man caught sight of me.

“Jasper Hayes!” he yelled. “Is it true you and heiress Olivia Lennox are no longer together?”

“Who designed your tuxedo?” another cried out.

“Do you regret selling your company?”

I rolled my eyes at the last one. Finally, Beckett emerged, and it felt like the moment I’d been living for had finally arrived. My breath caught as I saw her.

The sleeping angel I’d left that morning had transformed into an ageless beauty. It didn’t matter if she was twenty-four or two hundred and four. The radiance around her would never fade. As she bundled her black coat closer to her chest, Grace smiled at Beckett, and I noticed her full lips were painted the same scarlet shade as her dress.

“Thank you, Beckett,” Grace offered warmly.

He shut the door behind her and smiled. “My pleasure, Miss Grace.”

I stepped out to meet her at the steps. The vision of her silenced the shouting toads nearby. Grace’s eager eyes became all I could see, yet it angered me to see how she winced in the light of a large flash.

“Let’s get inside,” I told her, my arm wrapping around her shoulders and drawing her close. “It’s much quieter.”

Her breath warm against my neck, Grace murmured, “Did you have a good day?”

“It was fine,” I assured her. “But seeing you tonight is far more exciting.”

She laughed at that, squeezing my arm through my black tuxedo jacket. As her head turned, the crystal earrings she wore sparkled like stars. Grace had no idea what she was doing to me, what her very existence had done.

At that exact moment, I'd never desired Grace Balsamo more. I had seen her once, ages ago, but this time . . . I couldn't look away.

CHAPTER NINE

GRACE

In France, I got so used to the traditional Christmas. New York didn't have the same ancient streets, but it had its beauty and charm. I had the chance to enjoy evergreen trees in shop windows and wreaths hanging on doors. The holiday magic almost made it a shame I had to head into Saks. The only amusement I had was that Beckett had insisted on following me inside.

"What do you think?" I had to ask him from where I stood on the department store pedestal.

Beckett was an alien in the women's evening wear section, but he didn't show any anxiety over it. His former military career training kept his expression stoic.

"I liked the last one," he replied. "The red was festive."

I stared at the silver dress I wore and agreed, "You're right. The red one is better."

Armed with Jasper's gold credit card, I didn't know how to feel about buying a thousand-dollar dress with another man's money, but these were our terms. I certainly couldn't show up to *the* Plaza ballroom in an ordinary cocktail dress. No, I needed to blow people's damn socks off.

"Now, Beckett," I declared as I came out with my chosen dress in hand, "I need to go to the intimates department. Would you like to assist me there too?"

Beckett's stony expression crumbled. "Uh, why don't I get tea at the cafe instead?"

I smiled and did my best not to laugh. "I think that's for the best."

"Very good, Miss Grace."

I sighed. "Beckett, you can call me Grace, *just* Grace."

"With all due respect," he replied, "I won't, *Miss* Grace."

I rolled my eyes but continued to smile as I headed over to the undergarments. It didn't take long to find what I needed and then some. Then, after gathering Beckett and his tea, I was off to the salon and back to the apartment to change.

Everything about me felt new. My hair, my clothes, even my manicure were part of a costume, yet they felt strangely natural. As I climbed into the Black SUV, Beckett smiled in the rearview mirror.

"You look very lovely," he complimented while pulling out of the underground garage.

"Thank you. Do you think Mr. Hayes will like the dress?"

To my surprise, Beckett laughed like Santa Claus. "If he doesn't, he's a blind fool. Don't tell him I said that."

I settled into my seat with a childish giggle. "It will stay between us."

It was odd, feeling nervous about a party, but all the company parties I'd ever attended were in the back rooms of restaurants or in the office itself. They were never held in gilded ballrooms, nor were there local paparazzi buzzing around the entrance. With a hand over my eyes, all I could think about were the people who might see my face posted on their tacky websites. In all that glamor, I was forced to remember the ones I could hurt.

My heartbeat only calmed with Jasper's arm wrapped around my shoulders.

"Let's get inside. It's quieter in there," he told me in a tone only I could hear.

Breathing in his cologne, I asked, "Did you have a good day?"

The smile he offered weakened me. His eyes glanced my way, and I melted.

"It was fine, but seeing you tonight is far more exciting."

Filled with nerves, I laughed at his reply. I'd been anxious the whole ride across Manhattan, hoping he would like my dress, praying I could be the one he needed. Pride kept me

from confessing, but it felt like this one night was the center of my life.

Everything revolved around this moment.

We stepped inside, and I followed Jasper toward the coat check. As I relinquished my coat, his eyes glazed over. He finally saw my scarlet dress, a strapless column gown with a stylized waterfall of fabric gathered at my hip. Pain and pleasure echoed in his expression, and I knew that one look could last me a lifetime.

“I don’t know if I should take you into that ballroom,” Jasper told me softly, his tone darkening. “I’m going to be fighting for your attention all night.”

I tucked a piece of hair behind my ear and grinned. “And here I was, worried this was too much.”

“It’s perfect,” he assured me, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re perfect.”

“I’ve never been one to do anything halfway, so shall we go put on a show?”

As I offered my hand, Jasper took it willingly, his thumb across my knuckles. His hazel eyes glowed with something I couldn’t quite place. It was something new but magically warm.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

We stepped into the ballroom, and it was like walking into a movie scene. Glamorous people mingled with cocktails and passed hors d’oeuvres. Violet-blue uplighting glowed against the Italianate grandeur of the massive space. White blossoms were everywhere, and a string ensemble playing with a pianist had their melodies floating over the crowd.

The ballroom looked like a snowy night. In shades of cool blue, Jasper Hayes was more golden and gorgeous than ever. His shoulders were straight, and his smile felt effortless.

“This is more of a sponsored charity event,” Jasper explained as he led me toward the bar. “The silent auction is raising money for the city’s food banks.”

“Are you going to bid on something?” I asked him.

We reached the bar, and Jasper held up his free hand. “Two glasses of champagne, please.”

“Here you are, sir,” the bartender told Jasper.

He left a generous tip before answering me. “I haven’t looked yet. Would you like to see what they’re offering?”

“Sure.”

Of course, I couldn’t afford the week-long trip to Palm Springs or the designer jewelry worth more than a car. We simply walked along the dressed rows of tables, sipping our wine and eyeing one treasure after another.

“Nothing interesting to you?” he asked over my shoulder.

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” I admitted, my hand brushing against a rare bottle of Bordeaux. “It’s just . . . what do you do with all these things?”

Jasper laughed darkly. “You use them as a tax write-off.”

“Jasper, dear!” a nasally voice called out, drowning out our shared joke.

I looked up to see a bemused man and a bony blonde woman walking our way. Before I could think, Jasper’s arm wrapped around my waist.

His voice grew flat as he answered, “Hello, Olivia. I’d like to introduce you to Grace Balsamo. Grace, this is Olivia, a friend of mine.”

It took one look in her eyes for me to know that Olivia had never thought of Jasper as a “friend”.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I replied with all the courtesy I could.

She looked me up and down with a plastic expression. “Where has Jasper been hiding you?”

“In his attic, between the Christmas decorations and an old armchair,” I answered quickly.

Both Olivia and her date blinked in surprise.

Jasper chuckled beside me. “Grace is a pianist. She’s been studying in Paris for the last few years.”

“How marvelous,” Olivia feigned.

As the song changed, Jasper jumped in before anything else could be said. His arm shifted to mine, and I felt myself taking a step back. The piano flourished into the intro of an old Nat King Cole song.

“Of course, I promised Grace a dance, so if you’ll excuse us,” Jasper declared, and I didn’t dare argue.

Olivia’s gentleman friend seemed largely ignorant as we walked away. With one easy movement, I found myself in Jasper’s arms as we shuffled around a parquet floor.

“Why do you do that?” he asked.

“What?”

“Say absurd things to shock people.”

With my hand over his shoulder, I found myself tucking back a piece of his hair. The blue snow continued to fall around us, yet Jasper became the only enchanting thing in that ballroom. It was just us and the holiday melody.

“Because people take themselves too seriously,” I confessed. “I’ve spent too much time around a lot of too-serious artists. It’s healthy to laugh, especially at yourself, but Jasper . . . that woman . . . she wasn’t just a *friend*. You were avoiding her.”

It wasn’t a question. Jasper’s expression softened, and he didn’t try to lie.

“Olivia was supposed to be here with me, but she threw me over at the last minute.”

I smiled and rested my head against Jasper’s chest. “I guess I should thank her for being an idiot, then.”

“Only if you let me thank her first,” he joked lightly. “The date I brought instead is far more interesting.”

“Really? I’d love to meet her.”

As Jasper's warm laugh vibrated into me, the night felt like it was finally beginning. A carousel of chatting with board members and guests turned into canapes and little jokes. Then, the early morning hours came as Beckett carried us home, and I found my feet dancing back to Jasper's expansive bed.

"The only place I'll like this dress better is on the floor," Jasper said, his hands already reaching for the zipper.

It was a sweet relief to set aside the formalities. I'd been longing for this moment from the second I saw Jasper in his tux. Besides Olivia, Jasper had been eager to show me off, to have me talk about my musical ambitions, and it only made my wanting worse. He had spent the night making me feel like the only woman in the room, and Jasper deserved a reward for his efforts.

"I could say the same about this suit," I murmured, my hands already undoing his bowtie. "There's something I should tell you, though."

"And what would that be?"

I kissed Jasper first, but as I pulled away, I whispered, "This dress doesn't have a zipper."

His growling groan of frustration got lost in my laughter, yet his hands were already grasping at the fabric. They were pulling up the skirt and throwing it over my head before he could see what I'd bought for him. I heard his breath catch as he took a half-step away.

"Damn, Grace."

His eyes appraised the black lace bra, panties, and garter belt with a newfound fervor.

"You told me you liked lace, correct?" I teased him, my hands reaching out for his buttons and belt. "So, tell me what else you'd like, and I'll take care of you."

"There are so many things I want from you," Jasper confessed between languid kisses.

"Where should we start, then?"

I kissed him again, holding his lower lip between my teeth. At the foot of the bed, I could hear our breathing growing ragged. Jasper and I were both restless, but I forced the pace to remain slow. More than anything, I longed to savor the moment.

“I want to feel your mouth around me,” he growled, his breath warming my cheek. “I want you to bring me to the edge before letting me inside you.”

I smiled sinfully. “It would be my pleasure.”

Jasper didn’t hesitate to let me undress his chiseled figure. With every kiss and touch, I could feel his body reaching another level of anticipation. His eyes were making a meal of me as I removed my bra and panties before him.

“Leave those on,” he asserted as I went to remove my garter belt and tights.

I instantly stopped. “Okay.”

In nothing but my hosiery, I crawled over Jasper’s reacting body. His tip was already dripping in desire, and I was more curious to know its taste. As my mouth trailed across his stomach, I could feel the space between my legs growing hotter.

“Turn around, Grace,” Jasper told me wickedly. “I think that pretty puss of yours belongs up here.”

I answered his request with a knowing grin before I shifted my body around. My legs straddled his face, and Jasper knew just how to position himself. Just as I began to envelop his shaft with my lips, I found myself moaning thanks to Jasper’s confident tongue. Every lick and swirling motion compelled me to push further.

We were both racing toward the edge, but I didn’t want to end like this. Euphoria rippled through me. It had my hips rocking, yet I didn’t say a word. I didn’t give up until Jasper found himself on the brink.

“I want you,” he declared between gasping breaths.

It wasn't easy pulling myself away. I felt limp from the pleasure, but Jasper was all too happy to place me just as he needed me. His hands wrapped around my wrists, placing them over my head as he slipped inside me.

"Jasper," I whimpered.

He pushed deeper and cursed. "Hell, Grace, you feel too good."

My head was spinning as he pushed deeper. With a steady crescendo, Jasper's pace grew, and in a grand chorus, a delirious climax consumed me. It rushed through me as I clenched my body around Jasper's. As he wanted, I let his satisfaction rush through my body while I held him tightly.

"Damn," he cursed breathlessly.

I didn't have words to describe the feelings rushing through me. I could only wrap my arms around Jasper as I kissed his cheek softly. My hands ran over his hair, and I knew.

We could stay in this bed. We could be happy. If Jasper would give us a chance, we could be so much more.

"Why don't we get cleaned up for bed?" he suggested softly.

I easily followed him into the massive bathroom. Against a dark marble accent wall, a modern freestanding tub waited for us. It wasn't long before I found myself nestled against Jasper's chest as steam rose with the calming smell of lavender salts.

"You know we don't have any obligations until dinner tomorrow," he mentioned softly. "Have you thought about what you'd like to do?"

With a sea sponge, Jasper let the water run down my chest as he awaited an answer.

"I'd like to take a walk," I confessed. "They put up Christmas lights in Central Park."

"Is that all?" he wondered softly, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

As he rinsed off my arms, I felt my eyelids closing. The world felt so safe and warm.

I told him, “I don’t care where we go. I only care about being with you.”

With a sigh, I could feel my body begging for sleep. It was already the early hours of the morning, and all our exertions had me spent. I couldn’t tell where I was between dreams and reality. All I heard was the bath draining and Jasper’s muddled voice. His arms around me, and Jasper carried me to the bed. I had no idea he was even that strong.

“Sweet dreams,” he whispered in my ear.

My last memory was the feeling of his body under the covers. His arm curled around me, and I pressed my back into his warm chest. Skin against skin, I fell asleep wondering where I ended and Jasper began, but honestly . . . I didn’t want to know.

CHAPTER TEN

JASPER

I was always on the run with work. Before the sunrise, I would force myself into an endless hustle. I'd power myself with adrenaline and caffeine, the cogs of my mind turning rapidly.

Things were different with Grace.

That Saturday morning, I found myself still for the first time in ages. I kept myself frozen, admiring Grace's olive-toned face and its serene expression pressed against my shoulder. Until she woke up, I refused to look away. Her eyes fluttered open a few minutes before ten.

"Good morning," I whispered to her, my voice a tad dry.

"Good morning," she echoed with a tender smile.

"Would you like some coffee?"

She nodded and yawned. "That'd be nice."

"Okay, then," I agreed, kissing her forehead before I dragged myself away.

The common area smelled of Arabica beans and sugar. As Grace tiptoed into the kitchen, she tightened the sash of her kimono robe. Her face looked freshly washed, and her long hair was pulled into a ponytail.

"I was thinking about making an omelet for myself," I declared as Grace found a coffee mug in the upper cabinet. "Would you like one?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," she agreed before kissing my cheek.

In those simple moments, Grace's hand brushed against my arm and the back of my white T-shirt. Her footsteps padded around me, and I listened to her humming some holiday tune. Something inside me said I should thank her. As I looked at Grace fixing her coffee, a little voice told me to be beyond grateful for her mere presence in my life.

Instead, I asked, "What would you like in your omelet?"

“Oh, anything’s fine,” she assured me. “I could have it plain, with cheese, or whatever.”

I decided to make both omelets the same, with herbed cheese filling and a chive garnish. At some point, I heard Grace noticing the record player in the living room.

“How long have you had these?” she asked between sips of coffee.

“Since records were my only real option,” I answered. “My parents weren’t keen on cassettes.”

Grace laughed before suggesting, “Should I play one?”

“Why not?”

She chose Stevie Wonder’s Christmas record, an old favorite of mine. The opening track brought back memories of hanging tinsel and snowy nights in Wilmington, Delaware. It made me notice the absence of decor around the room, yet Grace’s eyes were enchanting enough. As we sat down at the breakfast table, her face sparkled more than Manhattan ever could.

Her cool feet brushed against mine under the table, and we talked about plans for the day. We both needed presents. I promised that Grace would get her walk, yet we didn’t rush out. Grace and I let the morning slip by as we remained unhurried and contented.

On paper, nothing about Grace and me made sense. She was twenty years my junior and my daughter’s friend, yet our conversation was easy. Grace’s hand in mine felt natural. Our fingers intertwined like they’d been together for a lifetime. As we wandered from store to store, cherishing her company felt as effortless as breathing.

I couldn’t be bothered by the brisk air heralding winter’s arrival. With Beckett driving us to Central Park, I found myself strolling around the Harlem Meer after sunset. Some saxophonist was busking by the Victorian-style park building while a flotilla of holiday trees glowed over the water. My steps slowed. I pulled Grace closer as children and visitors

hustled past, and she kept me warm where my winter coat couldn't.

"Would you ever do that?" I asked Grace, gesturing to the musician.

"I don't know," she joked. "I don't know how I'd drag a piano out here."

"Well, what about a keyboard?"

She sighed. "I'd settle for a baby toy these days. Do you know, I haven't played anything in over two weeks?"

"When did you start playing?" I wondered, knowing that I should've known.

"When I was four," she explained as we continued walking. "I liked my grandmother's piano. I played with it whenever we visited her in Tacoma. She would play for me, and I just remember how I could *feel* the melody. It was like . . . like wind or a water current in my chest. My parents decided to put me in lessons, and I never looked back."

"I heard you mention at your birthday dinner that you wanted to become a studio musician."

As I glanced down at her, Grace's expression looked so passionate and alive. I'd never seen so much excitement in one person's face, and it made her even more beautiful.

"It's where I would like to start," she agreed, her voice growing warm. "When I was in Paris, performing in concerts was lovely, but I want to do more than play for people who can afford some high-priced ticket."

"Do you miss Paris, though?"

Her smile grew bittersweet. "I miss my friends and my routines. I'd like to go down to the bakery at my corner each week. It's little things like that I'll always remember well, but I'm looking forward to my next steps, just like I know I'll play a piano again."

"Oh," I mused, my attention turning toward the dark sky. "I bet it will be sooner than you think."

“Maybe,” she murmured.

“Who knows? There might even be a piano at the dinner party tonight.”

“Well, if we don’t head back to your place soon, we’re going to be late.”

I reached for my phone with a pang of regret. As I squeezed Grace’s hand, I messaged Beckett to pick us up at the corner of Fifth and One Hundred and Fifth Street. I debated walking past the scrolling iron park gate. I imagined what it would be like to spend the rest of our trip alone, but Grace and I had a bargain. My selfish wishes couldn’t supersede our plans.

By the time we got home and dressed, I knew that Grace didn’t deserve to be hidden away. She deserved to be admired, especially in her black velvet cocktail dress with its scooped back and bejeweled sleeve cuffs. My default charcoal-colored suit didn’t compare. Grace Balsamo’s star shined too brightly for me to ever contain, and I never intended to lock such beauty away. As we arrived at the Upper East Side mansion, Grace smoothed her curled hair and stepped into her role with ease.

“Who are the Shaws to you again?” Grace asked as we walked through the front gate adorned in evergreen ivy.

“They’re both board members,” I explained. “Hillary Shaw always likes to host a dinner party the weekend of our investors’ meeting.”

“And her husband is . . . Oscar, correct?”

“Yes, and if you get caught in conversation with him, he’s a massive fan of opera, ballet, and hating the Red Sox.”

Grace’s laugh warmed me as I rang the doorbell and the quiet housekeeper let us inside. It was easy to see Grace shine among the traditional living room’s grandeur. She happily charmed Oscar Shaw with conversations of Tchaikovsky, and she knew to compliment Hillary on her taste in art.

I’d never known whether I belonged in these spaces. I was a middle-class guy born in Delaware with an aptitude for

computers and coding. Grace's childhood wasn't much different from mine, but she knew how to ease her way into this gilded world. Her warmth glowed like the candlelit dinner table. My acquaintances welcomed her stories and little jokes, but her eyes always came back to me.

"It's been a pleasure having you at our dinner table, Grace," Hillary told her as we collected our coats. "If you're ever in the city, we'd be happy to have you join us in our box at the Lincoln Center. I've never met anyone with more appreciation for romantic-era music than my husband."

"You're too kind, Hillary," Grace replied, her voice effervescent. "Please, give my compliments to your chef. Her chocolate panna cotta was heavenly."

"She'll be delighted to hear it."

As we stepped outside to meet Beckett by the curb, the residential street was quiet. Ice hung in the air, and hibernating trees sparkled with white lights. I stopped to kiss the back of Grace's cooling hand.

"What was that for?" Grace wondered.

"I wanted to thank you," I confessed, my hand still holding hers, "for tonight, for today . . . for everything."

Her free hand reached up for my cheek. "I made you a promise, Jasper, and I've always been a woman of my word."

"I know, but I still wanted to tell you before I forget."

Before I took Grace Balsamo and all her inner beauty for granted again.

"It's cold," she murmured as the SUV pulled up. "Let's head home."

"Of course."

When we were alone again, I knew I could kiss her as I liked. Ambient city light illuminated her exquisite profile as she discarded her jewelry on the sleek ebony dresser.

"Will you help me with my zipper?" she asked me.

My hand brushed aside Grace's dark hair so my lips could press against the nape of her neck. With a quick tug, I pulled down the zipper against her spine, exposing more of her soft skin. She smiled as she turned.

"I'm going to wash my face," she declared. "Give me five minutes, will you?"

"You can take all the time in the world," I promised.

"Five minutes will be plenty."

I hung up my coat and drew the sheer black window shades. The world had seen enough of Grace for one day. In that bedroom, I wanted Grace to be for my eyes only. I was pulling down the last shade when Grace's palms pressed into my back. Her fingers curled over my shoulders.

"I only needed four," she whispered to me.

When her grip let go of me, I turned to find her fresh-faced and barefoot again. The precise curls had been brushed into soft waves that cascaded over her shoulders. There wasn't an ounce of shame in her expression as she stood there, half-naked and hopeful.

"What would make you happy?" I asked while reaching for her waist. "What can I do for you tonight?"

Grace bit her lower lip. Her dark eyes looked hesitant.

"I'm not sure," she revealed quietly.

My lips pressed against her cheek. "You have no idea?"

"I mean . . . I have a few."

"Tell me," I urged her as my kiss wandered toward her ear. "You've done so much for me. Let me do something for you."

My hands trailed down, feeling the nude lace of her underwear against my fingertips. With a careful grip, I pulled Grace's body into mine. I drew her as close as possible and let her quiet moan get lost in a kiss that tasted of her peppermint toothpaste. She was, without a doubt, the center of my world.

Grace Balsamo was my golden star leading me back to feelings I'd forgotten. At that moment, all I wanted to do was

to make her happy, to see her satisfied. Her new reluctance didn't make me waver in my mission. I didn't care what it took. For as long as I possibly could, I wanted to be the man who cared for Grace.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GRACE

I want to stay here with you.

Let's be happy together in New York.

Let me be the woman you love.

There were so many answers to Jasper's question. As I admired his handsomeness and my hands pressed against the strength of his chest, I didn't let any of my truths escape my lips. The words danced in my mind, yet they didn't feel real. None of this did.

All I had was Jasper leading me toward the bed. Once his clothes were discarded, the only thing I knew with certainty was how his hands clung to my curves. I didn't want to ask for promises Jasper couldn't keep. Still, I knew that this was my last chance.

The next day, we would be flying home. Our contract would be complete, and my fantasy would reach its end. There were so many times that I'd wished for Jasper.

I just forgot to wish for forever. Even in my wildest dreams, I didn't dare think that he and I could have a happy ending. It felt . . . impossible.

Underneath Jasper, I told him, "I want to know nothing but the feeling of you against me. I don't want to feel anything else."

His lips lingered against my shoulder. They pressed against my skin once more before he answered.

"I think I can manage that."

The world felt cold as he pulled away from me. Then, I found his eyes again.

"Do you trust me?" Jasper asked.

"Yes," I answered without hesitation.

If he wanted it, I would trust Jasper Hayes with my heart.

The thick satin sash of my teal robe began to cover my eyes, and I leaned forward to let Jasper tie it tightly behind my head. The thin veil left me with nothing but Jasper—his kiss, his touch, his everything.

“At dinner tonight, I could only think about how badly I craved you,” he whispered in my ear. “You were too beautiful to be real, but you were all mine.”

“I *am* yours,” I echoed, hoping Jasper would hear me.

“You are tonight,” he answered. “Everyone else has had enough of you. Now, you’re only mine.”

He hadn’t heard me, yet he persisted with coaxing the pleasure from my body. With nothing else to perceive, I gasped at the feeling of Jasper’s teeth nipping at my breasts. His hands gripped my hips, and I whimpered at the sensation.

“Do you like this?” Jasper asked while massaging my breasts. “Is this what you wanted?”

His fingers massaged my nipples as I breathed, “Yes.”

“Do you like this, then?” he asked again, his hand reaching down until it found a home between my legs.

“Yes, Jasper,” I pleaded in a whisper.

Hot and bothered, it was nothing for his finger to slip inside me. My spine arched at the overwhelming sensations. His tongue and teeth toyed with my chest as Jasper’s thumb began to circle my clit. My hips rose to meet the feeling. Pleasure built up inside me.

I couldn’t think about what was coming for us. I refused to feel anything but him. As Jasper claimed me for his own, I did nothing but savor the moment. His mouth tasted every inch of me, and I shifted to accommodate his mouth. I determined that my legs would spread wider. My body would remain still. From my temple to my curling toes, I memorized the agonizing pleasure Jasper provided.

“Let me have you,” I finally had to beg as my body sprawled out beneath him, trembling in ecstasy. “Take me

from behind, from the side, I don't care. Just let me feel you, Jasper."

His lips pressed against my breastbone as he answered, "As you wish, beautiful."

As he turned me slowly on my side, Jasper wrapped me up in his arms, fastening me against him. I was locked against his chest, happy to stay there forever. I could spend a lifetime feeling safe and warm against him. When he slowly entered me from behind, I felt his one free hand undo my makeshift blindfold. It changed nothing.

I was still in the dark. Jasper Hayes was all I knew.

"Yes," I whimpered as he plunged deeper.

His lips against my neck, Jasper murmured, "You feel like heaven, Grace."

"That doesn't make me a saint," I teased back.

Jasper laughed as his lips found themselves against the crook of my neck. As he rocked against me, I shut my eyes and forgot the banter. All I needed was to keep our bodies connected for as long as I could. I had no power over the rising sun, but I could keep us together until it did.

My hips shifted. Jasper growled against my neck. I could feel myself so close, yet I wasn't ready to let go. His hands cupped my breasts as I begged my body to hold off. I refused to surrender to the satisfaction of a climax until it became impossible. After these nights together, Jasper knew just how to make my body relent.

"Jasper, I—" I gasped, my voice pitching higher.

All my words were lost in a rushing climax. My body trembled, and I felt Jasper's satisfaction rippling through me. Our two moments of pleasure melded into one. For a moment, three small words echoed in my mind, yet I didn't dare say them.

My body had its satisfaction, but my heart did not.

"So damn beautiful," Jasper muttered as we remained intertwined.

When sleep finally came for us, I put my head over Jasper's chest and shut my eyes. I imagined I had the courage to confess my truth and that Jasper returned the affection. In my head, we stayed in New York. We didn't go back to Malibu and to the reality that pulled us apart. I saw Jasper and me being happy.

Everything I desired was right there, but none of it was real.

In reality, Jasper fell asleep running his hands through my hair. His breathing was even and slow, yet I lost it when the dawn came. Jasper went back to his old routines, exercising before his morning shower. I was back in the warm bed by myself. Before Jasper got back upstairs, I showered and dressed.

"Would you like to go out for breakfast?" Jasper asked as he came out of the shower.

"We could," I replied while packing my bag. "What time do we need to be at the airport?"

"Two o'clock," he answered. "We could just have breakfast here too."

"I'm happy with whatever you want, Jasper."

My words sounded sweet on the surface. The night before, Jasper had tantalized my body with sheer pleasure, but I couldn't pretend anymore. I needed to shield myself before it was too late. Our flight was set to depart around two thirty. Once we touched down in California, the dream I'd known for the last few days would be over.

Even though the truth had been right on the tip of my tongue, I doubted that Jasper would ever say those three life-changing words. I couldn't believe that he really loved me.

He walked into the walk-in closet to find his clothes for the day. I tried not to notice how his hot, damp skin glistened in the morning light. His chiseled physique was too perfect, and I couldn't allow my knees to weaken anymore.

With my hair in a loose braid, I checked myself in the bedroom mirror. My burgundy turtleneck and brown tweed

skirt had to be polished enough for lunch between business associates. Jasper promised me that it wasn't serious. All I had to do was show up and smile.

Was that all he ever really wanted from me?

"Grace?" Jasper called out as he emerged from the closet.

As he pulled the olive sweater over his crisp white shirt and dark jeans' waistband, I ignored how handsome Jasper looked. I didn't say a word about it.

"Yes?" I answered instead.

"I said there's an old-school French place on Spring Street that makes wonderful crepes and pastries," he apparently repeated. "I thought it would be something you might enjoy."

I smiled. "Yeah, that sounds great, Jasper. I just need to finish packing up my things, and I'll be ready to go whenever you are."

Jasper nodded, but the gold of his eyes didn't shine like I'd grown used to seeing.

"Alright, Grace," he agreed.

I clung to my dreams for as long as I could, yet they slipped through my fingers like the sands of time. I couldn't keep us in New York. Even as I laughed along and played my part at lunch, I felt time ticking down. It wasn't until we reached the tarmac that the final gong rang.

"Hello, Matilda," I greeted the familiar attendant.

"Wonderful to see you again, Miss Balsamo," she replied. "Will you be wanting another ginger ale?"

"Yes," I responded absent-mindedly.

My stomach was already turning, and it had nothing to do with the altitude or the flight. For the first time in my life, I hated to think that I was going home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JASPER

From the moment we took off from LaGuardia, something was wrong. The irksome sensation nagged from deep within my bones. Grace was pulling away from me.

The young woman who had spent the night using my chest as a pillow was now distant. She kept her eyes on a book we'd found in a shop the day before. Any time I spoke to her, her words were still warm, but her tone grew softer, weaker. Her volume faded with the warmth in her eyes. When we touched down in Los Angeles, I feared my golden starlight was down to its last flame.

No, it wasn't mine. It never had been.

A driver took us, our luggage, and our shopping back to Malibu. As we pulled up to the gate, it felt like a lifetime had passed since we left my home. City skyscrapers were left behind for endless coastal views. The house itself was dark, and it smelled of eucalyptus and evergreen pine. Grace's boots tapped against the floor as she moved to turn on the Christmas tree in the corner of the living room.

"I guess I'll go unpack," she declared as the lights came alive.

I wasn't ready to watch her turn away. I wasn't prepared to let our time together end.

"Why don't we have a bite to eat first?" I blurted out, not knowing how else to keep her downstairs. "I could make us something. It's been eight hours since we had lunch."

Grace glanced at her watch and nodded. "That would be fine."

As she left her bag by the stairs, I went into the kitchen to see what my housekeeper had left for me. The grocery order had the fridge stocked, but my mind blurred. I didn't know what to make other than sandwiches. I began to gather up the ingredients as Grace moved toward the cabinet.

“Would you like something to drink, Jasper?”

“Yes, whatever you’re having is fine.”

I sounded too agreeable. It felt like all that effortless between Grace and me had stayed behind in New York. We shifted around the kitchen in our discomfort, neither of us knowing how to handle the other. Grace’s presence had me fumbling like a naive teenager. If she got too close, I found myself faltering. The uninhibited woman I’d discovered was shrouded in a reticent, coy demeanor, and . . . it bothered me.

“You want to listen to something?” I offered, reaching for the smart home hub on the wall. “Holiday music? Instrumental? Or, um, you used to like rock, right?”

“Anything’s fine with me,” she answered with little emotion.

I pulled up Brandi Carlile, a singer-songwriter Hope had probably played last. With her folksy melodies floating overhead, I continued to make two turkey and Swiss sandwiches for us. Grace poured us each mineral water and slowly pushed the second glass in my direction.

It was time to address the elephant inside me.

“You know, Grace, I enjoyed my time with you this weekend,” I began casually.

Her brown eyes met mine. They were kind . . . but not warm.

“I enjoyed it too.”

“Well,” I continued, “if you were interested, our arrangement could continue.”

I didn’t expect her to laugh. As she pushed the stray hair from her face, Grace shook her head and leaned against the cabinets. Her arms crossed over her chest as she glanced at her feet.

“I know you’re rich, Jasper, but I don’t think you afford me long-term.”

The gravity of her words hit me like a sucker punch. There was no malice in her voice, but the truth was unforgiving enough. Somehow over the last few days, I'd forgotten our agreement.

As I finished the sandwiches, I replied, "You're probably right, but I was thinking more about the relationship aspect of the weekend. I still want you, Grace. I hope you know that."

I handed her one of the two sandwich plates, and she took it only to set it aside. I watched as her calm mask fell to the floor as she looked back at me. Her eyes were unflinching.

"Do you want me, Jasper, or do you want my body?"

The question hung in the silence between us. Grace had been pulling away, giving me the chance to end this quietly. She'd folded into herself over the course of the day, but now, she was laying herself bare. This emboldened woman wasn't afraid to be honest.

"When I agreed to go to New York, I wasn't doing it for the money. I did it because I cared about you, but that's not enough for me to pretend that I want some no-strings affair. I won't lie and pretend that I don't want more for myself."

When did my pleasure start causing her pain?

"Were you unhappy in New York?" I asked first.

"No," she said, her voice rising with her growing anxiety. "I love . . . I *loved* this weekend, but we were playing pretend. Yes, the sex was great. Yes, I enjoyed my time with you, but that doesn't make this a long-term solution. *We* can't keep pretending. I can't be some woman who waits around for you in bed. I can't be Olivia or any of those other women you've been seeing."

"I don't want you to be Olivia," I asserted. "I only ever want you to be yourself."

"But do you hear me, Jasper? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I definitely heard you," a voice said behind me.

I turned to see Hope staring at us, her blue eyes filled with shock and disgust. Her jaw clenched, and her knuckles were white around her suitcase's handle. Between the music and the tense conversation, neither Grace nor I had noticed the front door opening. We hadn't realized that Hope had come home early.

"Hope, I can explain," Grace began quickly.

"What's there to explain?" Hope fired back, her body tensing in preparation for a fight. "*You went behind my back and slept with my dad.* God, I can't believe you, either of you! I caught an earlier flight home because I felt bad for you being here by yourself, Grace, but you weren't here at all! You were in New York, screwing my father and stabbing me in the back!"

"It wasn't like that," I asserted.

Her eyes growing red and watery, Hope scoffed. "What, don't tell me it's *worse*. You two have been fooling around for years or some shit like that?"

"No," I huffed in frustration. "It was only once."

"Once?" she shrieked. "Oh, my God, this has happened before?"

I groaned. Of course, I was the idiot who had to make everything worse. I was the one who had spent too many years turning love into a business arrangement, and now, I was paying the price. I'd forgotten the truth of my time with Grace, and I'd forgotten how to console a hurting woman.

"No, no, not like this. I mean, there was one time, but—" Grace swore as she choked back her emotions. "Hope, please, if you'll just let me explain. We can sit down and talk this out. I can make it right, if you'll just let me!"

"I'm not interested, Grace!" Hope shouted, her feet already taking two steps back. "I invited you into my home! I agonized over your being comfortable because I thought you were my family. I thought you thought of me like family, but you're just a damn traitor! Did you even care about coming to

see me for Christmas, or were you just trying to get in my father's freaking pants?"

"You have no idea how much guilt I have over this!" Grace shouted back while inching closer. "I get why you're angry! I know you're hurting! Just don't turn away from me, please!"

Tears streaked down Hope's cheeks, and each drop felt like a blade in my chest. All her life, I'd tried to spare Hope from the pain of my love life. I'd spent years keeping women at arm's length for her sake, but it suddenly started to catch up with me. Those years of avoiding confusion and dismay were returning with a vengeance.

"What did I ever do to you?" Hope cried, her eyes staring right at me. "What did I do wrong?"

"Hope, this wasn't about you. I promise."

"Then, who was it about?" Hope went off like a siren. "Was this only ever about you? Did you ever once think about me at all?"

With those final piercing words, I helplessly watched Hope snatch up the keys to her car. She dragged her suitcase back out the front door, and when I finally regained consciousness after that brutal blow, I followed Hope.

"Hope! Sweetheart!" I called out as the garage door rolled open. "Where are you going?"

"Anywhere but here!" Hope yelled, tears still streaming over her face and staining her navy sweater. "I can't look at you two! I can't be in this house! God, I feel like I'm going to be sick!"

Pain and horror filled the evening air. The stars were mocking me from above, knowing just how I was ruining my life. They saw the disaster before I ever could, but I'd been blinded by one of their own. I got caught up in that shining, ageless beauty, and I forgot that I was mortal.

I had no right loving a lovely little star. I should never have dared to think that Grace Balsamo could be mine. Instead, I'd

cheapened her beauty and put a price on her charms, and I had done it at the cost of my only child's happiness and trust.

"You know what the worst part is?" Hope cried while throwing her luggage into her backseat. "This is all your doing, but I'm the one who feels like the damn fool! I'm the one who's been played!"

With a shake of her head, my daughter climbed into her Porsche and let the convertible come alive. She didn't wait to check her mirrors or look back. No, she whipped her car around and sped off into the darkness. Her silver bullet rushed down the driveway until she was nothing but a speck on the horizon.

I sighed, and my shoulders heaved with exhaustion. I'd never had things fall apart so quickly. Since losing my wife, I'd never felt so awful.

That was before I turned to see Grace crying on the doorstep. Her arms tightened around her chest, and mascara ran down her face. I'd never seen a woman cry so quietly. In my rash desperation, I thought I could stop them. I prayed that I could fix at least one of my mistakes.

"Grace, I'm sorry," I pleaded with her. "I'll make this right. I swear to you."

When my hands reached out, Grace recoiled like a wounded animal. Her face grew even more pained, and she quickly shook her head. Every step I took forward forced her to inch back.

"No, Jasper, please don't touch me," she insisted.

Guilt was eating her from the inside out. All I could do was watch her be consumed. Perhaps that was the punishment I deserved. After all my short-sided foolishness, I deserved to be cut open by Hope's tears. I'd earned the burden of shame and torment that burned my face to a shade of damning crimson.

"Fine, Grace." I sighed, my hands dropping to my sides. "What can I do?"

She shook her head. "Just . . . just leave me alone."

I did as she asked. I stood there outside my house, bleeding onto the pavement. My hands wanted to reach out to Grace. I longed to wrap her up and promise her that everything would be fine, but I didn't. Nothing I could say would assuage my guilt or her pain.

"I'm sorry," I muttered to the bitter wind, but what did it matter?

It would never be enough.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRACE

Before the fallout, I tried to give Jasper a chance. I wanted him to offer more, but he didn't. Then, after Hope came home and learned about all our lies, I couldn't be sure whether I ever wanted to let him touch me again.

Every time I looked at Jasper, all I could see was Hope's crying face.

"She's okay. Well, she's upset, but she is physically fine," Inez, our mutual friend, assured me over the phone. "She's booked herself into the Viceroy in Santa Monica."

"Okay," I answered with a sigh. "Thanks, Inez. If she asks, please let her know I'm thinking about her."

"I will," she promised. "You two are the closest friends I've ever seen. If anyone can get through this mess, it's you and Hope."

I prayed to all my lucky stars that Inez was right. For years, I'd held onto my feelings for Jasper, keeping them as a shadowed secret. I knew the pain they could cause if the truth came to light, and Hope didn't deserve that. She had been the most important person in my life for too many years.

She'd held me when I'd cried over my parents' divorce. She was there for birthday wishes and endless summer nights. I told myself I could learn to live without Jasper Hayes. I could move on from him . . . but never Hope.

Days passed. When I felt bold, I messaged Hope with a small encouraging line, hoping it would be a chance to find redemption. Hope didn't answer, but she didn't lash out.

I took it as a win.

Then, when the morning of Christmas Eve arrived, I knew I couldn't wait anymore. I couldn't let my mistakes with Jasper ruin a family's holiday. My own family had already fallen apart. I knew the pain that came with that absence, and I

couldn't let Jasper and Hope suffer from those same wounds too.

These were my choices. I still loved Jasper, but I'd gone about loving him all wrong. It was time to reset our story and make everything right.

"I need to borrow a car," I told Jasper that morning.

We hadn't been speaking much since Hope's heartbreak and departure. The conversation we had that evening had been left up in the air all that time, but I'd told Jasper to leave me alone. His eyes were shadowed. His golden aura had dulled, yet he continued to give me the space I needed. Even over breakfast, Jasper was prepared to give me whatever I needed.

"The keys are in the mudroom," he told me. "Take whichever you'd like."

I stuck to the BMW coupe, the least expensive and high-tech of the three cars Jasper kept. The little two-seater still cut corners faster than I realized, but I survived long enough to make it to the Viceroy. As I handed the keys over to the valet, I knew that if I ever wanted to wallow in misery, this was the place to do it.

The upscale, modern hotel was just a few blocks from Santa Monica Beach. The poolside and its cabanas were breezy and decadent, and the interior was no different. Natural wood and stone were made vibrant with pops of color and bold graphic art. It was like some fanatic of Andy Warhol got together with a Scandinavian architect, and they made this place their baby.

"Excuse me, hi," I greeted the woman at the front desk. "I need to see Miss Hope Hayes, and I believe she's staying here. Is there any way I could call up to her room?"

"Do you have the room number?"

I smiled and lied, "I wrote it down, but I'm afraid I've lost it."

"Don't worry, I can look it up here," the woman assured me.

She typed at her computer before her ebony hand reached for the phone. My palms, growing clammy with nerves, rubbed against my denim-clad thighs. I fidgeted with my sweater sleeves and earrings as I watched the woman call for a second time.

“I’m sorry, but Miss Hayes isn’t picking up,” she explained with a regretful smile. “It’s likely that she isn’t in her room, but you are free to check our lounge spaces. Our menu has special holiday coffee drinks. Feel free to relax in the indoor lounge and order one for yourself.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind.”

I was too jittery for coffee, but the woman had to make her sales pitch. Although, it wasn’t a bad idea to check the dining rooms. It was only a few minutes before ten, and Hope might have just been having breakfast. I wandered through hotel guests and staff to find the expansive mid-century lounge. Across the half-filled room, my favorite blonde was sipping an orange juice and staring at her computer screen.

Her cornsilk hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and her blue eyes matched her dress. She looked like a melancholy doll. Even from that distance, I saw that Hope had planted herself there no longer from pain but pride.

She wasn’t going to crawl on her knees back to Jasper and me. No, these were my sins. I was the one who needed to atone.

“Hope?” I called as I came closer.

Hesitation kept me distant. I didn’t need to spook my best friend. Even as she heard me, her laptop slapped shut.

“No,” she declared quickly. “I can’t do this.”

“Hope, please, it’s Christmas Eve,” I pleaded softly. “I have no right to ask, but just talk to me. Give me fifteen minutes, and that can be your gift to me this year.”

She frowned as her eyes met mine. “I already bought you that lavender hot chocolate you like.”

“And I got you that face mask you love,” I replied. “You know, the one with blue tansy?”

Hope’s lips pursed. She looked like she was trying to keep the resentment painted on her face, yet as I sat across from her at the corner table, she didn’t run. Her arms folded over her chest with a huff.

“Fine,” Hope huffed, much like her dad when he was frustrated. “I’ll give you ten minutes.”

I’d been prepping my lines the whole ride over, but none of them felt fitting anymore. I couldn’t rehearse an earnest apology.

“I want to start by saying I’m sorry for how you found out about everything,” I began. “Hope, there’s a lot of things we tell each other, but . . . there are some secrets I’ve always kept to myself.”

“You mean Dad?” she stated flatly.

I opened my mouth to answer when a waiter popped up. “Excuse me, may I get you something? A coffee or something from our brunch menu?”

“Get her an iced Dulce de Latte,” Hope answered for me. “And put it on my tab.”

The skinny young man smiled. “I’ll be right back, then.”

Hope sighed, some of her venom fading. “Trust me, that latte is right up your alley.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t. Dad’s credit card is paying for all of this. After . . . *everything*, it’s the least he could do, but you were saying?”

“Oh, um,” I mumbled, trying to remember. “I was telling you about my secrets.”

“Right.”

I chewed on my lip before confessing, “I’ve had feelings for him for a while. For a long time, it was a dumb schoolgirl crush, a cheap infatuation, but when my family fell apart, when my parents split up and kinda . . . well, left me behind, I

began to see my feelings of loss reflected in Jasper. It was different, though. He lost a person. I lost my home and my family, but we both knew what it was like to pick up the pieces of a shattered life. I told myself that I was kidding myself, but it felt like I could see the broken places inside him. I saw them, and I wanted to be the one to take care of them.”

“So . . . that’s what you were doing?” Hope asked, her voice offering a little more forgiveness.

“I went to New York with him because he needed someone,” I answered honestly, “but I almost didn’t go because I knew it could hurt you. Hope, I was prepared to let all my feelings remain unrequited for your sake. I swear on everything that I am that my biggest fear in all of this was losing you.”

Her eyes were going glassy again. Hope’s arms unfolded as a finger dabbed at the inside corners of her eyes. As the waiter delivered my coffee, neither of us had the awareness to acknowledge him, and he was professional enough to disappear.

“You know, I’ve spent the last several days wondering how much of my life is a lie,” Hope confessed, her anger melting to sorrow. “I’ve gone through so many memories, wondering if I saw them all wrong. I felt like I was so stupid for not seeing what was right under my nose.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I swore to her. “Hope, I never imagined that I would get any chance to act on my feelings, and that weekend in New York, I figured it would be the only time. You have to understand. I would *never* risk our friendship for just some fling. I would never have agreed if it wasn’t for my feelings for him.”

She took a small sip of her juice and nodded. “I think I see that now. It killed me to know that you both lied to me, but I get . . . I see now why you made your choices.”

“I’m not asking you to absolve me of my sins right now,” I assured her. “I only want you to come home. I can’t take my next step forward without you in my corner.”

“I know what you mean,” she answered with another long exhale. “Besides, I’ve always wanted to see you fall in love and be happy. You’re my best friend, and I wanted the same thing for Dad. He did seem lonely when I was little. I always thought he could meet someone nice who would make him happy. It’s definitely weird to think about you two together, but I want you both to find happiness. It would be going against my love for you both if I got in the way of this happiness you found. I can’t ruin your relationship over some hurt feelings.”

I sipped my coffee and shrugged. “There’s not much of a relationship to ruin. I mean, we had New York, but I’m not sure we’re on the same page. The way I feel . . . I don’t know if Jasper feels the same way.”

“Dad’s never been good with words,” Hope agreed. “He can be a little aloof, too much for his own good, really, but he’ll open up if you nag him.”

“Is that from personal experience?” I tried to joke.

Hope smiled softly. “Yeah, one too many personal experiences.”

“I’ll make you a deal, then,” I declared as my throat grew tight. “I’ll talk to Jasper if you talk to him too.”

My friend was silent for a moment, but I remained patient. Once she’d mulled over the bargain, Hope nodded.

“Okay,” she agreed, “but can I counter that offer?”

“How?”

“Can I hug you, Gracie?”

“Yeah,” I answered, trying not to cry. “I’ll always love you, Hope. I’ll always want a hug from you.”

As I wrapped my arms around her neck, I did my best to stifle back any snotty tears. I didn’t care what the others in the hotel lounge thought of us. I didn’t even worry about what was coming next for Jasper and me. I finally had my Hope back in my corner, and that was the most important part. With her there, my wounds could be washed clean, and I could be

whole again. After all those long days of worry, I could finally heal.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JASPER

I didn't question why Grace wanted a car. After so many restless nights alone, I was left with my nagging thoughts and a brandy in my hand. It only made sense when I heard two cars parking in the garage.

Through the silence, two pairs of footsteps echoed. Grace and Hope found me in the living room, pacing by the Christmas tree I didn't decorate. I'd started to see how impersonal my life had become over the last few days. Was there a facet of my life I hadn't treated like a business arrangement?

I met Hope's tired eyes, and I knew my daughter was the only sentiment I had in my impersonal but pristine world.

"I think you both need some space," Grace declared softly. "I'll, um, be out by the pool if you need me."

Left alone with Hope, I found my hands sliding into the pockets of my jeans. I'd been waiting for this moment, but once it arrived, I hardly knew what to do with myself. Part of me didn't know how to be around my own damn daughter.

"I've missed you," I finally said, knowing no words but the truth.

"I've missed you too, Dad," Hope told me.

I glanced toward the sofa and suggested, "Why don't we sit down?"

She perched herself at the far end of the long linen sofa, keeping herself at a careful distance. Her sneakers tapped on the hardwood as we both were too proud to start the conversation. I struggled over the hurdle until I found my words with a weary sigh.

"I'll answer whatever questions you have," I told her first. "I guess you don't want to listen to a bunch of groveling, so whatever you need to hear, I'll tell you."

“Are there still others?” Hope asked in a heartbeat. “That night, Grace said something about an Olivia person . . .”

My hands wrung together as I admitted, “Olivia Lennox was a woman I would see from time to time in New York. She saw Grace and me last weekend by chance. She wasn’t special to me, but I’ve spent the last two decades keeping my love life at arm’s length.”

“Because of Mom?”

Hope didn’t use that word often. Robin felt more like a myth than a memory these days.

“Yes, and for you,” I answered. “After we lost your mother in that car wreck, you were the only reason I’d get up in the morning. There were days I didn’t want to get out of bed, but I did for you. My success with my company, this house, this life . . . it was all for you. I wanted to give you everything your mother and I dreamed about, and I did. I just . . . I set myself aside. Although, I think it was to protect myself more than anything. I didn’t want to go through losing someone again, but I found myself being selfish again when it came to Grace.”

Hope chewed on the inside of her cheek as she listened. Her eyes looked at nothing until they dared to flit my way. There were both pain and promise in her expression.

“When I was little, I could tell you were lonely,” she declared, her voice barely louder than a whisper. “I would sometimes wish that you’d find someone who could make you happy. You always made me so happy, but . . . you didn’t always feel happy too.”

“That’s because you’re a good person, Hope, sweetheart. You’re the best daughter a man could have.”

“That night I drove off, I kept asking myself why it had to be *her*,” Hope admitted. “I know it was childish, but I told myself I should’ve been careful what I wished for. It was like, like I felt myself losing you both to each other. I couldn’t see how we would move forward like this all was normal, and for the first time in a long time, I wanted Mom. I wanted someone

to run toward, but you're the only one I had. I . . . I hadn't felt so alone before."

Her chest heaved like she wanted to cry, but the wells of Hope's tears were dried up. Feeling her agony carved a hole in my heart. I couldn't help but reach out. My hand wrapped around hers, and she didn't shy away. Hope let my hand warm her cool skin.

Even as my throat grew dry, I swore, "My love will never leave you, Hope. Your mother is with you, and I will be too. In this life and the next, you'll never be alone."

Hope found the last tear left inside her, and it rolled down her cheek before her arms flung around my neck like they would when she was so much smaller. I would come home from work, and Hope would throw herself at me to welcome me back. Her body didn't fit against mine the same, but the love was still there.

"You deserve to be happy, Dad," Hope muttered against my shoulder. "If you love me, you'll go talk to Grace. You need to make things right with her too."

"But . . . would you be okay with that?"

Hope pulled away, wiping away her last tear. "We won't know unless we try, right? I mean, I still stand by the story that I was born in a cabbage patch, and please, don't tell me otherwise."

"I get what you're saying." I laughed with slight relief.

As far as Hope needed to know, my bottom half looked just like a Ken doll's. My girl wasn't so little anymore, but there were still some things to be left in blissful ignorance.

Hope offered me one more hug before she took her suitcase out to the guest house to unpack. Our housekeeper, Frieda, had probably cleaned it two or three times since Hope had been home. I was sure everything would be polished and ready to welcome her back into her little haven.

I just needed to find mine again.

Outside, she sat on one of the chaise lounges. Her eyes were toward the horizon, and her leopard flats were discarded on the pavement. With her body wrapped up in a blanket, Grace's starlight was still waning, but it had never been lost. I saw it again when she smiled softly in my direction.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Better than I expected," I admitted. "Then again, I set myself a very low bar. As long as she didn't hate my guts, I would be pleased."

Grace laughed lightly, but her expression remained pensive. Seconds stretched the silence that blew between us amid the afternoon breeze.

"Can I sit?" I finally asked.

"Yeah, sure," she agreed.

"Can I tell you something?" I asked as I sat.

She sat up a little. "I guess that depends on what it is, but . . . I'm listening."

All those secret moments with her had led up to this moment. I found her hand and held it in mine. She felt so soft and warm.

"Do you remember a few summers ago when I cut my hand?" I wondered, not knowing if she would. "It wasn't long after your parents sold their house in the Palisades."

"Yeah, I was terrified I'd made you cut yourself and that I was going to have to take you to get stitches."

I had seen flashes of the memory in a dream, but they all came rushing back as Grace began to hold my hand back. The tender touch caused the most wonderful agony. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it and her, even when she was only across the house.

"That day in the kitchen, you bandaged my hand for me," I recalled. "You stood by the kitchen sink for the best light, and you cleaned the wound and made a joke about getting a scar. When I looked at you and saw your eyes through those thick lashes, I couldn't remember the last time someone had taken

care of me like that. You held my hand like it was fragile and precious, and it felt like I was seeing you for the first time. After that, I couldn't stop seeing you, and the more I see . . .”

“What?” Grace urged me softly.

“The more I fall in love with you.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “It's not just me, then.”

“I've spent a long time keeping my emotions contained,” I admitted. “I don't know if this is some kind of all-consuming love, but I know how easily you take my breath away. I know how much I loved waking up beside you and how much I miss it now. More than any other woman since Robin, I know that I want you to be the guiding star in my life. I can't sit here and promise you forever, but if you allow me the chance, I'd like to try. Maybe it won't work out, but that doesn't change how badly I want to try, Grace.”

Her hand left the warm safety of her blanket to wrap around my face. Her thumb brushed against my lower lip, and I leaned into the sensation. We were so close. Inches apart, Grace only had to give me the blessing I sought, and I would be hers. I would do anything just to be welcomed back into her arms again.

“There are too many hypotheticals in this life,” she told me sweetly. “All I ever wanted was the chance to love you, Jasper. I've wished for it so many times that it's become one of my few certainties.”

“Then stay,” I urged her, my forehead leaning against hers. “Tell me you'll stay. Tell me I can love you as I should have.”

She murmured against my lips, “As long as you want me, I'm here.”

Emotion flooded my chest as I rediscovered the feel of Grace's kiss. My breath grew ragged, and all those nights of longing and years of isolation poured out. I craved to feel her skin pressed against mine. I ached to give her every piece of myself that I could. With her quiet declaration, Grace Balsamo had my undying devotion, now and forever.

“You know,” she confessed between kisses, “I’ve always been curious to see what your bedroom looked like.”

“It’s not my bedroom anymore,” I amended. “It’s *ours*.”

I felt her grin against my lips. “I like the sound of that.”

“Do you want to go see it now?” I suggested.

“Where else do I have to be?”

As she laughed, I could feel her radiance flourishing. She came alive with every new touch. Her dark eyes grew warm again, and I did too. I loved Grace. I could cherish her until the last second of my life, and I didn’t have to hide it.

Sunlight poured through the glass doors overlooking our balcony, but I didn’t bother to pull the shades. There was no reason to shut out the light or the sweeping view of perfect blues. My love for Grace felt as endless as the sky and the sea, and I wanted her to know it.

She would never be my secret again. Grace would be my promise and my treasure, even on days I didn’t deserve her.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed as she left her shoes by the fireplace. “You designed all this yourself?”

Her hand rested on one of the nearby armchairs as she looked out toward the west. I could already imagine what it would be like to wake up beside her, her dark eyes enamored with the view unfolding at our feet.

“Well, an architect designed it,” I replied, my arms reaching around her waist. “I just signed off on the plans.”

“You chose well, then,” she told me teasingly, “in houses and women.”

My laugh darkened as my lips found themselves against her neck. In response, Grace inclined her neck, inviting me to kiss all the places I desired. My hands ran up under the front of her black blouse. Impossibly warm, I reached up until my fingers brushed against the lace of her bra. Her nipples were already hardening.

“I’ve been living for this moment,” I growled against her skin, “when I could touch you again . . . when I could taste you again.”

“You’re not the only one, Jasper.”

Her backside pressed into my chest, and I felt my body reacting. There was too much fabric between us. Though it went against my instinct to keep Grace close, I let her go to undress. My eyes didn’t leave her as our clothes became a pile on the floor.

She was even more lovely in the light of day. Her curves molded against me as we got tangled up over the king-sized bed. Our legs twisted together, and our kisses remained unhurried. We weren’t rushing against the clock any longer. Still, as Grace reached for my growing length, I groaned, and something ignited inside me.

“I love how you sound when you get turned on,” she whispered in my ear.

As she stroked me, I groaned, “They’re all for you, beautiful. Tell me how you want it, and I’ll give you an earful.”

Her laugh effervescent, Grace answered, “I want you to taste me as much as you like, and when I can’t bear it anymore, I want to have you just like this, eye-to-eye with no doubts.”

“I think I can manage that.”

I could more than manage it. Once I coaxed Grace onto her back, I relished the taste of her from her temple, to her torso, and down to the tops of her feet. I left no inch of her skin without my kiss. I pressed my lips against the inside of her wrist, and Grace became molten, melting in the heat of the moment.

I saved her most precious parts for last, leaving them until they were dripping in anticipation. My tongue trailed up her warm folds, and Grace whimpered.

“There’s my favorite sound,” I teased her.

Grace giggled deliriously again, but it was lost in another gasp. I licked her before letting my tongue push back her little hood. My hands rubbed against her inner thigh as I lured Grace to the edge of euphoria where her toes curled and the only word she needed was my name.

“Jasper . . .” she breathed. “Please.”

I rose to meet Grace right where she wanted me. Her hand eagerly reached for my length, positioning it to slip inside her warm velvet. As we connected, I pulled her into me, rolling back on my side and letting her leg drape over my waist. Her loving brown eyes became all I could see.

“I love you, Jasper,” she whispered, her hands lacing around my neck.

“I love you too, Grace.”

The truth echoed in every rocking thrust. When Grace’s hips rolled, I reached down to her thighs to help the movement along. I offered her everything I could. I gave Grace my time, my attention, and the very air from my lungs. As she lost the will to kiss me back, I didn’t stop. I couldn’t until Grace had everything she deserved.

“I’m so close,” she murmured. “Jasper . . .”

“Let go,” I urged her. “Give it to me.”

She didn’t look away as euphoria crashed over her in one great wave and then another. With a whimpering cry of pleasure, Grace dug her nails into my skin and clenched around me. She did not need to let go. I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Absolutely beautiful,” I whispered between kisses.

Our bodies spent, I had no clue how long we lay there in our bed, intertwined and quietly content. The blue sky began to turn shades of pink as time slipped away from us. Until the doorbell rang, I didn’t move a muscle.

“I almost forgot,” I mumbled while heading for my jeans.

“Forgot what?” Grace muttered like she was coming out of a dream.

“You’ll see.”

I walked over to the smart console and answered the doorbell.

“Mr. Hayes?” a man called through the speaker.

I pulled my evergreen sweater over my head. “Speaking.”

“We’ve got your delivery here,” the man told me. “We’ll need you to come sign for it before we get it out of the truck.”

“Delivery?” Grace echoed from the bed.

I didn’t wait for her. In my excitement, I knew she would follow me downstairs once she got herself together. She would follow my footsteps and discover the grand piano replacing a few armchairs I had floating on one side of the living room.

“Wait,” she realized with pure shock. “What’s happening?”

“I promised you compensation, Grace,” I told her as the men unwrapped the instrument. “It was technically more than our agreed price, but think of it as a Christmas present.”

“Jasper,” she breathed, still in disbelief. “This piano . . . it’s a *custom Steinway*. Pianists dream of performing concerts on pianos like this one.”

I didn’t doubt it. The full-size grand piano was made of exotic Indian rosewood. It wasn’t the kind of instrument that could be bought in any music shop. It was as unique and stunning as the star shining before me. Even after the deliverymen checked its tuning and left, Grace sat on the bench in awe.

“Why don’t you play something?” I suggested.

“I . . . I’m just trying to catch my breath,” she confessed. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Like you.”

Her face turned up toward me, and I kissed her unbridled grin. When she finally pushed back the keys cover, Grace could hardly contain herself.

“I have *Claire de Lune* memorized. Do you like Debussy?”

“I’ll like *Twinkle, Twinkle* if you play it,” I promised her.

As the first notes played, the delicate notes began to float through the house. The sound was warm and enchanting, and for the first time in a long time, it felt like my house had a soul. It lived Grace Balsamo’s ageless beauty and glowing face. Her fingers flourished with elegant movements over the keys, and I watched her eyes flutter shut.

It was mesmerizing.

At that moment, I knew I would do everything in my power to protect this beauty, this soul of mine. She had given me the gift of a second chance at love. For that, I knew that I would be forever indebted to Grace, come what may. She was my star, and I was blessed to have her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EPILOGUE: GRACE - ONE YEAR LATER

My twenty-fifth birthday was the kind of day I aspired to have each year. Quiet and easy, it started with a call from my mom and stepdad, both excited to meet up for dinner when Jasper and I arrived in New York. My dad called from some desert canyon. He promised to see me on New Year's Eve before wishing me well. It was all nice enough, but I was far happier to see a wide pair of tiny doe eyes and a slight smile.

"Hi, Baby Clara!" I cooed at the three-month-old. "May I hold you?"

"Of course, you always can," Hope agreed with a smile.

It had been a strange year for us. I found myself getting through the first year of my relationship with Jasper, and Hope became a mother. After all of it, though, I knew we were strong enough to make it through anything. I could hold Hope's baby and listen to my best friend's problems. While I kept my relationship stories pretty PG for Hope, she didn't seem to mind hearing about Jasper and me. She liked that her two favorite people were finally happy.

Once our food came, we sat there in the little cafe, sipping chai teas and eating our breakfast plates, while little Clara kept herself cozy in her baby carrier. Hope happily talked about her daughter as the sea breeze blew through the covered patio. Her eyes could hardly leave her tiny girl.

"She's starting to realize that people like when she smiles," Hope explained. "She smiles at everyone these days. It's the cutest thing."

"She's got little crinkles around her eyes when she grins," I noticed, my finger reaching out to tickle her left foot.

My best friend's voice became bittersweet. "They're just like her father's."

The smile I got from hearing Clara giggle fell. I set my fork down and stared at Hope.

“You’ve never talked about her father before,” I realized.

It wasn’t like Hope to become sheepish. She had always been fearless and optimistic as long as I’d known her. Running a hand over her neck, she fidgeted with the collar of her lavender maternity blouse and sighed. Some internal struggle fought in her expression.

“I feel like someone should know,” Hope confessed. “Just . . . will you keep it between us for now?”

“Of course,” I vowed. “Whatever you decide to tell me, it will stay between us.”

Hope nodded. She took a sip of her water glass, taking a second to collect herself.

“I met him at the Viceroy,” she began slowly. “Well, I already knew him . . . in a way.”

“So, you did know him? I thought you told your dad that he was just some guy.”

Hope winced. “That’s where it gets complicated.”

The story poured over the reclaimed wood table. As Hope recounted that night almost a year earlier, I was surprised, yet I understood why Hope had never told anyone. I squeezed her hand and promised that it would stay between us, even if that meant keeping it from Jasper.

I arrived home late that evening after a haircut and a day of Christmas shopping. My car was packed with all the gifts Jasper and I were giving Clara. Hope would call it overboard, but who else did I have to spoil? It wasn’t like Jasper needed another damn tie.

“Jasper?” I called his name through the house. “I’m home!”

I left my keys on the hall table and stepped inside. The smells of greenery and dried oranges filled the house. I could see where cranberry garlands had been left beside ornament boxes and the ten-foot Christmas tree. Hope’s boss, Natalie, had outdone herself decorating the house for the holidays, but

this time, I made her promise to leave decorating the tree to me.

Jasper dragged down his family ornaments from the attic. I pulled mine from storage. For the first time, we would decorate *our* tree together, right after my birthday cake was finished.

Only . . . I couldn't find Jasper.

"Honey!" I called out again, walking past the piano covered in family photographs. "Where are you?"

I finally heard his voice. "Out here!"

I found Jasper wearing the burgundy cashmere turtleneck I'd picked out for him last Christmas and a winning smile on the patio. He had one of the dining tables dressed in white with candles and white lilies, my absolute favorite. I noticed that behind him, the pizza oven was burning and warm.

"You made dinner?" I guessed happily.

"I thought I'd bring back some old favorites," he declared proudly. "Would you like to try my version of a Mistletoe Martini?"

I laughed at the sight of the glass and clutched at my emerald dress.

"Only if you promise not to spill it down the front of me," I teased him, taking the glass with a kiss.

"If it gets you out of your clothes faster, I just might."

Hitting him on the chest, I chided him, "Don't even think about it. Hope bought me this."

"Well then, I guess we'll just have to settle on homemade pizza."

I sipped my drink and agreed with a nod. I would never get over the sight of Jasper sitting across from me at the dinner table. Even when I woke up beside him that same morning, even when we planned our family visits together and talked about calling a plumber for the bathroom sink, I would look at

my golden-haired gentleman and wonder what good thing I'd done to deserve him.

"How was your brunch with Hope?" Jasper asked as he served me a slice of Margherita pizza. "Was Clara good?"

"She's always good," I insisted, "but yeah, it was good seeing Hope. She'll be heading back to the office after Christmas, so it was nice to get some time with her before that. Oh, and I called the producer back this morning. He's happy to shift our session to Tuesday afternoon. We'll be able to get to New York on Wednesday with no trouble."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"To the investors' meeting?" I teased.

The gold of his eyes glinted. "Oh, you know what I'm looking forward to, Grace."

I feigned innocence with a simple shrug, but I was just as eager as him. Next week was exciting with my first chance to record a film score for a soundtrack. People would hear my music as they watched silver screens, yet that didn't hold the same appeal as getting back to my roots with Jasper. He promised me the weekend we should've had in New York without any pretense or doubt, and I knew he was a man of his word.

We ate our pizza and talked over trip plans until the plates were empty. As Jasper made me a second martini, I noticed that something about him felt almost rehearsed. Starlight glowed around us. A mild ocean breeze ruffled my braided hair, but my attention stayed on the man smiling a little too brightly.

"I know you told me not to get you a birthday present," Jasper declared as he presented me with a filled glass.

"And you kept your promise?" I suggested, seeing in his expression that it wasn't true.

He shook his head. "You know how I can't help myself. I found this a few weeks ago, and it made me think of you."

Reaching into his blazer's pocket, Jasper pulled out another piece of velvet—a box no bigger than his palm. My heartbeat quickened at the sight of it.

“Is it a very tiny coffee mug?” I guessed.

He chuckled. “Why don't you open it and find out?”

I knew what it had to be before I opened it, yet it was somehow better than imagined. The yellow-gold band was embedded with a halo of diamonds. They glistened in the candlelight, but the centerpiece of it wasn't a diamond. It was an emerald-cut ruby, perfectly crimson and at least two carats.

“Jasper,” I breathed, not even noticing when he knelt beside me.

“Grace Viviana Balsamo,” he began, his two hands wrapping around my free one, “I know it's your birthday, but here on my knees, I'm asking if you would give me just one gift and agree to be my wife. You make me a better and happier man every day that we're together. There's nobody else in this world that I would rather share my life with than you.”

I squeezed his hand tightly. “How can I refuse when you've asked me so nicely?”

“Is that a yes?” Jasper asked, almost in disbelief.

“Yes.” I laughed. “Yes, a thousand times over, I'll marry you. I'll be your wife.”

My heart leapt as the ring slid effortlessly onto my left hand. My fingers reached for Jasper's handsome face, and I could hardly stop myself from smiling long enough to kiss my fiancé back.

My fiancé.

The phrase played on repeat with every kiss. I lived it the feeling of Jasper pulling me to my feet and fastening my body against his.

“Do I even want to know how much this ring cost?” I teased gently.

Jasper grinned. “Less than your piano.”

“You can’t keep this up,” I joked between kisses. “With your history of gifts, we’re going to be living in a cardboard box before we ever get married.”

“I don’t care if I’m living in a box, Grace,” he swore, “as long as I’m living with you.”

His hands slid down my waist, and I knew it was true. No matter where life took us, there was no thrill like Jasper. No man other than him could make me feel impossibly loved. His lips were already trailing across my jaw. With a deep inhale of his cologne, I began to melt just like every other night.

“I know we’ve got a cake in the fridge,” I remarked softly.

“We do,” Jasper agreed, his mouth already moving to my neck.

“I think it will keep a little while longer, don’t you?”

My fiancé chuckled. “I’m sure it will.”

“Then, why don’t you take me upstairs now, and we’ll have my birthday cake later?”

As his fingers dug deeper into my thighs, I bit my lip and whimpered. Jasper was making it harder to move with every passing second. I could hear the boastful smile in his voice.

“It’s your special day,” he declared, his voice already darkening with desire. “We can do anything you like.”

“Anything?”

“*Anything.*”

Twisting in Jasper’s strong embrace, I turned to blow out the flickering tapered candles on the dinner table. It didn’t matter to me if those were the only flames I blew out. I no longer had a need for birthday candles, lost pennies, or shooting stars. There was no doubt in my mind about it—I had all that I ever wished for and so much more.

My life was alive with possibility, and it all lived in Jasper Hayes.

BOOK 2: KNOCKED UP ON
CHRISTMAS EVER

HOPE AND FELIX



CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE: HOPE

I wanted to be angry. Anger would've steeled me against the hurt, but as confused and deceived as I felt, I couldn't hate my father or my best friend for their choices. No amount of pain could keep me angry with them forever.

In the end, I was just . . . *lonely*.

"Give me an Old-Fashioned with rye," I told the bartender, sliding into the free bar seat.

The bearded man nodded. "You've got it."

After eight nights at the Viceroy hotel, I got used to the modern wraparound bar and the chic lounge flowing out toward the pool. The December breeze blowing in didn't feel like Christmas was coming. The cover band in the corner was playing Springsteen's holiday hit, and other guests were breezing in and out with their holiday shopping. Still, it didn't feel like Christmas anymore in my heart, but I couldn't go back home.

"Here you are," the bartender declared as I signed the receipt with my name and room number.

My bar bill would be more expensive than the room itself at the rate I was going. With a toast to nobody, I swallowed back the first bitter gulp. The potent cocktail tasted how I felt.

I thought to myself, *Perhaps I should call Gracie*.

"You're going to be glad you got in on the ground floor," I heard a man say over my shoulder. "Nick's startup is going to be huge. Industry press outlets are already asking for interviews."

"Journalists are always scrambling for the next big thing," a familiar baritone remarked, sounding indifferent. "That's nothing new."

I knew that voice. Why did I know that voice?

Turning my head, all I could see was a broad frame in a tailored black suit that the velvet-voiced man wore like armor. His eager companion only came up to his shoulder and had the manic energy of a terrier.

“Trust me. Nick’s different. His app is going to be the next Yfir.”

Not thinking, I snorted at the remark. “Yeah, I doubt that.”

The man turned to peer down at me with rich, golden-brown eyes. His face, much like the rest of his body, looked like the gods had carved him. With wavy dark hair and knowing eyes, he was a fallen angel sauntering among mere mortals. He looked at me with a smile that made me forget how to breathe.

“Oh, really?” he remarked, his expression almost amused.

“Yes, really,” I doubled down.

The terrier snapped, “I’m sorry, but do you even know what we’re talking about?”

I took a long sip of my drink. This little dog didn’t even know what he was doing.

“When Yfir was first founded fifteen years ago, there was *nobody* considering a direct rideshare and delivery service,” I declared adamantly. “It was a lightning strike opportunity to fill a need in a consumerism-driven world and a growing gig economy. Whoever this *Nick* is, unless he has some tangible proof that he’s hit some other goldmine niche market, then there’s no way in hell that his startup will have half of the success Yfir did. Besides, tech startups have a failure rate of over sixty percent. You would be better off dumping your money down at a roulette wheel with odds like that.”

“And what would you do instead with one million dollars?” the man persisted.

“Probably move it into a mutual index fund or look into purchasing land,” I admitted. “They would give me greater long-term success than any get-rich-quick scheme.”

He chuckled at that, a rich and warm sound that lingered like aged brandy. The terrier, hoping to see me wither away, now had his tail between his legs. His muddy eyes studied me intently.

“They do say women are more successful investors.” The handsome man laughed.

The terrier demanded, “Who are you?”

“Dean, this is Hope Hayes, Jasper Hayes’s daughter.”

So, the man did know me. I ran a hand through my hair, trying to keep my cool. His name was on the tip of my tongue. It was so close I could almost taste it, but my whiskey was getting in the way.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I lied, holding up my drink and internally toasting to the terrier’s doom.

The man’s head inclined toward Dean, but his eyes didn’t leave me.

“Tell Nick I’m not interested,” he decided.

It was clear that there was no arguing with the man. Dean pursed his lips but offered no rebuttal. His eyes met mine with obvious resentment.

“Nice meeting you, Hope,” Dean remarked begrudgingly. “Felix, thanks for a lovely dinner.”

The man was Felix Jacobson, head of J. Brothers Studios, one of the five biggest film studios in the country, or rather, the world. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t recognized him in an instant. Not only was his face photographed next to countless models, socialites, and ingenues, but Felix had invested in Yfir. He’d known my father for at least a decade, and we’d definitely met at some charity dinners.

Felix freaking Jacobson. I sighed to myself.

“My pleasure,” Felix answered.

Dean scampered away, and I turned back to my drink and bartending companion. I figured Felix’s interest in me was over, making me his five-minute wonder. I didn’t know how to

feel when he slid into the seat beside me. After throwing back the last of my drink, my shoulders straightened, and my fingers instinctively touched the hem of my plaid mini-skirt.

“Your speech was impressive,” Felix complimented me, his finger catching the bartender’s attention. “Although, I was never giving that startup a dime. You were right. He didn’t have any substantial evidence to back up his claims, but I’m sure they’ll hook some poor sucker.”

“Probably,” I agreed.

Just as I prepared to bid him farewell, Felix asked, “May I buy you another drink?”

“Why?” I stupidly replied.

He offered me a slightly crooked grin. “You look like you need it.”

“What can I get for you?” the bartender asked us.

“One Lagavulin, neat, and another cocktail for my friend here,” Felix answered.

When the bartender left, I laughed. “We’re not friends.”

“So, if I asked what’s bothering you, you wouldn’t tell me?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because you’re too lovely to look so alone.”

My head turned to see no hint of duplicity in his eyes. Felix didn’t need to hide behind a mask. He didn’t need to use his charm for any deception. Felix Jacobson was nothing but himself, and I guess that’s what intimidated people.

“My dad and I . . . had a falling out,” I explained. “I left his house about eight days ago, and I’ve been staying here.”

It shouldn’t have felt so nice to say those words, vague as they were. Since I had checked into the hotel, I’d eaten every breakfast and dinner alone. I would get back from work, and I’d sit by myself in my room. I had friends I could see, but what would I tell them? Would they even notice that I was hurting?

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Felix remarked as our drinks arrived.

I wrapped my fingers around the new glass. “Thank you.”

“For the remorse or the drink?”

I smiled softly. “Both.”

“May I keep you company, then?” Felix asked in turn.

Biting my lower lip, I didn’t know what would become of a night with a notorious charmer who was already in his late thirties. I was twenty-three and bitter. My tired mind couldn’t make sense of the request, but I treated it like a pool.

I dove into the deep end, holding my breath and never looking back.

“I’d like that,” I told him.

Hours ticked by as talking turned to laughter. After my third drink, Felix coaxed me onto the tiny dance floor to sway around to a ballad from The Beatles. The frontman for this band couldn’t compare to Paul, John, or hell, even Ringo, but I liked the excuse of pressing my cheek into Felix’s chest. My eyes fluttered shut, and I savored the scent of spice that lingered against his neck. The smell was as warm as the hand that held mine.

I adored the feeling. At that moment, I knew why so many women had fallen for Felix. The bar closed, and I found myself falling just as hard.

“Come upstairs with me,” he murmured in a low tone.

“Don’t you have some mansion somewhere?” I asked, my head feeling light.

“It’s being redecorated,” he explained. “Please, don’t make me beg, Hope.”

“Would you beg if I asked?”

His expression nearly stopped my heart. “With eyes like yours, I just might.”

How could I refuse him? How could I do anything but kiss Felix passionately on the hotel elevator and follow him up to his decadent ocean-view suite? Bathed in crisp white and endless shades of blue, Felix's bedroom invited me to take in the moment, shut my eyes, and forget.

"From the moment I laid eyes on you," he swore against my skin, "I knew I needed to have you. I'm desperate to know what you're hiding under this skirt of yours."

"You can unzip it and find out," I murmured.

He laughed sinfully. "Don't worry, darling. I will."

First, he wanted to leave me begging for my clothes to be torn to shreds. I could feel myself turning into a puddle as Felix took his sweet, sweet time claiming what he allegedly craved. His confident hands found their way under my gray sweater as his tongue and teeth trailed along my neck.

That's what this was, *a gray area*. My time with Felix didn't have to be right or wrong. It just had to be.

My backside pressed into him, and I could feel his body reacting. The bulge under his suit pants became harder with each little wiggle of my body. Felix wanted to take his time with me, but I had no interest in playing fair. Not soon enough, our clothes became a pile on the floor, and Felix's chiseled chest hovered over me.

"Are you going to come for me?" I asked with honeyed words.

For a moment, I wondered which way Felix took that remark. His picturesque smile gleamed in the ambient light, and I knew it didn't matter. His grip was already against my thigh and sliding up my curves. With just one look, he had the space between my legs begging for attention.

"I'm going to make you forget all of your sassy little words," he swore as his lips brushed against mine. "When I'm done, all you'll know is my name and how good you feel."

"Promises, promises," I murmured back.

Internally, I screamed. I'd never been a saint, but no man had ever been like this with me. His thumbs began to turn my nipples into pebbles. His kiss stole the soft moans from my lips. Some rational part of me said this was too insane, yet my desires won out. Every fiber of my being was coming alive.

My body began to writhe from the pleasure, and my fingers curled into his coffee-brown hair. I could feel his hard length pressing against me. The thought of it alone had me wet and desperate. When Felix let his fingers wander down to my slick folds, I could hear the smug grin on his face.

"You feel good enough to eat," he growled, his lips wandering toward my neck.

My breathing growing ragged, I replied, "Then, have a taste."

His laugh rolled like thunder through the darkness. My eyes fluttered shut, and I focused on the feeling of Felix's mouth trailing down my body. As he crossed my stomach, my legs inched wider, readying themselves to bid him welcome. My breath caught when his tongue licked me with one long, even stroke.

"Dammit," I cursed, my left hand reaching for my breast.

The right reached down to Felix. Running my fingers through his hair again, I stifled my cries of pleasure. I bit my lip and held back a moan as Felix readily consumed everything I offered. My hips wanted to push toward his teasing mouth, but his grip kept me fastened to the bed.

I wasn't just alive anymore. I was burning up, electrified and glowing.

"Felix," I pleaded. "Please."

Not stopping, he asked, "Please, what?"

"Please, let me have you."

"Alright," he answered with a frustrating nonchalance.

How could he be so cool when I was ready to come out of my skin? He was so keen on having me undone, but I wasn't the kind of woman to concede. As he released me, I took my

chance. I pressed my palms into his chest and twisted us around until Felix was the one on his back.

“There are consequences to treating a woman so well,” I teased him as my hand wrapped around his rigid shaft. “Don’t worry, though. Your name will still be the last word on my lips.”

My hand twisted up and down his length until his tip dripped with desire. Felix groaned deep within his broad chest. His hands hunted for my hips while his mouth hunted for mine. I could taste my salt on his tongue, and it thrilled me to no end.

It was nothing to have Felix’s member sheathed inside me. Inch by inch, he slipped deeper, and euphoria swelled in my chest. I anchored my hands against his shoulders as I rocked against him.

“God, you feel like paradise,” he breathed.

I grinned deliriously. “I could say the same thing.”

Felix gripped my backside and encouraged me along. So focused on the task at hand, I was pleasantly surprised to feel his mouth against my breasts. The sensation started sending me over the edge. Still, I didn’t relent.

My spine arched. My legs tightened around his waist. I kept pushing until my climax took hold of my body and Felix’s hot release flooded my insides.

“Felix,” I murmured, not knowing what else to say.

His slightest touch left me trembling. I was a woman spent and on edge.

“My darling Hope,” he muttered back, pulling me closer.

I didn’t think about what we were doing. All I knew was how nice his chest felt, like a pillow. In those early hours of the morning, sleep came for me, and my final memory became the smell of Felix’s pheromones mingling with mine.

The headache I woke up with was far less pleasant.

“We need coffee,” Felix grumbled as soon as our eyes met.

As I gathered my clothes, the smell of coffee beans filled the hotel suite. I zipped up my skirt, slid on my heels, and found a half-naked Felix in the sitting room with two cups already made. I sank onto the tufted couch and sighed.

“Here,” he said, placing two ibuprofen and a water bottle in front of me. “Take these.”

“Thanks,” I answered, offering him a smile too.

I wanted him to think I was happy. Of course, I didn’t regret our night together. I certainly didn’t mind seeing his physique in the morning light, but the dawn had given way to doubts.

Was it love, lust, or just the liquor talking? Had all my desire been about him, or was I just looking to be distracted from my self-inflicted isolation? My temples were throbbing too much for me to be certain about anything.

“Thanks for everything,” I offered at the door. “You should know . . . I’m not the type to kiss and tell.”

Felix smiled back, his eyes warm like a fireside. “I never thought you were, but if you’re ever looking for someone to buy you another drink . . .”

“I know where to find you,” I finished for him.

Kissing him one last time, I tasted the bold roast and sugar on his lips, but quiet doubts kept me from lingering. I could only offer him a kind smile and a wave goodbye. Pangs of regret echoed with every step I took down the hall, followed me into my morning shower, and kept me company in the hotel lounge. Even in my most comfortable sky-blue dress, I couldn’t settle myself. Something just felt off about, well, everything.

“Can I get a carrot, orange, and ginger juice with some, uh, avocado toast?” I asked my waiter, feeling the need to eat something obnoxiously healthy.

The skinny college guy returned not long after with my breakfast order, and I sat in front of my laptop trying to get some work done. It was officially Christmas Eve. I should’ve been out with friends or buying gifts, but . . . this was all I had.

Then, she came out of nowhere. Grace, my best friend, was standing there wearing blue jeans, her favorite hoop earrings, and a remorseful expression. I slapped my computer shut, getting ready to run.

“Hope?”

“No,” I declared quickly, shaking my head with sheer stubbornness. “I can’t do this.”

“Hope, please, it’s Christmas Eve,” Grace pleaded softly. “I have no right to ask, but just talk to me. Give me fifteen minutes, and that can be your gift to me this year.”

She was right. It was Christmas Eve, and even though my wounds were still healing, I wanted to go home.

CHAPTER TWO

FELIX - TWO YEARS LATER

“According to close friends, LA’s most eligible bachelor is back on the market,” Noah recited, yelling over the music. *“It’s been reported that Felix Jacobson has split with actress and America’s sweetheart, Shelby Warburton, best known for her role as Summer Hawthorne on the hit television show, Summer’s Days.”*

“Keep your hands high and breathe,” my trainer reminded me. “There, that’s it.”

I punched the heavy black sandbag with one quick combination, then another. Beside me, Noah slapped down the first tabloid magazine on the folding chair before thumbing through another. It was the kind of glossy garbage people could buy in grocery lines between the candy bars and gum.

“Shelby Warburton has been relegated as just another notch in Felix Jacobson’s belt,” Noah read from the second tabloid. *“The young starlet was photographed leaving West Hollywood hotspot, Peppermint, but a source close to Shelby says she’s been devastated by the split.”*

“Yeah, well, she was the one who broke up with me,” I grumbled, punching the bag as if it were that writer’s gut.

“Oh, this one takes the cake,” Noah declared, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. *“After a rocky six-month relationship, Felix Jacobson and Shelby Warburton are no more. Some insiders speculate that Jacobson, President and CEO of J. Brothers Studios, may have ended the relationship after another actress found her way to his casting couch. With Jacobson’s revolving door of girlfriends and rumored relationships, it’s hard to tell who might have been the ‘other woman’.”*

With every word, I slammed my bound fists into the bag. Throwback nineties hip-hop blasted from the speakers. Anger and frustration flowed through me, and I funneled it into every

punch I threw. It became an endless pounding rhythm until my chest heaved with gasping breaths.

“Send that one to my lawyers,” I huffed at Noah, pointing my bound hand in his direction. “That’s libel.”

“I’ve already got Kelly working on it,” he assured me. “I’ll be expecting formal retractions by the end of the week.”

I nodded and looked back at my trainer, Justin. He called out another combo. With another quick nod, I pushed up my sweatshirt’s sleeves and continued.

This boxing center wasn’t the kind of polished place girls like Shelby would strut around in yoga pants. Nobody was passing out flavored water, and there wasn’t a holistic mediation room or piece of quartz in sight.

The gray cinderblock walls were unfussy. A fine layer of dust collected on the high-up windows. The people working out here were too focused on their own form to take photographs, giving me the peace I needed to perfect my form.

“After you hydrate, you want to work on some five-punch combinations?” Justin asked.

“Yeah, sure,” I agreed while grabbing my water bottle. “Noah, are you getting some sick kick from reading these?”

In his brown tweed blazer, Noah rolled his eyes as only an old friend could. He didn’t fit into the gym either, but he regularly followed me around this place. His job as my executive assistant and public relations consultant was to handle messes like these. I let Noah placate board members and wrestle with the press with my trust.

The nonsense could be his problem.

“You know I don’t,” Noah retorted. “I just don’t like it when my husband and I are waking up to calls at seven on a Sunday morning from board members, A.K.A. *your cousins*. Your Uncle Walter had a few choice words about the situation.”

Walter Jacobson had the largest share of stock in the studio besides me. His words could carry some weight if he chose to

throw his displeasure around.

“Besides the swear words,” I asked, “what did my uncle say?”

“To make an explicit and long story short, since you’re turning forty in January, the family wants this kind of negative press to end.”

“I can’t control what people write about me,” I pointed out before swallowing another mouthful of water. “Besides, nobody cared when I dated that florist last fall, Laurie. Nobody wanted a photograph of me and Francesca, the set designer. This is all because Shelby is Shelby, and I’m, well, *me*. We sell magazines and get people to click on their trashy blogs.”

“You mean you’re a thirty-nine-year-old billionaire who refuses to have long-term relationships?” Noah guessed with a half-smirk.

I punched his shoulder hard enough to make him wince instead. Noah knew better, or maybe he didn’t. He never pulled punches. Whether we were sitting on the back of the bus coming home from a high school swim meet or debriefing in my office, I had always counted on Noah to never hold back for the sake of being gracious.

He was never cruel. I considered it unfiltered, and sometimes brutal, honesty.

“No,” I countered. “I have no issue with long-term relationships. They just don’t fit into my current life. That’s all.”

“Sure, sure,” Noah sarcastically agreed. “Your late father and his five wives have nothing to do with it.”

I shook my head. “Am I boxing or in therapy?”

My friend shrugged. “Why can’t it be both?”

Though I tried, I couldn’t ignore the merit of Noah’s comment. Maybe I hadn’t tried too hard to find “the one”. It never mattered until time started catching up with me. My workload grew, and the mantle of my family’s business was

passed on to me. At some point, all of my relationships started feeling like work.

I had enough work in my life. I wanted something that could feel effortless and a woman willing to endure the give and take. For that, I would give up all the conveniences of my single life and settle down beside her.

I thought I'd felt that . . . once upon a time.

As I stood there, my mind drifted back to that emboldened blonde swinging her feet at the hotel bar. She had been so ready to bust that guy's balls, yet her baby blue eyes held some kind of bittersweetness I didn't try to understand. I was too wrapped up in realizing that Malibu daydream was Hope Hayes. I'd met her once or twice when she was a plucky teenager following her dad to charity events, but I never imagined she would age like the finest champagne.

I thought something might've been there, but she never reached out. Of course, it wasn't like I went running after her that morning in the hotel. It wasn't like I'd asked for Hope's number when I saw Jasper Hayes that next spring.

I decided long ago that the one night was my lightning strike. She was radiant and rare, but Hope wasn't meant to last. Still, that didn't mean I couldn't find out what became of her.

"Noah," I began as we headed toward the practice ring. "Do you know if the Hayes family has been invited to the harvest party I'm hosting?"

A charity event to support migrant farmworkers, I'd offered my family's home as the venue for the annual event. My parents did it all the time when I was young. Now that the house was mine, I didn't see any reason to stop the tradition.

"I'm not sure," Noah confessed, reaching for the phone in his blazer's pocket. "I'll reach out to Kelly to double-check."

"Tell her to send them a personal invitation from my inbox," I insisted, running an arm over my sweaty forehead. "Invite Jasper, his wife, and his family. It's been a minute

since I've seen him, and we never get much time to talk when we're both in New York."

"I'll get on it, but is there a reason?"

I smiled. "I just gave you one."

Noah shook his head, knowing he wasn't going to get any other explanation. An eager grin spread across my face as I stepped into the ring. I was finally going to know whatever became of Hope Hayes, and this time, she wouldn't walk away so easily.

CHAPTER THREE

HOPE

My eyes were crossing from all the emails I'd been reading. There were messages from clients, design publications, and digital influencers. I was the marketing and communications coordinator in the office, but that didn't mean I was supposed to be doing these soul-sucking tasks. I was supposed to be editing photos, drafting a press release, and updating our digital brochures for the new year.

Handling finicky clients wasn't on my to-do list.

On any other day, this would have been all covered by my boss, Natalie, and her second-in-command, Forest, but Forest was off managing some deliveries and filling Natalie's shoes as best as he could. Natalie, much to everyone's dismay, was in the process of leaving her philandering husband.

I wondered what cruel twist of fate had Natalie's personal life falling apart in the middle of our busiest season. We were one of the top interior decorating firms in the greater LA area, and a few years back, Natalie tapped into a whole new market when she started offering "seasonal decorating" as well. We had homes to deck out with holiday cheer and a reputation to uphold.

Well, at that moment, it felt like I was the only one holding up the reputation, and I hadn't been blessed with upper arm strength. The only thing keeping me from crumbling was the clock on the wall telling me it was two minutes past five.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed to an empty office.

My delight echoed around the sleek, open-concept office space. With everybody else putting out fires elsewhere, I was the only one left to close up my laptop, grab my bag, and turn out the lights. I couldn't lock the door fast enough.

Even though I welcomed the reprieve, the truth was that I and all the others on her team were willing to stress out for her sake. Natalie was a wonderful, talented designer. She had always treated us well and given us the flexibility to work in

the office or from home. When I had my daughter, Natalie was a damn godsend too.

It was about time I returned the favor, but right then, I just wanted to leave that West Los Angeles office to get back to my Clara. I wanted to kiss the top of her sweet golden head and never look at another computer screen ever again.

“There’s Clara!” I greeted my girl with exaggerated excitement.

She squealed in reply, “Mama!”

“Oh, Mama is so happy to see you.”

Wiggling in her carrier, Clara’s brown eyes crinkled in delight, and dimples formed in her rosy cheeks. Grace had her neatly bundled up in a little lavender cardigan and leggings, making my baby soft to the touch. Her tiny hands were already reaching up toward me.

“How was work?” Grace asked as she stood up to hug me.

The Mexican cantina-style restaurant was colorful but quiet that Monday evening. Nobody was bothered by us lingering around the front door between two large potted plants and the heavy wooden bench.

“Oh, exhausting, but I managed,” I admitted. “Was Clara good for her grandmother today?”

Grace’s warm smile instantly dropped from her olive-toned face, and her pouty lips pursed. She might not have liked the joke, but it was her fault for marrying my father that fall. Technically, Grace Balsamo-Hayes was Clara’s step-grandmother, whether she liked the term or not.

“Can I just be like a cool aunt?” Grace grumbled while untangling the gold hoop earring from her dark brunette waves. “Or even Gracie? I like it when you call me Gracie.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured my friend while picking up Clara. “This little booger baby can decide, but seriously, thanks for watching Clara today. I didn’t know what I was going to do when Maria called in sick.”

I reached into the pocket of my jumpsuit and pulled out a tissue for Clara. Before becoming a mom, I never carried apocalypse-ready purses or tissues in my pockets, but that's what came with being a mother. My sleek German convertible was traded in for a sleek German compact SUV with actual space for a car seat and stroller.

No woman ever expected to get knocked up through a one-night stand, let alone one that happened in the early hours of Christmas Eve, but I had done my best to take it all in stride. I was willing to make every accommodation for Clara's sake.

"Have you heard from Inez?" I asked while tossing the tissue in a nearby trash can, Clara still hoisted on my hip.

"She'll be here any minute now," Grace answered. "She texted me that the Ten was at a standstill thanks to a car accident."

"Uh-oh!" Clara declared at the sound of the word 'accident'.

She knew all of five words, and it seemed "uh-oh" was her favorite one.

Soon enough, Inez came bursting through the door wearing corduroy overalls and a broad smile. I could tell her green eyes were worn from a lack of sleep, but she beamed, nevertheless.

"Hey, hey, sorry I'm late, everybody," she apologized breathlessly.

"Uh, Inez, did you run here?" Graced joked.

"Just across the parking lot," Inez replied with a laugh. "I forgot how out of shape I am."

Laughing along, I declared, "Well, let's all get more out of shape. I'm dying for some queso dip."

We all passed through the happy hour patrons with a petite hostess and found ourselves seated on the shaded brick patio. Clara was happy to watch a fluffed-up Pomeranian hanging out with its owners from her high chair. We all knew what we wanted, making things easy for our cheerful waitress.

“Alright, I want life updates from everyone,” I declared once our waters and chips arrived. “Inez, what are you up to these days?”

“I’m still working on getting someone to buy my script,” Inez answered while dipping a blue chip into the salsa bowl. “Mom called again telling me that the family restaurant is looking to hire some more waitresses.”

Rolling up the sleeves of her chambray dress, Grace signed empathetically. “Is your family still trying to get you to move back to Santa Barbara? I thought you and your Mom finally came to an understanding.”

“We did, but my grandparents are still holding out for me to come back to Athena’s,” Inez fretted. “I mean, I’ve got *eleven* first cousins. I don’t get why they’re so keen on me, specifically. Olympia, Tessa, and Chloe have worked there since they were sixteen like I did, but they *like* running the restaurant. Tess could make baklava in her sleep, and Chloe has done all this great work automating the bookkeeping and getting my grandparents into the Twenty-First Century. I might be the only granddaughter not working there, but they still have three amazing women running their restaurant and catering business just fine.”

I turned the page of Clara’s soft book. Her hands happily went from stroking a shiny fish to toying with the legs of a rainbow octopus.

“If you need some extra work, my boss is looking for a new live-in nanny,” I commented. “She’s just moved into her older brother’s house, and they’re looking for someone who can pick up her twins from school and watch them in the afternoons. Your lease is up this month, right, Inez?”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “But . . . are you sure they wouldn’t want someone more qualified?”

I shrugged. “You’ve always been good with Clara, and honestly, they’re kind of desperate. Natalie had to fire her last one on very short notice.”

“Really, why?” Grace wondered.

I took a long sip of my drink. “Because Natalie caught the woman in bed with her husband.”

Both Inez and Grace instantly winced. Inez tucked her thick mahogany curls behind both her ears as she considered the thought.

“Well, it would be nice to stop temping for a while,” Inez confessed. “And I’m sick of waitressing.”

“Look, I’ll send Natalie your info with a glowing recommendation, and I’ll send you her email just in case,” I decided. “What about you, Grace? What’s going with work these days?”

“And how was Fiji?”

“Work is good. I’ll be helping record some demos when I’m in New York next month,” Grace explained with a smile. “And Fiji was, of course, insanely stunning. Our beachfront villa had this little deck where Jasper and I could have our morning coffee beside our little personal pool. And, I kid you not, I got three different massages that week. The heated shell massage was so relaxing, but the hibiscus coconut treatment made my skin literally as soft as Clara’s butt.”

Our plates came as we all laughed together, including some child-sized taquitos for Clara. They were no bigger than a hot dog, and I got to work cutting them up into bite-sized pieces as Grace talked more about Fiji. The trip was for her honeymoon, but for the sake of our friendship, the romantic bits of the vacation were left out.

I was happy for Grace and Dad. It was great to see them get married and host an outdoor wedding at their oceanfront Malibu home, but I still liked to think of them sleeping in separate twin beds.

It was easier on my sanity.

“Oh, and speaking of Jasper,” Grace added out of the blue. “He got an invitation this afternoon. It’s to a charity thing hosted by, um, Felix . . . Jacobson.”

I nearly dropped my fork at the sound of that name. Only Grace knew what that name meant to me. Other than her, I’d

never told anyone the truth about Clara's father, including the man himself.

"Felix?" I echoed like his name didn't stop my heart. "What's the event?"

"It's a nonprofit that supports migrant farmworkers and their families," Grace explained. "It's called Harvest United or something like that, but your name was included on the list too, Hope. Your dad wanted to know if you would come."

"I'll have to get a sitter for Clara," I considered aloud. "Maria would need to be free for . . . when is it?"

"Not this Saturday, but next Saturday," Grace answered before taking a bite of her veggie enchilada.

Sipping her water, Inez offered, "If your nanny can't do it, I'll be happy to watch Clara. Come on, Hope, you hardly ever go out these days. I know it's different now being a mom, but you were always the one throwing parties and going out. You were the biggest social butterfly in college."

It was true. Back in the day, Grace, Inez, and I got up to plenty of adventures during our years at Pepperdine together. I was always planning beach trips, hikes in the canyons, shopping excursions, or sleepovers. I was the one who threw parties for everyone we knew, but since Clara, my kind of fun had become more about quiet time than long nights of tipsy frivolity.

There was nothing quite like a glass of wine, a warm bubble bath, and some online shopping on my phone.

"Should I tell Jasper you're planning to come?" Grace asked again. "I get it if you're busy, and I'll be going. It's not like Jasper has to wander around the party alone."

The debate in my head had nothing to do with my schedule. Hardly a day passed that I didn't think of Felix. Every time Clara hit a milestone, her first steps . . . her first tooth . . . her first birthday in September, I would find myself wishing he were there to see and love the little girl we'd made, but I'd given up on him ages ago.

Perhaps this was my second chance. Maybe this was fate sending me a sign, even though almost two years had passed since our fateful night. I could still squeeze my hips into that size-twelve skirt, but that didn't make me the same person.

"I'll come," I agreed, even though my stomach churned at the thought.

It seemed it was time for me to face Felix Jacobson again, and this time, I was going to tell him the truth. As long as he was ready to listen, I'd tell him everything.

CHAPTER FOUR

FELIX

The golden hues of sunset gave way to violet skies, starlight, and firepits glowing on the back lawn. The mild nights of Beverly Hills made it easy to host my party outside, letting the two hundred guests wander around the extensive gardens while music played through hidden stone speakers. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the appetizer stations and the wine bar supplied by my stepfather's Napa vineyards, but I wasn't worried about everyone.

I only wanted to know about one woman in particular.

Swirling the red wine under my nose, I asked Noah, "Have you seen the Hayes family yet?"

"No, and I still don't get why you're so interested in seeing him," Noah answered while chewing on a piece of prime rib. "Has Jasper got some new venture you're interested in?"

"He's a good guy," I commented with a shrug and a sip of my wine. "He's friendly, and my stocks in his company gave me a healthy profit last quarter. Why wouldn't I want to see him?"

"You'll be seeing him in New York next weekend," he pointed out.

I looked out over the crowded lawn. "I won't be able to make it to New York anymore."

"Since when?"

"Since I had something come up."

"It's a woman, isn't it?" He shook his head and grumbled. "Hell, I thought we were just getting over Shelby."

"I've been over Shelby Warburton since the second she threw a fit in that Brentwood restaurant," I muttered. "America's sweetheart, my ass."

Nobody ever read about *that* scene. There she was, a woman in her early thirties, having a meltdown over her

dinner order. Shelby's PR team likely deserved a raise for all their hard work.

"I'm going to go find Max," Noah declared, his feet already turning away from me. "Have you seen him?"

"He was in a fierce game of yard chess with someone."

I gestured out beyond the pool house where the giant-sized board game was kept. Noah, tipping his proverbial cap to me, disappeared in the crowd, and my eyes became free to look for a head of champagne-blonde hair in the crowd.

Maybe she had dyed it. It had been so long that maybe her baby blue eyes were now framed by some brunette bob. As I polished off my wine, I wondered if she'd even come at all.

"The party only started fifteen minutes ago," I muttered to myself. "She's got every right to be fashionably late."

I had been thinking about the moment too much in my head. Ever since Jasper replied to my email, I'd spent my idle time wondering what she would say, how she would look, and everything in between. Too many expectations and aspirations were pent up inside me. Not even the taste of the full-bodied Merlot could settle me.

Then, I saw her, and the world grew quiet.

Her hair, swept up loosely, was just as fair and silken as I remembered. Her ice-blue dress sparkled with all its shimmering sequins, making her stand out in the crowd of suits and sensible black dresses. Hope Hayes somehow looked exactly the same and even better than I remembered.

"Hope," I murmured without thinking.

Hope didn't notice me watching her as she talked with her family. She didn't feel my eyes staring at her profile as she picked up an hors d'oeuvre from one of the passed trays. All at once, I felt like I needed to drag her into one of the quiet rooms of the house and get my answers, but another stopped me in my tracks.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Jacobson?" Kelly, one of my assistants, asked.

In her late twenties, the woman looked different without her glasses. Her ginger hair was combed back, and her usual suit was traded for a sensible yellow dress. It wasn't the best color for her, but I hadn't hired Kelly for her fashion sense. She was polite, organized, punctual, and always attentive. As long as she kept up her excellent work, I didn't care if she showed up to the office in a burlap bag.

"I'm fine, thank you," I assured her.

Before I could pass by, she told me, "The guests seem to love this new caterer. I—I thought we could try to hire them for one of the next company parties."

"I like that idea," I agreed. "But you're off the clock, Kelly. You don't need to be thinking about work. Drink wine. Mingle."

She laughed. "Oh, I, um, have never been much of a drinker."

"That's okay. There are plenty of desserts. I'm sure you can find something to enjoy, but if you'll excuse me, someone important just arrived."

"Right, right," Kelly agreed while running a hand through her hair. "You're the host. You have things to do . . . people to see. Well, um, if you need me, I'll be by the . . . the cheese and charcuterie station."

With an absentminded nod, I patted her shoulder and focused on the girl sparkling like fallen snow, but I only got another five feet before a barrel-chested man caught my attention. Looking at his scruffy beard and snug suit, I realized he was the owner of a tabloid I'd just sued.

"One of my editors-in-chief told me about your legal dispute," he confessed in his low, gravelly tone. "You must know, I was quite disturbed by the news."

"It's your industry, Nelson," I noted. "You know how it goes."

"Of course," he agreed with a laugh. "Still, I hope we can put this . . . disagreement behind us. As an old friend of your father's, I hate for there to be any hard feelings."

“There aren’t. As long as you aren’t pulling profits from defamatory articles about me, we’re golden.”

Realizing there was nothing more to be said, the portly publishing mogul let me go, but every ten paces, I found myself running into someone new. The task of reaching her was such a feat that I had nothing prepared when our eyes finally met. With a glass of champagne against her lips, I wondered what it would be like to be that flute, wrapped up in her polished fingers.

“Felix,” Jasper greeted me with an extended hand. “Thank you for inviting us to join this event. I feel like I never get to come.”

It was everything I could do not to look at the blue eyes sparkling beside him. Jasper himself had always been a charismatic sort of person. As long as I’d known him, he had the golden aura of a man who always played but never bragged about it. His self-assuredness had been earned through blood, sweat, and sleepless nights.

His daughter wasn’t much different.

“It’s usually the weekend of Yfir’s investors’ meeting,” I explained coolly. “Since I’m hosting, it was easy to change the weekend to accommodate my schedule.”

“I read somewhere that your mother runs this nonprofit,” Hope remarked.

“My mother and stepfather, yes. They own a large vineyard up in Napa, and their work with our migrant population helped them realize the unmet needs of the community.”

She smiled. “Sounds like a mutually beneficial situation.”

Jasper quickly interjected, “Felix, you’ve met my daughter, Hope.”

“Once or twice,” I agreed, extending my hand to her. “It’s good to see you again, Hope.”

“Likewise.”

When she shook my hand, I almost didn't let go. I half-expected for her to vanish again, like a cool mist. All the pretense and small talk were becoming more grating by the second.

"Jasper," a dark-haired woman greeted him. "There you are."

"Grace," I realized, seeing the ruby boulder on her finger.

Hope consumed my mind so much that I wasn't thinking clearly.

"Felix, I don't think we've seen you since Hillary's dinner last year," she answered with a smile.

"I can't believe it's been that long," I admitted. "It's a shame I won't be able to make it this year."

"Then, we should get together sometime," Grace offered. "After the holidays are over, we should arrange to go out for dinner, but I hope you don't mind me stealing my husband for a minute."

"Not at all," I assured her.

My eyes followed the couple as they vanished into the crowd. Left alone with me, Hope tucked one of the framing pieces of hair behind her ear before shaking her head. I began to see how pensive her angelic face looked. She took a step closer and lowered her voice.

"I was hoping maybe we could talk," she confessed, her eyes searching over my shoulder.

"I think that's a good idea."

Before anyone could pull us apart, I led Hope into the house and up the side stairwell toward my upstairs library. The long oak room was filled with built-in bookcases and stretched to the billiards room at the opposite end. As we found ourselves alone in the quiet, I walked over to the marble fireplace and flicked on the gas logs.

"Shall I refresh your drink?" I offered.

Hope appraised the room as she shook her head. “Thanks, but we didn’t come up here to sample your overpriced vintages, did we?”

It was hard not to smile at her little quips. The lilt of her voice and her knowing smile took me right back to that hotel bar. In the quiet, I could hear Hope’s heels tapping against the floor, sounding off as she circled slowly.

“I can’t believe I’ve waited almost two years for this moment,” I confessed while shrugging out of my black suit jacket.

“Is that why you invited me?” Hope asked. “I imagined this was all just a coincidence.”

“Did you think I’d forgotten you?”

I watched as her fingers ran along the length of a bookshelf. Her bright eyes caught sight of one title and then another. I wondered if they meant anything to her or if she was just trying to be coy. Every step she took felt tedious and agonizing, but she was inching closer.

She shrugged. “It’s not like you’ve been waiting around for me to show up.”

“Did you?”

“I couldn’t,” she answered, her voice bittersweet.

She finished her wine and sighed. Something was being left unsaid, and I thought I knew what it was. I dared to look in her eyes and presumed all the thoughts running behind them were clear to me. After closing the distance between us, my hand reached out to brush against her cheek.

Everything seemed to be in my grasp again.

“I still thought about you,” I confessed as I took her empty glass and the silver purse wrapped around her wrist. “It bothered me when I found out you’d left the Viceroy without a word.”

“Bothered you?”

“*Pained* me,” I amended. “If you prefer, you could say troubled . . . or concerned . . . or agitated.”

Looking toward the fire, she laughed. “Alright, I didn’t mean to turn you into a thesaurus.”

My finger tilted her chin up to meet my gaze. Her parted lips tempted me closer.

“I couldn’t let that one night be the end of everything.”

“It wasn’t,” Hope said.

I couldn’t help but smile. Her soft breath warmed my skin all over. After all that time, we were falling right back into place.

I asked softly, “Are you coming back to me, darling?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Will you be running away again?”

“I . . . I don’t think I can.”

Hope and I felt like puzzle pieces clicking into place. Her pouting lips parted and welcomed me closer. With her fingers curling into fists around my shirt, Hope’s kiss was even more intoxicating than I remembered. Years of wanting and wondering poured out into the moment. Before I knew it, I found us wandering back to the long Chesterfield sofa.

“Let me have you,” I urged her, my kiss trailing from her lips to her neck.

Her head tilted to accommodate me. There was nothing coy about Hope now. She was uninhibited, emboldened by her desires.

“I told you,” she answered breathlessly. “I’m not running anywhere.”

It was all the permission I needed. So much time had passed that I couldn’t be bothered with undressing her. Her heels clattering to the floor was enough. In some ways, I liked watching her form sparkle in the firelight. She was iridescent and ethereal laid out on the couch, and she was mine again. I

reveled in my unearned swell of pride as I pulled down her little scrap of lace and pushed up her skirt.

Hope invited me closer. She didn't move with the same wild fervor that I remembered from our first encounter. Something about her felt more . . . *reserved*, yet her leg still draped over my left shoulder. Her head pressed deeper into the throw pillows as I traced along her folds before circling slowly over her little pink nub. The perfume of her pheromones found me, and I became captivated.

"I missed this," I teased, kissing the inside of her thigh.

Hope grinned. "Is that all you missed about me?"

I didn't care if she wanted to be coy, clever, or even carnal. I would play whatever game Hope desired as long as we reached the same satisfying result.

"No," I assured her. "But it was toward the top of the list."

Then, I found exactly what I wanted. I listened to her laughter flourish into a pleading gasp as I tasted her for the first time. All her cute little lines were lost to the rise and fall of her chest and her fingers digging into my scalp. At first, she may have been reserved, but I could feel Hope coming undone.

I was falling to pieces right there with her.

With every lick and teasing touch, I couldn't hold back my desperation for more. Hope had my whole body burning. I dared to look up toward that fiery intensity in her eyes. All their softness was gone, and all that remained was a blue bolt of lightning coursing through her and right into me. Even if Hope turned me to ash, I refused to let up. I couldn't quit her until I watched her eyes shut tight.

Her spine began to arch. Her hips rose to meet me. My tongue lapped at the first rush of euphoria before ecstasy consumed her body and soul. One wave, then another, satisfaction took hold over every fiber of Hope's being, and I reveled in the sight.

Hubris had me wondering if I could coax her to my bed. As I licked my lips clean, I was too arrogant to ever consider

anything beyond my selfish desires. They kept me from feeling the blue flames licking at my skin, ready to burn up my presumptions.

“Now,” I teased gently, “Is there something you want to say?”

I expected a sly response or a quip. Reeling in her satisfaction, I didn’t expect her to say anything serious, nothing that would make my racing heart slam to a deadening halt. Her voice was so soft as she said it.

“Clara,” Hope murmured. “Our daughter’s name is Clara.”

My face falling, I choked out, “*Daughter?*”

Hope’s eyes shot open. With one simple phrase, the game we’d played was over.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOPE

Nothing about this party was going according to plan. Grace would make sure Felix and I found ourselves alone. We would find somewhere quiet to talk, and I'd calmly explain everything before offering Felix a chance to be a part of Clara's life.

It only took one kiss for that plan to go up in smoke. As I got Felix alone to talk, I couldn't deny the thrill of his touch. I didn't want to turn away from the pleasure we both craved.

I was too swept up in the moment, and in my haste, the truth came spilling out.

"Daughter," Felix echoed again. "*Daughter?*"

A streak of cowardice coursed through me. I thought about lying, snatching up my purse, and heading for the hills. Felix could keep my shoes and panties. I didn't need those to call a cab, but I hadn't come this far to run away now.

I sat up and met his shocked expression. Felix's dark eyes demanded answers.

"I believe you've heard of them, *daughters*," I muttered, suddenly feeling agitated by the look on his chiseled face.

Pushing myself to the edge of the soft tweed sofa, I wrung my hands and stared at the fire. Felix's intense gaze still burned into the side of my face. Tension rose around us.

"You can't say something like that and then be flippant about it," he asserted.

I stared down at my palm. "Well, you can't think I planned for our conversation to go like this. When I said we should talk, I meant it. I wasn't just looking to get you alone to fool around."

My heart pounded in my chest. I began to wonder if he would deny me, if he would cast me aside as quickly as he'd played with me. I never took Felix Jacobson to be a cruel man,

but fear didn't indulge in logic or rational thought. Fear only entertained paranoia.

"Why haven't you come to talk to me sooner?" Felix demanded, his voice growing more frustrated. "Are you telling me that all this time I . . . I had a, *a child* for almost two years, and you said nothing? Why would you wait around for a damn party invitation?"

The words wrapped around my chest like heavy chains, and Felix was determined to pull them tighter. I couldn't run away now, even as old memories flashed across my mind. With them, old scars opened, and forgotten emotions emerged.

"Sometimes, it doesn't feel that long." I sighed raggedly. "Other days . . . it feels like a lifetime."

Time was turning backward. I sat the same way in that office lobby. My legs tight together, I stared back at that young woman's scowl as embarrassment reddened my face and made the tips of my ears burn. It took every ounce of courage I had to keep my face composed.

"That's not an answer, Hope," Felix insisted.

"I didn't intend it to be."

His voice grew firm. Felix wasn't the kind of man to be denied. He always got what he wanted. As a hunter, the man always got his prey.

"Then look at me, Hope, and tell me why."

Felix could have what he wanted, but I wasn't the kind of woman to be gentle. The only grace I had was my best friend.

"I did come to you, Felix!" I fired back, my hands balling into fists. "I came to your office that spring, and you sent me away!"

Whipping my head in his direction, I felt my gasping breath shift to fuming huffs of hostility. I didn't hesitate to stare Felix down. I watched as his frustrated look turned into utter confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

I was ready to come out of my skin. Standing, I paced in front of the fire as every wound opened. The story spilled out of me like blood from every awful cut into my pride.

“From the moment I found out I was pregnant, I agonized over whether or not to tell you,” I began. “I didn’t know you, and you didn’t know me. I didn’t need money or support. I *have* that. I still have that, but something changed when I found out I was having a girl. I *wanted* you to know. It didn’t exactly help that you were already photographed with some actress. At the very least, I thought if you rejected me, I could stop wondering. I could stop worrying and just . . . just hate you, so I went to your office. I bullied my way through security desks and secretaries, and then . . .”

“What?” Felix pressed me, his voice softening.

I stopped pacing to study him. He was disheveled on the surface. His shirt was undone where I’d tugged at the fabric, and his dark hair was all mussed. Even though he ran a hand over it, Felix still looked unkempt, but his golden-brown eyes flickered with brooding torment. They held his pain over lost years as well as a new empathy for me. The burden of it all forced his broad shoulders to slump forward and a heavy sigh to leave his chest.

“I was turned away,” I answered, trying not to cry. “I sat there for an hour outside your office door. Finally, some redheaded woman went into your office, and when she came out . . . she told me you didn’t want to be disturbed. She asked me to leave. She . . . she told me that I should have made an appointment. I tried to tell her it was important, a personal matter. I even showed her the sonogram copy in my purse, but she still sent me away. She said I wasn’t the first to fake one of those, and I probably wouldn’t be the last. To say I was mortified would be an understatement, and after that, I guess I never found the courage to try again.”

“Then why now? Why did you accept my invitation here?”

I shrugged, shaking my head. “Because I still want Clara to know you. I guess, more than anything, I came for her.”

Felix nodded slightly in understanding.

“I swear, Hope, I didn’t know,” he told me. “My staff, they have a trick that if someone’s being unruly, they’ll go and pretend to talk to me. I’m not even in my office most of the day. They’re supposed to tell me when something like that happens. If I had known . . . if I had even thought that you came to my office back then, I wouldn’t have let you walk away.”

I sank into the sofa beside him. In my haste, I had been so prepared to fight him. I hurled my words at the man sitting before me, but there was no need. We both were hurting. Felix and I both had reasons to be upset, and it would take us working together to heal these jagged wounds.

With the tension gone, only quiet fell between us. We could hear the party’s noise drifting in through the walls. I’d almost forgotten there was a crowd in Felix’s endless gardens. Somewhere out there, my father was probably wondering where I went.

I could easily say I got lost looking for a bathroom. In a place like this, it would be the most believable lie.

“So,” Felix said softly, “her name is Clara.”

“Yes.” I nodded. “She has your eyes.”

“Really?”

I smiled. “Yeah, they’re the same golden-brown.”

He sighed fretfully again. “If I’d known, you could’ve been here in this house. I could have been there for you and Clara, taken care of you as I should have.”

“I don’t need anyone to take care of me,” I insisted. “I don’t need your money, Felix. I have my own house, a good job, and a nice nanny who helped look after me when I was little. I meant what I said. I only want to give you the chance to be in Clara’s life. Besides, do you really think we could have built a life together on a single night?”

“How about dinner, then?” Felix countered.

“Huh?”

Carefully, Felix reached out and wrapped his hand around mine. His grip warmed me from within and allowed my body to grow still. I hadn't even realized that I'd been trembling.

"Perhaps two people can't build a life on one night," Felix told me. "If we can't have that, tell me that you'll come over for dinner. We can talk more about this, and we can make a plan to move forward together."

My hand squeezed his. "Alright, Felix. We'll have dinner, but you won't blame me if I don't bring Clara? I would like for you to meet. It's just not that easy to talk with Clara around. She's a little distracting."

"That's fine," he agreed. "With the public's interest in me these days, I will do my best to keep this quiet. The world doesn't need to know about Clara or us."

"Thank you," I answered. "My friend Grace, she's the only one who knows about you. I haven't told my dad or anyone else, and I think I should be the one to explain things, not some gutter tabloid writer."

"Agreed."

There was a party full of people waiting for Felix. Dad told me that Felix was supposed to make a speech before a firework show thanking the guests for supporting the cause. The world was waiting for him, but, instead, Felix sat with me, letting his thumb run over the back of my hand.

"I missed this," he confessed softly.

"You mean my body?" I tried to tease, praying it would lighten my mood.

"No. I mean seeing you."

It was hard not to smile at him. I still needed to gather my shoes and figure out where Felix set down my clutch, but for a second, I offered him one more moment of indulgence.

"Come on," I finally urged him. "People will be wondering where we are soon."

I slowly stood and fixed myself before moving toward the door. Felix's eyes studied me the entire time. They glowed like

two dark pieces of amber.

“Hope,” he called. “I need one more thing before we go downstairs.”

My hand lingered on the doorknob. “What?”

Reaching into his jacket’s pocket, Felix tried not to chuckle. “I think before you run out again, I should get your phone number.”

CHAPTER SIX

FELIX

“For your dinner tonight, I’ve prepared a four-course meal with a little gem salad and lemon vinaigrette as our starter,” the chef explained. “The second course will be a butternut squash risotto with shaved pecorino, followed by an herb-crusted chicken and glazed seasonal root vegetables. To finish, we’ll bring out crème brûlée and coffee.”

Her young assistant was still puttering around the stovetop, fussing with some medallions of carrots and beets. If Hope had intended to bring Clara, I would have asked for pizza or whatever our child preferred, but I had to respect her boundaries. I needed Hope to trust me.

“That all sounds wonderful, Jean,” I told the chef.

Just then, the doorbell rang. My head quickly shifted, and it took me a full second to remember my housekeeper was already gone for the evening. I wove through the back rooms and toward the front door with a hurried stride.

“Hi, Felix, I hope I’m not late,” she greeted me. “I got caught behind an accident on Santa Monica Boulevard. I skipped changing clothes, but Clara still wanted me to help her with her bedtime routine, *of course*. I just tried to get here as fast as I could without breaking too many traffic laws.”

As she stepped inside, I couldn’t find a reason Hope would have wanted to change. Her long hair fell like strands of silk down her back, and her curves were a perfect silhouette in her black sweater dress tied up with a bow around her waist. I wanted to offer her some joking response, but the words were lost when I noticed the large fabric-covered book tucked under Hope’s arm.

“I hope you didn’t feel the need to bring something to read tonight,” I half-joked.

Hope scrunched up her nose in confusion before realizing what I meant. With a small laugh of understanding, she set down her oversized purse on a nearby table before presenting

the rose-blush book. The gold foil letters across the cover read *Clara's First Year*.

“This is for you, actually. It’s an album I made. I thought you should have a copy.”

I should have been used to Hope’s surprises. It would have been easier to give up trying to plan everything and be prepared around this extraordinary woman. Still, I stood there dumbly, thumbing through the pages at a loss for words.

Clara did have my eyes, though hers were round like a little fawn’s and filled with far more delight. I saw how she grew month by month. As lovely as it was to see, the image of Clara in front of her birthday cake put an unseen knife into my heart.

I could have been there. I *should* have been there.

I didn’t blame Hope for what had already happened. The past couldn’t be changed, but the regret I had over missing all this time would never leave me.

“Thank you,” I offered.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “Well, I guess we should have dinner now, don’t you?”

I had to laugh at myself. Caught up in the gift, I’d forgotten why Hope had come at all.

“Yes. It’s, um, right this way.”

The house my great-grandparents built could be a bit of a maze, but Hope and I weaved our way through hallways and sitting rooms to reach the side terrace and its illuminated gazebo, just off the main parlor and nestled among the climbing green vines. The catering duo dressed up the dining table for four with white linens and candles, and white wine was chilling in a bucket nearby.

I poured a drink for us both as we settled into our seats. In the blue evening light, Hope looked nothing short of stunning. The warmth of her voice floated over the night air, and her eyes remained bright even in the lowest light.

As our second course arrived, the risotto, Hope smiled across the table and asked, “Have you given more thought to my offer?”

Over the last four days, we had been calling back and forth when we found ourselves alone. We never sent a single text or email mentioning Clara or anything else damning. The only evidence I had of our long conversations were my tired eyes the following day and the timestamps in my phone. Somewhere around midnight the night before, Hope had offered me the chance to strike up my proposal at co-parenting. I never found myself excited by any of her suggestions.

I couldn’t take Clara away from her routines. Hope couldn’t figure out the simplest way to make me a part of their everyday life. On the surface, it appeared that our lives were too different to make this work, but I knew there was only one solution that made sense.

“You know what I’m going to say, Hope,” I reminded her before sipping my wine.

“Tell me anyway.”

I set down the glass and smiled. “My proposal is that you live here with me. If it would make you more comfortable, the guest house on the back of the property has two bedrooms, and it can be redesigned however you like. I could be closer to Clara. We could have meals and weekends together, and you would have your own space.”

“For now,” she pointed out. “If you get me here, how long would it be before you lure me into the main house? Or are you planning to leave us out in the gardens for the sake of your dates?”

Hope’s stubborn heel dug into me with a quick twist, but the jab wasn’t entirely unearned.

“I think two girls are enough for me to handle at once. Between you and Clara, I don’t need a third on my plate.”

“Are you sure about that?”

My head tilted with curiosity. “Why? Are you interested in other men?”

Hope laughed like it was the most absurd thing she’d ever heard. Brushing a stray hair from her eyes, she shook her head.

“I haven’t looked twice at a man since I found out I was pregnant.” She continued to laugh. “Babies aren’t the most alluring accessory for a single woman, not that I even had the energy to date.”

I thought back to the photos of her holding Hope in those first few months. I knew that they were snippets of a polished reality, not the unvarnished truth of motherhood, yet Hope glowed in all those photos. Even at the dinner table, she radiated with life and self-assurance. What sane man wouldn’t be attracted to that?

“That doesn’t mean a man didn’t take an interest in you.”

“Yes, it does,” Hope asserted before taking a bite of her risotto. “Men wouldn’t perceive me as available or find my situation attractive. I can’t make them a priority when I have a baby hanging onto me, and no man wants to play second-fiddle to an infant.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

“That’s because Clara’s *your* child.”

Game. Set. Match.

I settled back into my seat and relented. “Maybe I am biased, then.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I left my father’s guest house to raise Clara on my own. I’m not leaving my condo just to go to another man’s mansion.”

“But I’m not just another man,” I countered. “As you say, Clara is *my* child.”

Hope took another bite and smiled. “Touché.”

“Let’s just talk about what you will let me do for you two,” I suggested, refreshing both our wine and water glasses. “Then, once we’re finished with dinner, I can show you

around the main house. Perhaps you can even decide which of the eight bedrooms might be suitable for Clara.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “You’re incorrigible.”

“You should know by now, darling,” I teased, “I’m not one to admit defeat.”

“But do you know when you’re defeated?”

I flashed her a winning smile. “We’ll see, won’t we?”

Over the rest of dinner, we talked more about Clara, her milestones, and what she liked. She wasn’t too picky of an eater. She loved all fruit and most vegetables, and Clara had started fixating on anything to do with animals. She loved rabbits, sheep, and anything soft.

“And what about you?” I pressed Hope.

She took a bite of her crème brûlée and shrugged. “What about me?”

“Don’t you have any interests?”

“My interests these days consist of very quiet baths, uninterrupted naps, and maintaining my sanity.”

I shook my head. “That can’t be true.”

“Well, it damn sure feels that way,” she insisted with a wry smile. “*However*, there was a time when I liked to read books that weren’t printed on thick paperboard. I would throw parties for my friends and travel when I got the chance. I also had a bad habit of picking fights.”

“I already knew the last one.”

“Right,” she agreed. “That’s how we . . . met.”

I chuckled. “Sure, if that’s what you want to call it.”

Hope tried, but she couldn’t hide her earnest grin behind another forkful of dessert. Her eyes glanced down to the candles before coming back to me.

“What about you?” she wondered. “What do you like other than work?”

“If you can believe, my family has always been into movies.”

“Really? A family that runs an international film and television studio *likes movies*?”

She laughed at her sarcasm.

“Fine. Did you know I used to box in college?”

Hope raised her eyebrows. “That’s a thing?”

“Sure, the oldest club in the country is up at UC Berkeley. I was an active member all four years of my undergrad.”

“I guess you still like to train,” she mused.

I nodded. “I prefer to think of it as therapeutic.”

Hope picked up the wine bottle and poured out the last of the crisp white before asking, “Do you have any trophies you could show me?”

When our little crème brûlée ramekins were empty, Hope and I found ourselves wandering through the rooms where my old memorabilia was kept. I took the long route, showing her guest rooms and parlors before reaching the den. I tried not to think about Hope being the first woman to see them and even the first to ask.

Like every other piece of my life, my relationships remained in their own neat little compartment, but Hope wasn’t the kind of woman to be kept in a box. If I tried, she would just take a sledgehammer to the confining walls. Her fingers ran along one of the gold medals, and she smiled.

“You never settled for second, did you?” Hope joked.

“Maybe once or twice, but I still blame those on bad rulings from the referee.”

As she laughed, I could see how her blue eyes were growing dreamy, reflecting the ease of my muscles. All those glasses of wine were taking hold, and time began to slow down.

“What’s that door?” Hope asked softly.

I turned to follow her gaze. “That’s the master suite.”

“You mean . . . your room.”

“Yes.”

“Are you willing to show it to me?”

I turned back to her and saw the truth in her expression. It wasn’t just the wine going to her head. Hope knew exactly what she was doing as her fingers skated up my arm. All I could focus on was the perfect cupid’s bow of her pink lips. My hands itched to feel the small of her waist.

“You can have whatever you like,” I murmured back.

Luring her closer to me, I kissed the pulse point just behind her ear. I let my mouth wander from her ear to her neck as I relished the rise and fall of Hope’s chest. Every sweet breath escaped her lips, and the air grew warmer around us.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she said breathlessly.

I pulled away and found her half-hooded gaze. The sugar and wine on her breath coaxed me closer until only a veil of static lingered between our lips.

“I don’t intend to,” I vowed.

With a sigh, Hope’s lips found mine. She pulled me closer, guiding me in a slow dance toward the half-open door. I don’t know if she noticed the sitting room or the French windows leading to a private terrace. Hope only had eyes for the expansive downy bed and me. Her hands were already pulling at my jacket and the buttons of my shirt. If she had asked, I would have skipped dessert outside.

I would have skipped the whole damn dinner.

“Tell me what you want to do to me,” Hope urged me between hungry kisses.

“The list goes on and on,” I teased. “I’ve got all kinds of ideas about your mouth, your breasts, and down to your perfect little—”

She cut me off. “We don’t have all week, baby. I’ve got a sitter waiting.”

A chuckle rumbled deep within my chest, muffled as my mouth wandered down to the exposed skin of her chest. With my fists balling up around the soft fabric of her skirt, I was desperate to taste her breasts, even if my tongue could only find the slightest curve.

“I want to see every inch of you,” I declared, my hands pulling up her dress. “I want to have you under me and watch you come undone. I want to look right in your eyes and know that I’m the man who makes you feel so good.”

“Nobody else . . .” she murmured back.

Hope was in my grasp again, willing to let me pull off her dress and coax her onto the bed. Her long hair scattered across the pile of indigo and white pillows. It brought out the sweetest blue of her dreamy eyes in the low light. With a hazy smile on her face, Hope was sprawled on my bed in bits of gray lace.

I’d had dreams just like this.

As I hovered over her, Hope’s uninhibited hands were already undoing my belt, already hunting down the bulge she could feel against her thigh. She tugged at my pants and pushed back the shoulders of my dress shirt. I longed to memorize the curves of her body, but her persistence kept pulling me away. I set her free time and again until she had no more clothes to cast aside.

It was only me and her, skin against skin. In the back of my mind, a voice told me to savor the sensations. It took me two years to find my way back to Hope. I needed to make this moment worth all that while.

My hands left her waist and thighs to wander down between her legs. The sheer fabric I found was already wet, and the body underneath was begging to be touched. Once I had her thong cast aside, Hope didn’t hesitate to spread her legs wider, to welcome me closer.

“You’ve torn me apart, darling,” I muttered against her chest. “Whether it leads me to ruin or paradise, I need you to be mine.”

Her chest rose in a soft gasp as my fingers traced upward along her folds before slipping inside her. Hope’s hips rolled against the sensation, her whole body reacting to the long-awaited touch.

“I’m yours,” she breathed in a pleading whisper.

“Tell me you won’t run again.”

She shook her head against the pillows as I studied her, memorizing the glassy look in her eyes. Her pouting lips parted just for me.

“I won’t,” she swore. “I don’t want to.”

I found her tongue with my own. Hope’s hand reached for my dripping tip and growing length as we kissed. I didn’t realize how badly I wanted Hope until her hand was around me, encouraging my body to grow rock hard until it ached to be inside her.

“Do you want me?” I urged, my voice almost growling.

“Yes, please, Felix.”

“I love my name on your lips,” I remarked with a wicked grin.

“And I love it when you stop talking and actually fuck me.”

Through her haze, Hope smirked, as daring and smug as ever. She continued to let my hands pin hers above her head. She let my mouth wander where it liked, but Hope would never be submissive or demure. This was merely permission, a temporary offering I could easily lose.

I refused to let that happen.

Our bodies connected, and I watched how Hope relished the sensation. Her hand buried itself in the pillows. Her fingers curled around mine. With every rocking thrust, my fervor and pace grew. I studied the sight and feel of Hope’s body writhing

beneath me. I stole the moans from her lips in a hasty kiss and felt the ecstasy vibrating across her skin.

I could have fallen apart right there, but I didn't relent. I held out until Hope was past the point of no return. Her spine arched into my chest, and her insides clenched around me. There was no holding back the rush of my release then. I muttered a curse as my hands tightened around Hope's and my kiss stole the air from her lungs.

It was over too soon. We were hardly catching our breath before she began to pull away.

"Stay," I implored, my hand brushing against her bare back.

She found her bra on the floor. As she talked, Hope never looked back.

"You know I can't, Felix. I have Clara and the nanny back home."

"I don't mean tonight."

Her head turned then, and her expression grew soft. Her cool hands wrapped around mine. I was lying there, naked and spent, yet she was already walking out the door. Nothing about it felt fair. Selfish as it was, I didn't want her for fifteen minutes or a single night. I wanted her mornings and her lazy afternoons. I craved every minute Hope would offer me if she would only give me a chance.

"I spent my entire life being nurtured by other people, but for the first time, I'm running my own life. I'm standing on my own two feet," she explained gently. "Part of me would love to stay, to shut my eyes and not worry, but . . . I can't dive in headfirst anymore. I have a life I've made for myself. I have Clara to consider. I can't just give it all up and come running to you."

"Why?"

"Because what if it didn't work out?"

"You don't know that," I argued.

“But I can’t be sure,” Hope insisted, kissing the back of my hand. “Felix, if you care, you’ll give me space and time.”

With a reluctant sigh, I nodded. “All right, Hope.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

It pained me to watch her dress, to run a hand through her hair and then kiss me goodbye at the front door. After all that wine, I didn’t want her driving. I called a car for her to take home with the promise of her car being in its designated spot the next morning.

“There’s no need to doubt me,” I assured her with every fiber of my being.

Hope would see that I could be the man in her life. I could be the man who made her feel safe and adored. Even if she needed time to see it, I was damn determined to make her see the truth. We could be happy together. With me, Hope Hayes could have the life she’d always wanted.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HOPE

Music and sunlight filled the Malibu home. A warm December breeze blew through the house and carried Grace's music through Dad's living room. Her grand piano, a one-of-a-kind piece made of exotic wood, was covered in silver-framed photographs, birthday cards, and the fragrant bouquet of pink peonies I brought as her birthday present. Outside, Dad was cooking lunch in the wood-burning oven, and the Pacific Ocean shone its unmistakable blue.

"Clap for Gracie, Clara!" I exclaimed eagerly.

Clara, with an excited grin, mimicked my movements. Grace's talents were far beyond simple Christmas carols and *Twinkle, Twinkle*, but she always played them for Clara. Grace had played on stages in front of hundreds of people. It was almost funny to see her so enamored with a baby's applause.

"Yay!" Clara cheered, smacking her two palms together.

Grace grinned at the baby in her lap. "Thank you, Clara! Should I play another?"

"This is your birthday lunch," I reminded her. "You don't have to entertain my daughter."

"But I *want* to," Grace amended.

With ease, she slipped into another melodic carol, her nimble fingers gliding across the ivory keys. Clara watched with rapt attention from her spot in Grace's lap, but my friend's dark eyes were focused on me standing nearby.

"So . . . how did the dinner with your *new client* go?"

I smiled. "Oh, him."

"Yes, *him*."

My eyes glanced toward the open glass doors. Dad was too far away and too focused on his pizzas to overhear us, but I was paranoid of him walking in during the wrong moment.

“It went really well,” I answered honestly. “Well, it went well for us, but I don’t think we were much closer to coming to an agreement.”

“About . . .” Grace mumbled, her eyes glancing down to the top of Clara’s honey-blond head.

I nodded. “He wants me to come out to Beverly Hills. I still think the best place for me and our creation is a safe distance away from his life. You know, I was picking up diapers last night, and there was some interview from his ex in one of those trashy magazines? Gracie, I don’t want my life to be sold as some stranger’s amusement, next to candy bars and gum, no less.”

Grace laughed as she flourished over the chorus of bells and sleigh rides. Clara wiggled to the music, the peach tulle of her skirt swishing as she moved.

“You can’t blame him, though,” she remarked. “Honestly, I think it’s great that he wants to be so involved in the project. He hasn’t even seen your creation face-to-face, but he’s still interested in the project and you.”

The birthday girl smirked, and I knew exactly what she was thinking. When I found her under the light of the party’s firework display, Grace had flashed a similar shit-eating grin.

“You hooked up, didn’t you?” Grace asked under cover of a booming explosion.

Others oohed and ahed, and I turned beet red. Was I so obvious?

“Well, he could be interested in the project because of me,” I considered. “He showed plenty of interest in me the other night.”

“Ooh,” Grace teased me with a childish giggle. “It’s a shame there are little ears in the room.”

“Yeah, well, there are other ears just outside too.”

Speaking of the devil, Dad yelled out, “Lunch is ready!”

“Come on, Clara dear,” Grace cooed at her. “Let’s go have some pizza and cake!”

“Yay!” Clara clapped for the cake.

I pulled Clara up from Grace’s lap, letting her smooth out the fabric of her striped silk blouse. She fixed the rolls of the sleeves and pulled up her dark hair into a ponytail before we stepped out into the California sunshine. As Clara clung to me, her tiny fingers dug past the buttons of my floral dress. She was five seconds from flashing my bra to the lunch table.

“You’re as incorrigible as your daddy,” I whispered in Clara’s ear.

She giggled, the feel of my breath tickling her skin. Quickly, I fixed the stray buttons and got Clara settled in her high chair. Dad was already laying out the hot, bubbling pizza on the slate tray, cutting pieces for us all. The rounded table was spread out with lemon cake and a side salad. I didn’t know if Clara would try the grilled Caesar salad, but her curiosity was definitely fixed on the cheesy pizza.

“The pizza’s a little hot for your mouth,” I told her. “Have some milk first.”

“And you can have some lemonade,” Dad interjected, pouring me a glass.

“Is this the mango one from that market stand last summer?” I asked.

“One in the same,” he agreed with a smile.

Grace laughed. “Jasper refuses to buy anything else.”

“I got an extra half-gallon of their strawberry lemonade last weekend,” Dad offered. “You and Clara should take it home with you. I mean, we’re leaving for New York in two days. Our fridge might as well be empty.”

Dad had always been that way, generous to a fault. Even when we were still a middle-class duo living in Santa Monica, Dad wanted to get me the best cruiser bike for my birthday. He crowded our backyard with a bouncy house on my birthday, and he never missed a school play. Dad was always there, always filling the role of two parents, and it wasn’t much different with Clara. Up until recently, Dad was the only man in her life, but . . . that would be changing soon.

“Speaking of things you should have,” Dad added. “I was thinking about setting up an education fund for Clara.”

“Thinking?” I echoed.

Grace shared a knowing look with me. “He’s already called his accountant. He needs you to sign some papers before you leave today.”

Sighing, I shook my head. “Dad, we’ve been over this. I make good money with Natalie. I can cover preschool just fine.”

“But what about grade school and college?” he countered, sitting down across from me. “You’ve been afforded the best education money can buy, Clara. What’s so wrong with my wanting my granddaughter to have the same luxury too?”

“Because you already covered the down payment on our home,” I reminded him. “You gifted me my Porsche, and oh, you hired a doula for me when I was pregnant.”

Grace smiled into her drink. “Even I thought that was weird.”

“It’s not about the money,” I insisted before Dad could interject. “This is about my pride and *me* providing for *my* child.”

Dad exhaled, but I could see the surrender in his hazel eyes. I tried not to smile. As Dad picked up his chosen slice of pizza, he pursed his lips.

“I know you’re an independent and hardworking young woman,” he assured me. “I’m very proud that you want to take care of everything yourself, but we have the means. My money is your money, and it’s not like you have anyone else around to support you.”

“I have Maria, and Mom’s family is probably buying Clara too many Christmas gifts as we speak,” I pointed out.

Dad, pushing up the sleeves of his khaki-green sweater, frowned at the thought. We all knew what he meant. As far as Dad knew, Clara was going to be a fatherless child, and he’d been that parent since I was six. Dad never wanted that for me.

He never wanted me to face those sleepless nights and parental worries alone, but this was where we were.

“You have all the family you’ll ever need right here, but that . . . that *man* is a fool and an idiot for not wanting to be in your lives.”

“Jasper,” Grace chided him softly.

“I’m not trying to be difficult,” he insisted. “This is Grace’s birthday celebration. I’ve spent my two cents. Let’s just enjoy the day.”

Picking up a piece of pizza for Clara, I began to cut the pizza into baby-sized pieces easy for her tiny hands to pick up. Dad had conceded, so I decided that maybe I could too.

“And I’ll sign the papers before I leave,” I agreed. “Maybe it can be a nice college fund for Clara one day.”

His look of defeat vanishing, Dad flashed one of his triumphant smiles. “We’re going to have to call her Dr. Hayes then.”

Grace took a bite of her pizza and joked, “Clara’s probably going to have enough money for three doctorates.”

“Or just one very expensive one,” I added.

With the tension leaving the table, it became easier to fall into the happy pattern of eating and chatting on the poolside patio. Grace told me about their plans to visit her mother in Connecticut while they were in New York, and I got some ideas about what to buy them both for the upcoming holiday. We didn’t need to talk about Clara or her father, but the worry lingered in my mind.

How would Dad ever accept the truth about Felix? In many ways, I still grappled with the reality of our relationship. I had no clue how to explain Felix to Dad when I could hardly explain my feelings surrounding Felix to myself.

On that fateful night in the hotel bar, I’d been lonely and feeling overwhelmed. I was desperate for a distraction, and now, it didn’t feel that much different. I knew I was attracted to Felix. I enjoyed our conversation and knew he had a good

heart, but I felt so worn down these days. Between work and Clara, there was nothing more intoxicating than shutting my eyes and relishing the feel of Felix's hands on me, but I couldn't forget my daughter.

I couldn't pretend like my emotions for Felix Jacobson were honest or true. Did I love him at all, or had this all been . . . *convenient*? Were we meant to be anything more than two ships passing in the night?

"What's on your mind?" Grace asked as she found me in the kitchen.

I looked up. "I thought you were putting Clara down for a nap."

"Your dad's handling it," she replied.

She watched as I loaded the dishwasher, not interfering with my process. Grace leaned against the black stone island, letting light flood in over the breakfast table and the endless kitchen counters. The crisp white walls made everything seem even brighter.

"I'm sorry about how he got during lunch," I apologized. "I didn't mean for the conversation to take that route."

"Oh, don't worry about him. I'm not," Grace insisted with a smile. "Between you and me, I think fatherhood has been on his mind recently, and . . . it's not only because of Clara."

I nearly dropped the glass in my hand.

"You don't mean . . .?"

"No, I'm not," she assured me. "We've talked it through, though, and we're making plans."

I loaded the glass into the top rack before giving it the company of two other tumblers.

"Oh," I mumbled in surprise.

"You're okay with this, right?"

I blinked twice before realizing why Grace had begun to wince. Throwing up my hands, I quickly wiped them off before taking hers.

“Oh, my God, Gracie, don’t worry!” I exclaimed. “I know we’re still working out some kinks in all this, but I love you. You’re going to be a great mom.”

Her olive-toned face brightened with relief. “Oh, good! You got me a little scared for a second.”

Throwing my arms around her neck, I hugged Grace tightly. Our family dynamic might have been strange, but she *was* my family, nonetheless. Since the first day of Scouts, Grace had been there when we shared our snacks and talked about our favorite stories and games.

She let me in. I discovered her loyalty and love. Now, I needed to do that with someone else too.

I have an idea. Why don’t you come over Saturday and spend the night? We can call it a test run.

The text had come from Felix early that morning. I left it hanging in the air, but as I got into my car that late afternoon, I finally messaged him back.

What time should we be there?

I turned my head to see Clara dozing in her car seat. Worn from a day with her Grandpa and Grace, her half-closed eyes were looking out the window. The buzz of my phone brought me back.

As early as you’d like.

Fear told me this could be a fatal mistake. If things didn’t work out between Felix and me, I worried Clara would suffer. Her chance at having her father would be ruined by my selfish desires, yet Clara would have the happy home she deserved if it did work.

There was a risk in this venture, but as I pulled out of my Dad’s driveway, I knew I had the possibility of the ultimate reward. For Clara’s sake and mine, I needed to take this chance. I had to put my faith in Felix.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FELIX

I was living for the weekend. As work loomed over me, I found myself bombarded with tiresome meetings and too many press inquiries about Shelby Warburton's new claims. She was doing press junkets for her new film, and it appeared that her broken heart helped arouse more interest.

No press was bad press, and collateral damage didn't matter. I left Noah to put out the fires while I focused on getting myself ready for Saturday afternoon. The house had been overhauled for the holiday season. Gardeners had added more white lights to the gardens and front bushes. My staff had decked out the windows and doors in fresh boxwood wreaths with scarlet bows. I wanted everything to be perfect when Hope pulled up in the traffic circle.

Money was a powerful weapon, but she wasn't the kind of woman to be bought. My only artillery was making a concerted effort, showing that I cared.

"Wow, you've really done up the place," Hope mused as she hopped out of her driver's seat. "It's almost like we're not in LA County."

With her hair braided back, it was different seeing Hope in jeans. She was the kind of woman to favor dresses and skirts, but I guess I was the kind of man who wore more slacks than denim. Based on the way Hope's eyes appraised me, my pullover and dark-washed denim were a pleasant surprise.

"Almost?" I echoed with a smile.

"Well, you can deck your boughs with holly, but you'll never escape the California heat."

She pressed a button, and I noticed the trunk's door opening. Slowly, it rose on its own as Hope pulled open the backseat's door. Something in my chest twisted. I knew who she talked to in that cooing little voice. I'd spent so much time getting ready, yet all the photographs I'd memorized and the baby books couldn't prepare me for this moment.

Nothing compared to meeting my child for the first time.

Dressed in a sunny cardigan and a denim dress embroidered along its edges, Clara looked around the house with wide, curious eyes. Her tiny mouth remained hidden behind a teething pacifier. Hope tried to look casual, but we couldn't deny the gravity of the moment.

"Clara, this is Daddy," Hope explained in that clear, optimistic voice. "Can you say hi?"

It was surreal to hear that name. Clara said nothing, but her doe eyes studied me before she waved slowly.

"Hi, Clara," I greeted her slowly. "It's nice to meet you."

In Hope's arms, she was close enough to reach out and touch the rust-colored cashmere I wore. Her fingers felt so small and delicate, and in that fraction of a second, I knew I'd do anything to keep them safe.

"Do you want to hold her while I get the bags?" Hope offered.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, she loves being held," she assured me. "It's a miracle she ever started walking. Come on, Clara, let Daddy hold you."

Quickly, Clara's arm unlatched from Hope's shoulder and reached for me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd held an infant, but Clara knew how to make herself comfortable in the crook of my arm. She continued to pet my sweater.

"You're a sturdy girl, Clara," I told her, feeling the weight of her against my arm. "Maybe I should start doing my weight training with you."

Grabbing the two suitcases and backpack from the trunk, Hope remarked, "She does provide a good burn. I definitely get sore after Mommy and Me Pilates."

"How often do you do that?" I asked, offering Clara my free thumb.

“Once or twice a month,” she answered. “So, where are we putting Clara’s things?”

It had been easy choosing which bedroom to adapt for a child’s use. Down the hall from the main suite, a guest suite sat empty, eager for a visitor. My mother had put up the gold and tan wallpaper covered in blossoming tree branches and little birds, and it was easy to clear away the sofa and put a gold-spindled crib in its place. Still, the queen-sized bed and gilded nightstands remained.

“I figured it might be easier for you to share a room,” I explained.

Hope’s eyes scanned the new changing station atop the walnut dresser and the toy basket in the corner. She set down her bags and smiled.

“Didn’t want to share your room?” she teased lightly.

“I didn’t want to presume anything, but you know I’m always happy to share with you.”

She laughed, rolling her eyes at the thought. Shaking her head, she unpacked Clara’s essentials, double-checking the diapers I’d purchased and setting some things aside in the bathroom. Clara and I sat on the bed together, her tactile interests moving to the cool satin of the pillowcases. Pointing, she grumbled at her feet.

“You want me to take off your shoes?” I realized.

Clara kicked off the Velcro sneakers as I tugged. In her sock feet, she was more content to flop up against the pillows and admire the ruffles on the comforter. My eyes couldn’t leave her.

“Okay, I think that’s everything,” Hope finally decided. “Clara, what are you doing, sweetie?”

Clara giggled from where she had buried herself in the plush fabrics. With a big swoop of her arms, Hope gathered up the girl, and a peal of silvery laughter filled the room.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is about the time for Clara’s afternoon snack,” I commented. “I thought we could

have it outside.”

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

“Mama!” Clara exclaimed, pointing at her shoes in my hand.

“Why don’t we get these back on her feet, and I’ll show you?”

Picking up the wicker basket and some drinks from the kitchen, we all went out onto the side lawn, freshly mowed and bright green. Ancient trees offered dappled shade, and the border was lined with boxwoods and pansies of every possible color. Before Hope and Clara arrived, I had already laid out the picnic blanket and left Clara’s new red scooter tied up with a white bow.

“We’re here for less than an hour,” Hope commented while shrugging out of her baby backpack, “and you’re already spoiling her.”

“This was where my parents had my swingset set up for me as a kid,” I explained. “I figured this would be a good place for Clara too.”

“Is Santa bringing the swings and slide?” she teased while kneeling on the red gingham blanket.

“Maybe,” I relented. “He’s doing his research first.”

Hope nodded. “Sure, he is.”

The riding toy enthralled Clara. Her feet dug into the grass as she scooted around the perimeter, stopping to look at flowers or notice a bird. She almost got too distracted to notice the orange slices and graham-cracker bears we’d brought along for her to eat.

“Clara, don’t you want some of your snacks?” Hope called to her.

Abandoning the scooter, Clara toddled over to plop down with her milk and treats. She shrugged off her cardigan and tossed it aside, proving she was forceful like her mother. Her body flopped against my leg as she stared up at the oak tree

and the squirrel chittering away. I ran my hand over her soft blonde hair, and she didn't shy away.

"She likes you," Hope told me.

"I like her," I answered, yet the word didn't feel like enough.

Hope, picking up one of the orange slices, asked, "I know you didn't get much of a choice here, but . . ."

"But what?"

"Did you want to be a parent?"

It was a loaded question, but I didn't blame Hope for wondering.

"I've always liked kids," I admittedly honestly. "I have more patience with them than adults, and Clara is far more entertaining. I guess I did, but life kept getting in the way. There was always something else occupying my attention at work, and I never met any woman worth taking that step. Family . . . babies . . . it just didn't seem to ever be on my agenda."

"And now?"

"And now . . . we're here," I replied. "And I'm happy to have you with me, the *both* of you."

Hope smiled. "Good answer."

I felt her head press against me as she handed Clara half an orange slice. As the afternoon shifted to evening, we spent our time together outside, reading board books on the blanket and taking a walk through the garden trail. It was the first time that the world felt quiet in a long time. The sky turned from blue to hazy pink, and we went inside to fix supper. Clara sat attentively at the kitchen table, glued to some cartoon about a tiger in a red sweater.

"It's what replaced Mr. Rogers," Hope explained. "I thought I was going to be one of those no-screen parents, but you gotta admit, it's useful right now."

I chuckled. “I don’t know what parents did before television.”

We stood together at the kitchen peninsula and prepped the food for dinner. With the meatloaf already made by my housekeeper, Hope and I only had to make the roasted broccoli and macaroni and cheese. It was easy for us to find a rhythm and talk as the pasta boiled on the stove and the oven heated up. It felt like life should always be like this, like my world had holes that were finally filled.

“Are you finished grating that cheddar?” Hope asked.

“Almost . . . and done,” I declared.

I turned to see Hope straining the shell pasta before spreading it out in the casserole dish. Not losing her pace, she took the bowl of cheese from my hands before pouring it into her cheese sauce. She bit her bottom lip as she folded in the cheddar and gruyere I’d grated for her before pouring it over the pasta.

“Have you always liked cooking?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I love a good restaurant, but we can’t be helpless in the kitchen, can we?”

“No.” I laughed lightly. “I guess not.”

It wasn’t long after dinner ended that it was time for Clara’s bath and bedtime. Hope hauled the drooping girl upstairs, leaving me to clean up the kitchen. It was nice to have someone in the house. I could hear Hope’s footsteps padding up the back staircase and heading down the hall. The house was so quiet most nights . . . too quiet.

“She’s wiped out,” Hope declared as she found me in the library.

“Was she comfortable?”

She nodded. “Knocked out as soon as her head hit the pillow.”

The Christmas tree glowed in the far corner as Hope sat down on the long tufted couch beside me. The gas fireplace glowed, and Hope, tucking her legs under her body, put her

head on my shoulder. I noticed that her blouse and jeans had been replaced with a pair of lavender pajamas.

“Are you about to fall asleep too?” I wondered.

Hope glanced down at her clothes. “Oh, Clara splashed me when we were washing up. I figured I might as well get ready for bed then myself. I’ll probably head up in a while.”

“You want anything to drink?” I offered.

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around mine. “No, I’m fine as I am.”

Warmth exuded from Hope as her body molded against mine. All week long, anticipation had built up inside my body. Every minute counted down to the moment Hope would return to me, our daughter in tow, but now that the sun had set and the hours grew late, I wasn’t ready for it to be over. I felt like a boy who refused to let Christmas day end. Even as the blue flames danced across Hope’s tired eyes, I only wanted to burn up in her beauty. I longed for her to remain curled up beside me until the end of time.

“I guess I should head upstairs,” Hope murmured.

With a sigh, she pulled away, dragging her bare feet to the floor. The couch felt too cold without her close. I knew I said she could sleep with Clara. I knew I should respect her space, but I couldn’t let her go so quickly.

I reached for her wrist and implored, “Stay with me.”

She didn’t pull away. Instead, Hope turned to watch me kiss her soft palm and the inside of her wrist.

“Why?” she asked quietly.

“Because I want you,” I answered. “I want to wake up beside you again. Don’t tell me you want to sleep alone.”

Once again, the words didn’t feel like enough, but they were all I had to offer. My hands would tell everything I couldn’t. As I stood, I let them slide up the back of her soft shirt and coax her closer to me. That burning blue became all I could see, all I knew as our lips met.

My mouth tingled with the electricity of her touch. I tasted the peppermint toothpaste on her tongue, and I inhaled a soft scent of flowers on her skin. My cheek burned where her palm pressed against it. Though I didn't have the words, my heart couldn't deny the pounding in my chest. My strength failed me, and my breath grew ragged.

Hope was so much more than the hollow loves I'd known before. She made the mundane magical. If she desired, she could drag me to my knees, and I'd let her. Maybe it was reckless for us to fall so quickly. Still, that didn't stop me from wanting. No matter what I did . . . I couldn't let her go.

CHAPTER NINE

HOPE

It should have been harder for Felix to lure me to his bedroom. I'd given myself so many reasons to refuse him, but with one kiss, they all became worthless. My feet willingly followed him back to the main bedroom and that palatial bed of his. Though I thought to shy away in the lamplight, Felix's hands made me forget all the scars of motherhood that lingered on my skin. He didn't care about stretch marks on my hips and stomach. He only wanted me.

He wanted me like a thirsty man who wanted to drown.

Swept up in the current, I found myself swimming these treacherous waters alongside him. Our clothes were lost in the rush. I could only hope the gold of his dark eyes would be a star guiding me to safer shores. Until then, I only had the anchor of his grip against my thighs and the weight of his chest pressed against mine. We twisted and turned together as my teeth dragged against his lower lip.

I found myself straddling his waist, and my loose braid fell apart over both our faces. There was scotch on Felix's lips, and we were both drunk on it and the feel of each other.

"I've been dreaming of this all week long," Felix growled in my ear.

His lips pressed against my collarbone, and I let my head fall back to savor the moment. With my eyes shut tightly, my fingers dug into Felix's unkempt hair. His dark tendrils were the grounding I needed to keep from floating away.

"What did you dream about?" I wondered breathlessly.

"What your mouth would feel like on me," he confessed. "How beautiful you would look naked in my bed, and how amazing it would feel to be inside you again."

"Good thing I'm here to make all your dreams come true."

As he chuckled deeply within his chiseled chest, Felix inclined his mouth to my ear and asked, "Who owns this ass,

darling?”

I grinned sinfully, and his grip massaged my backside.

“Me,” I answered boldly. “But I can rent it to you for the weekend.”

Our laughter was lost in another hungry kiss. As we twisted around together, Felix’s back fell against the cloud-like bed, and I began to let my lips trail away. Felix might have been parched. His lips might have been eager to drink me up, but I was ravenous, hungry for every piece of his Romanesque form. My tongue trailed across his sun-kissed skin while my hands wrapped around the growing length I intended to taste.

“Tell me when you need me,” I encouraged him. “Say the word, and I’ll be yours.”

If Felix planned to offer some banter back, it was lost in a growling groan that escaped from deep within his body. I licked from base to tip, tasting the salt of his skin and feeling how eager Felix was. As my tongue swirled around his tip, I felt his confident hands pushing back my hair. I caught a glimpse of his undoing through my veil of eyelashes. Then, inch by inch, I enveloped him. My lower lip dragged along all the sensitive little nerves on the underside of Felix’s erection, and the feel of it got me hot and bothered.

My body knew this was only the beginning, and it couldn’t wait for the final wave. I could feel the pulse of desire as my mind grew light. All sense and reason were lost in the thrall, and I could only think of my needs and the handsome creature underneath me.

Felix’s tip dripped, and I felt his fingers hold my face back from going down on him again. My eyes fluttered upward once more. Intensity consumed his gaze.

“Let me have you,” he urged me.

My fingers curled around his rigid shaft as I smiled. “As you wish, baby.”

Holding onto him, I rose up to let my ruined hair fall like a cornsilk curtain around our faces. It blocked out the light and the world. The only thing I saw was Felix’s gaze as our bodies

connected. His arms wrapped around my back before finding their home at my hips, and my starving lips settled against the crook of his neck.

“God, you feel so good,” he muttered as I rocked against him.

My teeth nipped at Felix as I felt my clit brush against his burning skin. The way we were tangled together, his mouth was able to find my breasts. I wanted to cry out, but I only allowed myself a small, high moan.

“I could say the same about you,” I murmured back.

My heart wanted to scream out so many things, yet I could only focus on the pleasure. I shut my eyes and rocked my hips in a steady rhythm. My mind grew more distant until I was lost entirely in the rushing current of euphoria. A delirious grin spread across my face as my trembling muscles let go. My pussy clenched around Felix’s shaft as his release flooded my insides.

“Damn,” he cursed before finding my lips again.

“I think we’ll need to get cleaned up,” I teased, my lungs still searching for air. “How big is your shower, baby?”

Felix’s lips curled into a smile. “Big enough for both of us.”

It was late when my damp, naked body tucked itself into Felix’s warm embrace. The bedroom was pitch dark as I breathed in the smell of his pine soap on us both. I listened to his slow, even breathing, yet some shadowed corner of my mind told me to slip away. I should run and hide while I had the chance.

It’s all too good to be true, the voice whispered. If Felix drowns, he’ll drag you down with him. You won’t be able to escape.

In the tumultuous throes of desire, I’d wanted to tell Felix I loved him. My ecstasy tempted me to stay, to tell Felix that I would be his one and only forever. I longed to be the goddess reflected in his gaze. Still, my steely armor kept my heart from Felix.

He could claim my body. He could steal my nights and the air from my lungs, but my heart remained secure in my own hands. It was the only place I could be sure it was safe.

In the morning, I woke up to an empty bed, still warm and lingering with the scent of pine. The cold air nipped at my skin as I shoved back the covers.

“Felix?” I grumbled in a dry, raspy voice.

There was no sign of him. I found my pajamas on the floor and headed down the hall. Clara’s door was half-open. Still half-asleep, I blinked to focus my eyes. My heartbeat quickened.

“Clara?” I called more clearly.

With a flick of a switch, my body came alive, and I heard a faint clapping sound. I knew those two little palms smacking together. As my feet hit the stairs, the smell of blueberries and syrup hit my nose.

“Yay!” Clara cheered.

I wandered through the endless mansion to find Felix in the kitchen, tossing blueberry pancakes in the air for Clara’s amusement. The sight of him cooking without a shirt was a sight for the sorest eyes, not that Clara noticed. Still in her rainbow pajamas, she grinned in excitement. Neither of them seemed to notice me in the doorway.

“Two pancakes for the little lady,” Felix told her, presenting her with a plate. “Can I cut them for you?”

Clara nodded, and Felix began cutting the fluffy pancakes into little pieces. Adding some more berries on top, he drizzled them with maple syrup and shared a grin with my baby girl.

No . . . *our* baby girl.

I went to sleep agonized over my armored heart. Already, those pieces of iron and steel were falling away. Felix Jacobson was finding his way around my defenses too easily.

“Are you going to lean against that door frame all day?” he teased me, not looking up.

“You could have woken me up,” I insisted.

“You looked too peaceful,” he replied. “Besides, Clara and I were able to entertain ourselves. We were even able to get her diaper changed.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You changed her diaper?”

“It’s amazing what you can learn on the internet.”

I tried not to laugh as Felix handed Clara her pink baby fork. She furrowed her tiny brow as she got to work stabbing her breakfast. One blueberry managed to escape her.

“Uh-oh,” she realized, watching it roll across the table.

“I got it,” Felix assured her.

Clara giggled as she watched him eat the lone berry. She picked up another from her plate and offered it to him with her fingers.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the berry from Clara. “There’s coffee in the pot, by the way.”

“Are there pancakes for us too?”

Felix grinned as his golden-brown eyes flitted my way. “By the stove, darling.”

I fixed my coffee and two plates of pancakes for Felix and me. Though I remained silent, I adored his kitchen. I loved the cool marble counters and the dark wood cabinets. I liked the morning sunlight flooding through the French windows and the comfort of the pale green walls. I wanted to spend more mornings there watching Felix love Clara.

“I was thinking,” I remarked while handing Felix his plate. “Maybe I should consider coming to live here . . . part-time.”

It was Felix’s turn to look surprised as he replied, “Part-time?”

“Clara and I have our routines, but maybe we could start with staying here on weekends.”

“And then, you would work your way up to full-time?”

I kissed his cheek and smiled. “We’ll see, won’t we, baby?”

I wasn’t ready to give Felix everything he desired, but I could at least give him a bit of Hope. There, at his kitchen table big enough for six, I tried not to worry about the world beyond this house or its gated grounds. Instead, I set my worries aside and enjoyed the sweetness of the morning.

Fear didn’t have a place in the early morning light. There was no seat for my anxiety at the table. As Clara grinned and Felix returned the expression, I saw that there was only room for happiness.

CHAPTER TEN

FELIX

Cloud Nine wasn't high enough for me. After my weekend with Hope and Clara, my shoulders were light, and my smile felt brighter than the Monday morning sky. It was cloudless perfection, just like Hope's eyes as she kissed me goodbye and promised to call me.

She was finally within arm's reach. All those years of wondering had culminated into one quiet weekend and the vow for more, but I was starting to wonder who needed whom. I had been living over three acres and sixteen thousand square feet. For years, my family home was nothing more than a hollow palace, yet with Clara, it had life again.

The memory alone made me feel stronger, invincible even. I could hit a punching bag a million times, but that would never give me the resilience Clara's happiness offered. For her, I could do anything.

I wondered if the people on the elevator knew why a smug grin was plastered on my face.

The bell chimed, and I stepped off onto the top floor. My feet knew the way to my corner office, passing familiar faces as I went. The smells of coffee, fresh paper, and lemon dusting cleaner mingled together. I breathed it in with a heavy inhale. It was a usual Monday morning, yet I could feel it was going to be different.

Everything had changed for me. My world was turning on its axis, and I liked it.

"Good morning, Mr. Jacobson," Kelly chimed as I stepped through the door. "I just made a fresh pot of coffee with those beans you like. Shall I fix you a cup?"

Kelly's ginger hair was a bright spot in the gray and white waiting room. As I passed through the glass wall, I stopped by her desk and noticed the much larger desk behind her was empty. Noah hadn't arrived yet.

“Yes, thank you,” I told her. “Any messages since Friday morning?”

I’d left early that afternoon to oversee the holiday decorations, using Hope’s employer for the first time. Hope had made the suggestion, and she was right. My old decorators were gouging me in price. Boxwood wreaths cost half of what I thought.

“Um, sir?”

I blinked and realized I wasn’t listening to anything Kelly said.

“Forgive me. I’m a little distracted this morning,” I apologized. “What were you saying?”

Kelly laughed with a toothy grin. “Oh, that’s okay, Mr. Jacobson. I, um, was just saying that one of the board members came in here disgruntled on Friday after you left, so I pretended to discuss the matter with you. I have some notes of his complaint for you to look over, and he’ll be expecting a face-to-face appointment in the coming weeks.”

“Well, that’s going to be hard, especially with the holidays . . .” I mumbled before my voice trailed off.

I had tried not to agonize over the memory. It caused me too much pain when I recalled Hope’s teary eyes in the library. My bones twisted when I considered the time I’d lost with her and Clara, but a line from her story echoed in my mind.

“Some redheaded woman went into your office, and when she came out . . . she told me you didn’t want to be disturbed. She asked me to leave.”

Some redheaded woman.

My pulse quickened. Adrenaline and realization coursed through me.

“Kelly . . . do you remember a pregnant woman coming here last year?” I asked, my tone growing dark and grave. “It would have been in the spring.”

Her smile faltered, and she pushed up the brass metal glasses circling her nervous eyes. I watched as she swallowed

hard. Kelly told me everything without saying a word, causing bile to rise in my throat.

“That, um, that was a long time ago, sir. Maybe I can get you coffee first, and then I’ll remember.”

“No,” I asserted. “You’re going to tell me right now—yes or no? I’ll give you a hint too. I wasn’t in my office, and some redheaded woman lied about it.”

There was no other ginger on the whole floor, let alone in my office. Kelly cowered in her seat like the mousy person she was. Her pale hands wrung together over the glass desk as she bit her chapped lip.

I thought she was always a smart young woman, but it seemed we were both fools.

Her voice grew anxious. “Maybe, but how—”

“Tell me now,” I commanded her.

“I . . . I remember some young woman coming in here with, um, some papers from a women’s health clinic. She said she wanted to see you, to explain, but she—she had to be lying! Women lie all the time!”

“Like you, Kelly?” I growled.

Tossing my briefcase in a nearby armchair, I planted my hands on her desk and stared Kelly down. She shrank down in her swiveling chair. I glared at her, seeing the truth for the first time.

It was Kelly who’d sent Hope away.

She wounded Hope’s pride and planted the seed of doubt in Hope’s heart.

It was Kelly’s fault I’d lost so much time with Clara.

“Sir, you have to know that women have always tried to take advantage of you,” she swore with a quivering lip. “I—I only wanted to protect you! It’s my job, and I—”

I cut her off. “You insulted a pregnant woman. You shamed her, sent her out of my office embarrassed, and you

kept the incident from me. Did you even tell Noah? Did you tell anyone?"

"No." Kelly trembled, her face turning beet red.

"Did you ever consider that she was telling the truth?"

She flinched. "No, sir."

"Don't lie to me, Miss Cohen," I growled back.

Shame flashed across her face. Looking at the pain in her eyes, it was as if I'd whipped her, but my sympathy was gone. Tears filled her eyes. Kelly was using her last resort—begging.

"Please forgive me, Mr. Jacobson!" she wailed. "I didn't think it would matter! Please, please, I never meant to upset you!"

I heard a voice behind me wonder, "Felix, what's going on?"

It was Noah, but I wasn't looking away from Kelly.

"I don't care what you meant," I fired back. "You're fired, Miss Cohen. You have fifteen minutes to get the hell out of this office before security forces you out."

"Wait!" Noah yelled. "What?"

"Please!" Kelly cried, her hand latching around my wrist. "I only did it because I care! Don't fire me!"

"Too fucking late," I growled before picking up my suitcase and storming into my office.

Even though I slammed the door, Noah didn't hesitate to follow right behind me. I could hear Kelly crying as the frosted glass door opened and shut. I dropped my bag on the gray sofa backed up to the white wall. My eyes glared out the window.

Nothing about the city view offered me solace. I wanted to go back to Clara's head leaning against my leg. I ached for the feeling of Hope's skin against mine and her body curled up against me. So many times, I'd told myself Hope needed me, but I was wrong.

I needed her.

“What the hell is going on, Felix?” Noah implored, frustrated and confused.

“You saw what happened,” I answered flatly. “I just fired Kelly. She has twelve minutes to leave this office.”

“You can’t just fire her without notice.”

I scoffed. “It’s my company, Noah, and I have the free will to do whatever I want. Write her a recommendation letter. Send her home with as much severance pay as you want, two weeks’ worth . . . two months’. I just never want to look at her face again. I can’t stand to see her.”

“I thought you liked Kelly,” Noah wondered, running a hand over his neat blond hair. “I mean, I’m pretty sure she liked you a lot more, but you were always complimentary of her work. She’s always been loyal.”

“Too loyal,” I muttered. “That’s the problem.”

I turned to see Noah pacing in front of my long, black desk, agonizing on how the morning was falling apart so quickly. Two female voices echoed outside the office door.

“Something’s not adding up,” Noah grumbled. “What don’t I know?”

I sighed. I hadn’t told Noah. I hadn’t told anyone, but if I was going to have Hope in my life, people needed to know.

Hell, I probably needed to tell my mother too. Learning she was a grandmother might make her whole damn holiday season.

“Look, it’s a long story, but—”

A knock at the door stopped me short. Three taps on the frosted glass wall, and the silver doorknob turned. If the charcoal carpeting hadn’t muffled the click of her heels, I would’ve known the devil herself had arrived.

She looked as sweet as ever, all smiles and bouncy brown hair. The sleek bob curved around her rosy cheeks, but it was all hollow, an act of a play I never wanted to see. In Shelby

Warburton's violet eyes, there was nothing but vanity and self-obsession. All the sugar she laid over her words rotted her heart to its core.

"My, my," Shelby cooed. "What's happened here? The poor little secretary outside is crying!"

"Noah, go take care of Miss Cohen," I instructed him. "I'll deal with Miss Warburton."

He gave a quick nod and slipped out behind her. Shelby, sauntering closer, smiled in her plaid mini-dress, letting its short skirt ride up as she propped against the desktop. She set down her little pink purse and beamed my way.

"It's good to see you, Felix," she declared, her voice soft and saccharine. "Have you been getting my messages?"

She crossed her legs and waited for me to come closer, but I remained by the window. Even from there, I realized how small she was. Shelby was barely five-foot-three. My six-foot frame always dwarfed her, yet her ostentatious personality consumed the entire office.

"You mean how you've been talking about me every chance you get with the press?"

She giggled. "Oh, you know I'm not one to be discreet. I want what I want. I just can't help myself."

"I know," I replied.

I knew it all too well.

"So?"

"So what?" I echoed back.

She cooed again, "Aren't you going to ask me why I'm here? Don't you want to know what I want?"

Honestly, I didn't. I wanted her to leave.

I sighed. "What do you want now, Shelby?"

"I want *you*, Felix," she declared, her eyelashes fluttering.

My face contorted in shock. "What?"

She laughed again like a child, like this was all just a fun game. Nobody's lives were being affected. My board members weren't pissed about the bad press the company was receiving. No, consequences be damned, Shelby wanted to play cat and mouse with me. As she smiled, her eyes looked all too cat-like for my taste. She was ready to grab me by the tail and swallow me up.

But I wasn't a mouse. Shelby couldn't take hold of me so easily.

"I've just been trying to get your attention," she explained in a honeyed voice.

Sliding off the desk, she sashayed her way over to me, reaching for my pale blue tie and taking it in her manicured hands. My heart was still unsteady from the argument with Kelly. My mind remained with Hope and our daughter.

"No, Shelby," I instantly refused. "This isn't happening. We're done."

I had seen what my life could be. It could be nights filled with satisfaction and mornings of contentment. It could be pancakes, coffee-flavored kisses, and my hands wrapping around Hope's curves in the shower. Shelby Warburton could never offer me such happiness.

"Don't act like you don't want me back," Shelby teased, but it came out more like a whine.

"I don't," I asserted.

Pushing her away, I found it funny to watch her real colors show. I'd seen it one too many times back when we were dating, back when I'd refuse her. She would stomp her foot in front of the nearest camera. She was always willing to look wounded, too happy to be the victim.

"You're kidding," she swore.

I shook my head. "No, I'm not. I'm done with your games, and I've moved on to greener pastures."

"Moved on?" she repeated in a squeal. "You can't just move on from me! You're supposed to be heartbroken. You're

supposed to be upset that I've been talking about us! You were going to get all, all huffy, and I would get you to calm down."

"With sex?" I mused.

Her annoyed expression said everything Shelby wouldn't. Her lips pursed together before she scowled.

"Don't mock me, Felix," she fumed. "I can't believe you could get over me so easily."

"You were happy getting under someone else. What's his name again? Harry? Henry?"

"Harvey," she corrected in a huff.

"From what I was told, you and that assistant director got along just fine, and if you ever want to work on a J. Brothers production again, you *will* walk out that door right now."

Shelby's acting career was probably the only leverage I had against her, but it was all I needed. Her eyes looked ready to protest. Her mouth twitched, yet she muffled back a scream. Hating to lose, Shelby flailed as she snatched up her purse and intentionally knocked over some things on my desk. Her tantrum echoed down the office hall.

"I can't believe him!" I heard her shriek elsewhere.

Noah, without Kelly, looked haggard as he found me again.

"Kelly's gone home with a month's pay and a recommendation from me, not you," he explained. "Do you mind telling me what all this is about?"

"I know it's early," I sighed.

Noah reached into the hidden compartment of the wood-paneled wall and pulled out a bottle of cognac and amaretto. He already knew what was about to happen.

"I'll spike the coffee while you clean up your desk," he declared. "And I'll be sure to tell your nine-thirty we'll be late. This feels like it's going to be a long story."

"You're right," I agreed.

I wanted today to be the end of the story. I had Hope and Clara in my life. The traitorous assistant was sent off to feel the consequences of her egregious actions, and Shelby was sent packing. Everything should have been tied up with a neat bow.

Still, worry had my stomach in knots. This wasn't going to be the end of it, and while happiness was still in my grasp, nothing about it was secure. One wrong move could send Hope running again.

I knew this Monday morning felt different when I walked into the office. I never imagined it was because my life was about to go to hell in Shelby's designer handbag.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HOPE

“Do you have those client feedback reports, Forest?” I called across the communal office.

Scheduling the company’s digital content, I liked seeing that clients responded to us. It helped me get a better idea of what attracted people to the interior decorating business in the first place. Adjusting his chunky black glasses, Forest leaned away from his double computer screens.

“They should be in your inbox any second now,” he answered.

My laptop pinged, and I smiled at the sound. I checked my phone to see that Inez had messaged me as I let the document load. Natalie had given her the nanny job, and it was apparently going well.

The twins are cute, she gushed. Thanks again for helping me get this job! I really owe you one.

Everything in my life felt like it was falling into place. It wasn’t perfect, but my world was shining through rose-colored glass. It was a sight to behold.

“What’s up with you, Hope?” Sarah, the office administrator, asked.

Standing in her uniform black, Sarah stirred her coffee with curious eyes and a knowing smirk. I tried to brush it off.

“Nothing, I’m just having a good week,” I swore adamantly. “Can’t a gal just enjoy herself?”

“No,” Forest declared from across the room. “On Monday, you had a definite post-sex afterglow.”

I let out a dry laugh. “What does your gay ass know about a woman’s afterglow?”

Forest stood up from his desk and declared, “Plenty!”

Sarah tried not to laugh too hard. Leaning against my desk, she leaned closer, and Forest joined her. We were the only

ones around at the moment. Natalie was off somewhere putting out fires, and the three junior decorators were all out at project sites. Nobody else was around to hear me spill my guts. Still, I wasn't ready to share my happiness.

"Look, I'll just say that I've reconnected with Clara's dad, and it's going well," I confessed.

I thought that bone would be enough for them to gnaw, but Forest only looked more eager. Sarah flipped her sleek black ponytail over her shoulder and gasped.

"OMG," she exclaimed. "You two are fooling around. Are you trying to give Clara a sibling?"

"Hell, no." I laughed. "I take shots for that now, but I've said too much already. He and I are trying to keep things under wraps while we sort it out. I don't need all of Los Angeles knowing my business."

"Why would they care?" Sarah wondered.

"Because Hope is the heiress to a golden software king," Forest explained jokingly. "One day, she'll inherit the tech kingdom built by Yfir's rideshare and on-demand delivery services. Everybody loves rich-people drama. That's why there are so many reality shows about housewives!"

"Sure," I muttered, knowing that wasn't the real reason.

Sarah relented with a shrug. "I guess so."

"Look, I'm gonna go grab some lunch," Forest decided. "I was thinking about the Korean fusion place down the street. Can I get you two anything?"

"The one with the bulgogi wrap? Sarah asked.

"One in the same."

"I'll pay you back if you grab me one of those and an iced green tea."

"Hope, precious," Forest wondered, "can I get you anything?"

"Um, I guess I did forget to bring my lunch," I realized. "Would you grab me a veggie bibimbap bowl?"

It took me two tries to get the name out, but Forest agreed with a smile. It was just like any other Wednesday at the office. I planned to edit some photos for social media until Forest got back with lunch, and then, we all would sit in the break room and talk about holiday plans or how much we wanted to ditch work and get manicures.

Forest said that a lot.

As I pulled up the photo file from our cloud system, I heard Sarah's phone ring. She quickly hurried over to the front desk to answer.

"Hello, Crawford Designs, Sarah Lewis speaking," she greeted in a polite tone. "How may I help you?"

She was quiet for a moment before I heard her call out.

"Hope, there's a reporter who wants to speak with you about, um, a Jacobson?"

My eyes shot up. Quickly, I hurried toward her. My heartbeat quickened with every step.

Had Felix said something? Was there something he forgot to mention during our phone call the night before? If he was looking to deal with the press, it didn't seem like that would just slip his mind.

"Did you say *Jacobson*?" I pressed Sarah.

She looked up from her seat at the L-shaped desk. I didn't like the look on her ebony face.

"Yeah," she answered. "His website is hoping you'll give them an exclusive statement."

Behind me, I heard my phone chime, but I didn't think it was Inez or Forest texting about my lunch order. Something was wrong . . . very, *very* wrong. Still, I knew my press training. My dad taught me how to handle the little weasels if they dared to show up on our doorstep. I watched as people bombarded him over the sale of his company, yet it was far different when the ravenous hordes were hurtling in my direction.

“Tell them I’m not making any statements,” I stated quickly.

My phone buzzed again and again. With a huff, I ran back to my desk to see Clara’s nanny, Maria, was calling for a third time.

“Maria?” I greeted her, not hiding my worry.

“Oh, Hope, sweetheart!” she fretted. “I just got back from a walk with Clara, and there were these photographers outside your building! They started asking if this was the Jacobson baby! I didn’t know what to do!”

I was used to Maria calling me sweetheart. As a younger woman, she was my nanny, but I wasn’t used to hearing her so out of sorts. Maria Goldberg had nerves of steel and a no-nonsense personality to match. I imagined her like a Jewish Mary Poppins when I was small.

“Maria, did you tell them anything?” I pressed her.

“No, I just beat them with my hat for bothering me!” Maria insisted. “Clara was getting upset, and I didn’t know what they were talking about!”

I did. Somehow, the word was out that Felix Jacobson had a secret child. They knew I was the mother, but they wanted to know how, why, and every other sordid little detail that they could get. Not second-guessing myself, I began packing up my desk.

“Listen, Maria,” I instructed her, “I am going to give you an address and schedule you and Clara a Yfir ride to pick you up in an hour. In that time, I want to pack up everything you can for Clara, and if you get the chance, throw some clothes in a bag for me. If you can’t get to that, it’s okay. Focus on Clara first.”

“Right,” she agreed, her steel returning.

“It will be easier to explain in person. I’m going to meet you at the address. Tell nobody where you’re going. Don’t acknowledge the rats outside. Lie, hit them with your hat, do whatever you want, just don’t let them know where you’re going. When you get to the address, ask for Frieda at the gate.

She's the housekeeper. Tell her I sent you. She might even know what's going on."

"Okay, Hope, but will you be okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm leaving the office right now."

"Take care of yourself, sweetheart."

"And you take care of Clara."

We hurried our goodbyes, and I began throwing everything I could into my tote bag. If they knew to call me here, then it wouldn't be long before reporters started scurrying around the office. I didn't need to give them a reason to disrupt Natalie's business.

"Um, Hope?" Sarah said.

"What?"

"I think I know what's happening . . ."

Sarah handed me her phone with a regretful look, and I began scrolling through endless clickbait titles and scathing articles.

Felix Jacobson's Secret Family: What we know so far

Shelby Warburton Heartbroken Over Affair. Did Secret Baby Doom Relationship?

Malibu Heiress the Latest Love in J. Brothers' Scandal

The articles didn't stop, yet they all painted a similar story. I was a mistress and a self-serving heiress. Felix was a wealthy horndog too powerful to be touched, and poor Shelby Warburton was the blameless victim who fell prey to a doomed romance.

I didn't care much about her, but I knew a rat when I saw it. Looking at her glossy image from some red carpet event, I could have forced my fist through the screen and punched her whitened teeth out. I knew she had to be the one to splash my name across tabloid blogs.

The only silver lining is that nobody knew Clara's name. They just knew some faceless baby existed. However, that

didn't stop them from raking my name across the coals. It didn't keep people from hunting down photos of me with my father at charity events. Felix could ruin these publications in a second, but I was more vulnerable, easier prey.

“Oh, shit, *Dad.*”

In any other instance, I would have gone running to him and begged forgiveness, but he was the least of my worries. He wasn't even the man I wanted to help Clara and me.

“Hello?” Natalie called as she walked in the back door. “What's going on? Hope, why are you crying?”

I hadn't realized there were hot tears on my cheeks. I hadn't felt Sarah take my trembling hand. In so many ways, I didn't care about myself. I just feared how Clara was going to be hurt by all this.

“Hope's under fire,” Sarah explained for me. “It seems Clara's dad has a hateful ex, and . . . it's getting ugly.”

I held out the phone for Natalie to take. Natalie's green eyes narrowed as she brushed the short brunette waves from her face. Armored in her violet pantsuit, she wasn't the kind of woman to suffer fools. She would castrate a man before letting him see her cry, and she, like any good mother bear, was fiercely protective of her people.

“This is outrageous,” she hissed. “This is absolute slander! Hope, do you need a lawyer? I can get you one right now!”

“Dad has plenty,” I sighed, my voice weak. “I handle all of my business through them.”

Natalie's burgundy lips pouted with empathy. “Oh, Hope, I'm so sorry this is happening. Go home, and if you need something, let me know.”

“I . . . I'm worried the reporters will come here.”

Sarah added, “One just called.”

“Then, you can work remotely until everything's settled down,” Natalie agreed. “Sarah, if another calls, you know what to do.”

She nodded. “Right, Boss.”

It was supposed to be two more nights until I kissed Felix again. We’d made our plans for Friday night, never imagining that life would be throwing us back together. In my haste, I refused to think about what might have been if we’d never reunited or if Felix had been there that day in the office.

None of it mattered. As I hustled out to my car, all I could think about was Clara. All I wanted was to get back to my baby girl and Felix.

“He’ll take care of us,” I muttered as the engine hummed to life. “He’ll know what to do.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

FELIX

“Thank you for coming,” I declared as I shook the man’s thin hand. “Cripps Technologies has come a long way, and I’m glad our studios can be a part of the new chapter.”

The CEO of the long-time computer company smiled. “I think this new streaming service will be a benefit to us both. We already have several projects lined up with some major names—Hanks, Anniston, *Denzel*.”

“If you send over the proposals, I’ll personally guarantee that they’re greenlighted,” I assured him. “I will tell my assistant to be on the lookout for them.”

Of course, Kelly would have been the one to handle those emails, letting Noah peruse the projects before forwarding them to me. Noah had brought in a temp Tuesday morning, but I could already feel our system deteriorating. Still, our new company partners didn’t need to know that. All I had to do was smile and promise to have dinner the next time I visited San Jose.

We were all smiles as I escorted them to the elevator, but mine faltered when a pair of furious hazel eyes caught mine. Jasper Hayes stepped off the elevator in a rage.

“We need to talk,” he snarled like a rabid dog.

The Cripps CEO raised his white eyebrows. I plastered on a smile.

“Forgive me. This is a personal matter I must discuss,” I told him and his companions. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

I didn’t let my features fall until the silver doors shut. I adjusted my navy jacket with a weary exhale and turned back to Jasper. My gut told me why he was here, but I didn’t want to believe it.

“I could fucking hit you right now,” Jasper seethed.

“If you’re going to hit me, wait until we get to my office,” I insisted. “I don’t want to stain the lobby’s carpets.”

Anger rolled off him in waves, but Jasper followed me down the hall. Shocked glances caught sight of him and quickly averted their eyes. Not that it mattered, but I still wondered what people would say about this moment. I was curious what rumors would spread around the building, but right then, the only person I concerned myself with was Jasper Hayes.

“Noah,” I called as we walked through the private sitting room. “Let Gregson know I’m going to be late for our lunch meeting.”

I would have told the temp, but she was conspicuously absent. She must have run off to lunch at the first possible second. With a nod from Noah, I let Jasper into my office and let my composure fall.

“Now,” I declared with an exhale. “Tell me what’s got you so angry, Jasper.”

I had my suspicions, but it was better to let him vent first. His dark blond hair grew wilder as he paced. Standing beside my desk, I gave Jasper a wide berth to flail and fume.

“You arrogant son of a bitch,” he began to rant. “You brought me to your house for that damn party, and you lied like the two-faced bastard you are! How dare you take advantage of Hope! You let her fend for herself all these years! You abandoned your daughter! I don’t give a damn what the press is saying! You haven’t been in Clara’s life at all!”

“Press?” I echoed.

“Are you an idiot?” he fired back. “The press who have been splashing my daughter’s name across the internet next to that whiny little actress you dated last summer!”

“I’ve been negotiating with the heads of Cripps for the last hour,” I explained. “Before that, I was in wall-to-wall debriefs prepping for the meeting. If something’s happened this morning, I haven’t been told about it.”

“Then look at your fucking phone! I’m sure you’re getting a million emails about it.”

He wasn't wrong. Heading to my desk, I glanced at my inbox to see press inquiries flood in with each passing second. Board members and extended family added their own dash of bombarding questions. It took ten seconds and one internet search to see why Jasper had stormed down to my office.

I knew Shelby was vain. I never realized she was vindictive too. That heart of hers really had rotted out.

"Dammit," I cursed under my breath. "Jasper, this had nothing to do with me."

"What? You're going to deny that Clara is your daughter now?"

I looked up and stared at Jasper, blinded by the blood-red anger in his eyes. My expression remained stony, yet my heart went elsewhere. I needed to know where Hope was. I needed to get her somewhere unreachable before something bad happened.

"That's not what I meant," I answered flatly. "Jasper, we've known each other for years now. If you ever gave a damn about our friendship, you'll sit down and let me get you some water."

"I don't want water."

"Then, you'll at least listen."

He cut his jaw, debating his options silently. With a grumbling huff, Jasper threw himself down on the black leather chair and stared back at me. His green and gold eyes demanded answers.

"First, have you talked to Hope?" I asked.

"She won't answer her phone," he answered begrudgingly. "She's driving."

"I don't know why or what happened back then. I met Hope two Decembers ago at a hotel bar. I heard nothing from her until that charity event at my home. I didn't know Clara existed until that party, and ever since I learned about her, I've been doing my fucking best to make up for lost time."

Jasper lowered his volume, but he still looked outraged. “That’s all you have to say for yourself?”

“This story is more Hope’s than mine. You deserve to hear it from her.”

“She never once tried to contact you?”

Damn, I had hoped Jasper wouldn’t ask that question.

“She did,” I confessed with a sigh. “Hope told me she came here, and one of my assistants lied to her and sent Hope away. The woman has been fired, but I will probably live with regret over that situation until the day I die.”

Jasper let out a heavy exhale, and I watched his shoulders slump forward. He didn’t talk for a long moment. As silence lingered, I went and got two glasses of sparkling water for us both.

“Thanks,” he mumbled.

“I’m sorry for keeping this from you,” I added. “I’ve always considered you a friend.”

He sighed again and nodded. All the stress was leaving his body with every labored breath. The temperature in the room cooled.

“After Hope’s mother died, I learned how hard it was to be a single parent,” he explained, staring down into his water glass. “I never wanted that for Hope. She’s an adult now. I do my best to respect her decisions, but it hurt me when she struggled. It doesn’t matter how much money you have. No amount of wealth can stop the worrying. You can’t pay off a newborn to keep it from crying in the middle of the night. I love Clara, but I hated the man who left her alone, who left Hope alone.”

“I get it,” I assured him. “I would want to punch me too.”

Jasper let out one wry laugh before shaking his head. “When I saw that first article saying it was you, I was shocked, Felix. It hurt me because I never suspected you to be that kind of man.”

“I’m not. I would never have let any of this happen if I’d known.”

He took one long gulp from his glass and said, “I believe you.”

“So, how are we going to deal with the media circus?”

“I’ve already called my attorney who represents Hope, and I’m sure you have an army of your own.”

“Noah will probably have them on the line any moment now.”

Jasper nodded. “Mine are already drawing papers for libel lawsuits. They’ll be served in the next forty-eight hours.”

“That slow, huh?”

He chuckled. “Don’t try to make me laugh, Felix. I’m not in the mood.”

Just then, my phone rang on my desk. Hope’s name was scrolling across the screen.

“Hope?” I greeted her.

Jasper’s ears perked up. He watched as I listened to Hope.

“I’m at your house,” she explained. “Clara and her nanny are here. Your housekeeper let us inside.”

“She’s at my place,” I told Jasper quickly.

Relief washed over him. “They’re okay, then.”

Hope, confused, asked, “Who are you talking to?”

“Your father.”

“Oh, no . . .”

“It’s alright,” I assured her. “Look, I’m going to wrap up here. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“You don’t have to rush home,” she insisted. “Frieda and Maria are happy to keep Clara occupied.”

“What about you?”

“I . . . I’m okay.”

“Tell Frieda I’ll be home soon.”

I wanted to say more, but not with Jasper listening. As we said our goodbyes, I looked back to Jasper with an empty glass in his hand.

“I know it will be hard,” I told him, “but I need you to trust me, Jasper. We don’t need to waste our energy fighting now.”

“You’re right,” he reluctantly agreed. “Look, I’ll tell my legal team to reach out to yours, and you . . . you look out for Hope.”

“I’ll do my best,” I promised him.

“You’d better.”

He grumbled as he stood, but Jasper extended his hand to me. We shook on it before I went out to drag Noah into my office. With Jasper gone, I got to work putting out the worst of the flames and rescheduling the rest of my workday. I rushed home as soon as I could, finding that Clara’s nanny and my housekeeper were hosting a tea party for the girl in our yellow parlor.

“Hi!” Clara exclaimed, holding up her teacup.

I smiled. “Hey, Clara. Are you having a party?”

Her little hands reached up for me, wrapping around my neck as soon as they could. Those tiny fingers soothed my frazzled nerves.

“Where’s Hope?”

Frieda set down her teacup and explained, “We fed her a sandwich and sent her upstairs to lie down.”

“Will you stay with these ladies, Clara?” I asked.

Putting her back down on the floral couch, I went upstairs to find my bedroom door cracked. Hope’s heels were abandoned on the floor, but she was curled up on the bed, still wearing her black work dress. She didn’t move as I sat down on the bed beside her. The bright blue of her eyes looked wild, bloodshot, and pained.

“I don’t care what they write about me,” she swore, her voice fragile. “I don’t care what people say. I just . . . I don’t want this hurting Clara. I don’t want her to find this all one day and think . . .”

Hope’s words were lost as she buried her face in the pillow. My hands brushed through her fair, silky hair all scattered across the pillow. The dried tears on her cheeks felt like knives in my chest. Selfishly, I needed to make her feel better. Hope’s happiness was tethered to mine, and I couldn’t rest easily until her smile returned.

“You once told me you like uninterrupted baths,” I reminded her softly.

She rolled over to look at me. “It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“So, Clara has somebody to watch her.”

I kissed her tear-stained cheek as Hope nodded. Slowly, she undid her black skirt and pulled off the camisole. Her mourning period ended as I coaxed her body into the oversized tub fragrant with herbal salts. Shades of silver, soft green, and white surrounded us as I dimmed the overhead lights.

Hope pulled her hair up into a bun as she asked, “Won’t you join me?”

I was content just perching on the edge of the tub, but I smiled.

“If that’s what you want.”

She nodded, balling herself up in the warm water to make space for me. We fit easily together. Hope leaned into my chest, her head on my shoulder. We let the outside world and all its woes melt away in the quiet.

“I don’t think I’ve seen a woman make tears look so attractive,” I offered with a bit of levity.

“Don’t make me smile, Felix,” she replied softly. “I’m not in the mood.”

It was funny how alike Hope and Jasper were.

“Then, what are you in the mood for?”

A smile toyed at the corners of her lips. “You.”

My lips pressed against Hope’s temple and the corner of her left eye. As my arms wrapped around her under the water, her body accommodated my touch. Her soft flesh molded against my grip, moving with ease as my hand glided upward to cup her breasts.

“Is this what you had in mind?” I wondered softly.

She sighed into the sensation. “Something like that.”

Hope’s head tilted, and my teeth grazed against her ear. Her nipples reacted. Her spine twisted, but I used my grip to brace Hope’s body against mine. I pulled her tighter into my chest as my right hand wandered back down into the water to the aching place between her legs.

“Am I hot or cold?” I teased.

“Hot,” she swore. “Burning hot.”

Her pain was my pain. Her pleasure was my pleasure. With every gentle stroke, I could coax the breathless gasps from her lips. My two fingers traced her two velvety folds before massaging soft circles around her clit. The rise and fall of her full chest grew more ragged.

“I know you can take care of yourself, darling,” I murmured in her ear. “But . . . isn’t it nicer to have someone take care of you?”

“Yes,” she answered breathlessly.

I let my fingers slip inside her, forcing her spine to arch and her head to fall back against me. Reaching for her chin, I tilted her head in my direction. Hope’s soft moan was lost in a kiss. She sank deeper into my embrace, melting in the heat of the moment. Then, a flourish of euphoria swelled in her body. I felt it vibrate through her skin as the climax consumed her. Hope lost the will to kiss me back, but that didn’t stop my lips from pressing against the corners of her mouth, her jaw, and her ear.

“Felix,” she whispered in a gasping breath.

“I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

We stayed wrapped up together until the water became too cool to enjoy. Her fingers like pale raisins, Hope didn’t protest when I encouraged her to pull on one of her satin slippers and crawl under the bedcovers. I pulled on some sweatpants and a fresh T-shirt, but I didn’t slide in beside her.

“What about you?” she asked.

I drew the heavy blinds and assured her, “I’m going to relieve Frieda and Maria, spend some time with Clara, and when you wake up, there will be dinner waiting for you.”

“But . . . will you stay here until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.”

Over the comforter, I lay down facing Hope. She looked more tired than she cared to admit, but I said nothing. I just studied her relaxed and lovely features, realizing that my fixation with Hope Hayes was more than her beauty or her status as Clara’s mother.

She wasn’t an object to be claimed. No, she was a force of nature meant to be appreciated and adored. Hope was meant to be loved, body and soul, and I was the lucky fool who caught her like lightning in a bottle. Her burning blue eyes held me until her eyelids fluttered shut as I kissed her forehead.

“I love you, Hope,” I whispered against her skin.

Somewhere between dreams and reality, Hope smiled. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HOPE

Hours slipped into days. New patterns became familiar. I spent my mornings working out of Felix's home office and afternoons with Clara. In the evening, we would bake holiday cookies and cut out paper ornaments for the tree Felix brought home for Clara, sparkling white and delightfully absurd. It shined in the corner of her bedroom as she slept, and life became just as easy.

I'd wasted so much heartache worrying over this possibility. Insecurity told me it wouldn't work and that Felix would tire of me. Now, I found it hard to leave. Lawyers had choked every viper hidden in the grass. Shelby had been legally strongarmed into recanting and publicly apologizing to Felix and me. Her reputation was forever tarnished, and I was free to go back home to Santa Monica.

Still, I stayed.

"Clara's really thriving here," I told Inez over the phone. "She's having a ball picking out stuff for her new room with Felix."

"He's letting her pick out the furniture?" Inez laughed lightly at the thought.

I watched where she played in her new sandbox shaped like a ship. Under the shade of a red-striped sail, Clara entertained herself with a plastic shovel and pail while I let my toes wriggle in the fresh white sand.

"It's more like Felix asks which rocking horse Santa should bring," I explained. "I was a little bothered by it at first. I don't want him setting a bad precedent."

"He's just making up for lost time," my friend remarked.

"Yeah, that's what I realized," I agreed. "He'll calm down after a while. Speaking of men in our lives, how are things going with Cole Crawford?"

Inez laughed at the thought. When I recommended her for my boss's nanny job, I never imagined Inez would have a history with Natalie's brother, an actor known for his magnetic charm and playing a teenage heartthrob on-screen. She told Grace and me all about it over brunch the Sunday before, leaving us both pleasantly surprised.

Grace also assured me that Dad was on better terms with my choices. He was still grumbling about how my life with Felix unfolded, but we were happy. Clara was doing well. At the end of the day, there wasn't much to be angry over.

I just had to learn to be okay with contentment. Paranoia told me this couldn't be real, that I should pinch myself and wake up, but I was learning to be comfortable in my life in Beverly Hills. I told myself each day that it wasn't bad to be protected and adored. After all that worrying, I just felt like a hypocritical fool.

I knew I needed to tell Felix what I was thinking. I only hoped his grin wouldn't be too smug when he heard my proposal. As I got off the phone with Inez and arrived, Clara and I went inside to find Felix arriving home. He set his briefcase down and shrugged out of his brown suit's jacket.

"Da-dee!" Clara chimed at the sight of him.

We were still perfecting the pronunciation, but that didn't stop Felix from smiling at the word. She squirmed down from my arms to close the distance between them. Toddling over with a dimpled grin, Clara fastened her arms around his pants leg.

"How was work?" I asked Felix, kissing his stubbled cheek.

"Alright," he answered. "Yours?"

"Good. That tennis court building of yours makes a wonderful office. Maybe you should rent it out to Crawford Designs."

"Whatever you want, darling," he replied with a joking grin. "You draft up the papers and I'll sign them."

"How about dinner first?"

Frieda and I worked together to stock the fridge with stuff other than a bachelor's microwave meals. The catering group Felix used still made some dishes, but they were about to lose a lot of business from their best customer. Instead, I baked a salmon fillet that had the kitchen smelling of garlic and lemon. I cooked veggie fried rice and some Chinese dumplings from frozen packets, but nobody seemed to care as we ate at the kitchen table.

There was a massive muraled dining room just behind the swinging door. I wondered if we would ever use it. As I took a bite of my pan-fried potsticker, I imagined it would be nice for Christmas or a New Year's Eve dinner.

"I'm supposed to go to New Jersey for New Year's," I remembered aloud.

Felix's golden-brown eyes met mine with interest. "Is there a specific reason?"

"My mom's sisters and family all live there," I explained. "My grandparents still live in the same house in Montclair. I try to go there twice a year, but . . . I don't think they would mind if I brought a friend?"

Feigning ignorance, Felix asked, "Like Grace?"

"No," I grumbled, rolling my eyes. "Like you."

"I guess I could come if you would agree to visit my mother in Napa for my birthday."

Between us, Clara picked up a pea from her fried rice and shoved it in her mouth. She hardly noticed anything but her meal, especially not the smile I offered her father.

"I think we could make that work," I agreed. "Also, I was thinking about something else too."

"What would that be?"

I took a long sip from my water glass. My palms grew clammy, and I slowly shifted to dry them on my denim skirt. It should have been easy for me to say it. I didn't understand why my pride took hold of the words in my throat.

“I, um, was thinking about my condo,” I began, stumbling over my words. “I know a guy through work who runs a rental management company. I was thinking that maybe I could call him and see if he would be interested in managing . . .”

“Yes?” Felix encouraged me.

He knew where this was going. It was written all over Felix Jacobson’s absurdly handsome face, but he said nothing. He just smiled and waited for me to spit the words out.

“Managing my condo,” I finally finished. “I’m thinking about putting it on the market.”

“And where would you live?”

“Here . . .” I muttered. “You don’t have to grin so hard about it.”

He couldn’t help it. Across from me, a megawatt smile spread across his face. Christmas was less than four days away, but Felix already had exactly what he wanted. Rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt, Felix put his elbows on the wood tabletop and leaned closer.

“Are you suggesting that we should live together, darling?”

“Not if you keep this up.”

“Alright,” he conceded, leaning back into his chair. “I’ll tone down my joy. There’s no place for joy at Christmastime, anyway.”

I didn’t want to laugh, but my lips betrayed me. I hid my smile behind a bite of salmon and focused on making sure Clara didn’t just play with her food. Felix grinned through his water glass.

“I’m going to say one more thing about your proposal,” he declared.

“Alright, what?”

“You’re always welcome here,” he vowed, “but don’t do this for my benefit.”

“I’m not,” I promised him, my hand reaching out across the table. “I want to stay here with you, and I like seeing Clara happy. If anything, I’m being very selfish right now.”

Felix took hold of my hand and drew it to his lips. He kissed my knuckles, and his features softened. The gold of his eyes gleamed with captivating beauty. It took one look for my whole body to start melting.

“I’ll take it.”

There was nothing more to be said. Of course, there would be paperwork and moving arrangements to be made in the new year, but that night, all I had to do was curl up against Felix in the home theater as we watched a Christmas movie with Clara. She wiped out on my lap halfway through, leaving us to finish the holiday Muppet movie alone.

“Come on, cutie, time for bed,” Felix whispered as he coaxed a dozing Clara into his arms.

I turned off the theater screen and left our mess for the morning. Instead, I followed Felix upstairs, helped Clara through her bedtime routine, and left her in her storybook bedroom. There was no need for a story tonight. Clara and I were already in a fairytale.

“So,” Felix wondered as he shut the bedroom door. “I believe some Christmas packages I ordered came this afternoon. Do you want to help me wrap them?”

I let my hands run along his chest as I teased, “Don’t talk so dirty, baby. Clara might hear you.”

He laughed, leaning forward to find my lips with his own. Felix’s strong arms wrapped around my waist, and for a moment, I forgot what he’d asked in the first place.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said, inevitably pulling away.

I ran a hand over his dark waves of hair and nodded. It didn’t matter what Felix wanted to do. As long as I could be there beside him, I was happy. All the reasons I’d once held to keep me at arm’s length from Felix grew minuscule and distant.

The pain of our past didn't matter anymore. All we had to do was focus on the pleasure. After that, everything else simply . . . fell into place.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

FELIX

Christmas was decidedly better with children. It was nearly midnight when Hope and I finished wrapping our gifts and stacking them up under the library's Christmas tree. Clara's stocking hung over the marble fireplace between Hope's and the one she bought just for me. For the last few years, it had just been another day. I went through the motions and visited family for elaborate feasts, but it wasn't the same.

"I think you're going to have to sell this house," Hope remarked as she stepped out of the bathroom. "After Clara gets all her Christmas gifts, this house isn't going to be big enough."

She wasn't wrong. It took about two hours between the two of us.

Watching her cross the room, I asked, "That's not a bad problem to have, is it?"

"I guess not."

"Besides, there's always the garage, the pool house, the conservatory, the tennis courts, and we could build out on the edge of the property."

She laughed. "I get it. Your house is as big as Buckingham Palace."

"*Our* house."

Hope opened her jar of citrus body cream and smiled. "Okay, our house."

I had memorized the patterns of Hope's bedtime routine. She always bathed or showered and immediately brushed her teeth, insisting they felt dirty. I knew how she combed out her wet hair and which order she layered her little jars and droppers of skincare products, and after all of that, she slid on her nightclothes and rubbed cream on her hands, elbows, and ankles. By the time she came to bed, the entire blue bedroom smelled like an orange grove.

“Come here, I got too much,” she insisted, plopping onto the bed.

Hope didn’t ask as she took my hand, rubbing the excess over my fingers and palm. With little protest, I gave her the other hand to finish. I would give her any reason to sit there in soft lamplight, her eyes downcast and veiled by a layer of thick eyelashes. She looked like a dream, and in the haze, I didn’t think twice about what I said.

“I love you, Hope.”

The words escaped from my chest and lingered in the air around us. For a second, I wondered if it was too much. Hope’s expression had frozen, and her shoulders stiffened in surprise. I had said it that one time already. I just never got the nerve to say it again.

It didn’t change how the words echoed through my head every time I admired her.

With a soft exhale, Hope looked up at me. “That certainly took you long enough.”

Relief washed over me. I found myself laughing, amused by the Cheshire-Cat grin curling up on Hope’s face. She was always something else.

“You could’ve said it,” I pointed out.

Hope’s hands skated up my bare arms and rested against my neck. Her sweet smile inched closer. With little effort, she pulled herself into my lap.

“I thought I had been saying it,” she teased, her peppermint breath cooling my cheek. “I’ve just been saying it . . . in other ways.”

“Other ways?”

“I enjoy showing how much I love every inch of you,” she persisted.

“I knew it,” I said, feigning a small sigh. “You only want me for my body.”

Her bright laughter was lost in an all-consuming kiss. My tongue tingled, begging to find hers. My hands gripped her body tighter, and we fell back against the bed together. Twisting around, I got Hope on her back, glowing up at me with her sparkling expression.

“Say it, darling,” I demanded, my lips brushing against her ear.

“I love you, Felix Jacobson.”

My hands slid underneath the ivory pajama top she wore. “Say it again.”

“I love you,” she swore. “I loved you in the Viceroy, and I love you now.”

Her words thrilled me to no end. With no reason to hold back, I longed to feel her skin against mine. I wanted to forget where my body ended and hers began. I craved so much from Hope, and it was all right there in her extended, open hands.

“Why do you have to wear clothes to bed?” I teased, already undoing her pearl-like buttons. “I only wear boxers to bed, and even that feels like too much.”

“One day, Clara will start trying to sneak in here, and you’re going to change your mind.”

“But not tonight.”

“No,” she agreed, her mouth already against my neck. “Not tonight.”

Though I complained, it didn’t take long to pull the satin shorts from her hips, yet every second apart felt like a lifetime. Hope let her legs hover in the air as she laughed under her breath. Something about me made her giggle like a schoolgirl.

“What?” I pressed her, luring her back into my lap.

“Nothing,” she said. “You’re just always so incorrigible.”

“Do you want me to change?”

She shook her head. “No. Never.”

We sat up together, her warm thighs brushing against my sides. Her hands didn't hesitate to wrap around what they desired, teasing my tip before sliding down my length. My lungs tightened as a groan rumbled deep within my chest.

"I love the way you moan," Hope whispered before kissing the crook of my neck.

"What else do you love about me?"

As she answered, I let my grip wander down her spine to grip her backside. My fingers gently massaged her full hips, and I felt Hope's breathing grow erratic.

"I love the way you make me feel," she answered. "I love my name on your lips and how you whisper in my ear."

"Like this?" I murmured, letting my teeth nip at her earlobe.

"Yes," she breathed. "And you know what else I love?"

"What?"

"Having you inside me."

Already dripping with desire, my body didn't need more encouragement, yet Hope refused to relent. She let her fingers brush against my balls, sending electricity across my skin. Inch by inch, she lowered herself onto me. Her arms wrapped around my neck, and it became impossible for me to pull away.

I didn't want Hope to ever let me go again.

"Felix," she whimpered, her lips hunting for mine.

Her hips rocked against me, letting her clit brush against my skin. Every ragged breath she took pressed her chest deeper into mine. Skin against skin, our body heat mingled until there was nothing left between us. My eyes shut tight. I wanted to give into the euphoria, but I refused. My hands encouraged Hope's hips as her body was on the edge of ecstasy.

Her toes curled against the precipice. Her spine arching, Hope let her head fall back, and I kissed the neck she exposed.

I held onto her as the shuddering climax took control. The sensation overwhelmed me, and my satisfaction coursed through her body in one wave and then another.

“Fuh . . .” she muttered, not even having the breath to finish her cursing.

“Hell, Hope. You’re going to be the death of me.”

Her blue eyes returned to me, brilliant and electrified. “I promise I’ll bury you well.”

“That’s all I needed to know.”

She laughed softly before kissing me and whispering, “I do love you, Felix.”

“I love you too.”

Hope might have teased me, but she didn’t pull her pajamas back on until morning arrived. She slid on her sleepwear and a robe to wake Clara before finding me in the kitchen. As she poured her coffee, I thought about waiting until Christmas Eve as I’d planned. I should have been able to wait two more nights, but the velvet box was burning a hole in my sweatpants pocket.

“Hope, darling,” I remarked coolly as we set the table. “I was thinking about giving you an early Christmas present since you gave me one over dinner last night.”

Hope slid three pieces of wheat toast into the four-slot toaster. Her expression grew curious as she tucked a bit of hair behind her ear. Turning, she went to get the eggs from the fridge, carrying them over to her warm frying pan.

“Oh? Like what?” she wondered.

Clara was mellowed out with her educational television show while her milk sat on the table. There were so many gifts Hope had given me. I didn’t feel like mine would be enough, but it was what I had.

“Well, I’ve told you that my great-grandparents built this place in the twenties after the studio took off,” I began.

“Yes . . .”

“And you know that I love you,” I continued.

Hope smiled, cracking and whisking her eggs in a glass bowl. “Yes, we went over that last night.”

“So, I was thinking that you should have something else of hers as well.”

“Hers?” Hope repeated, too focused on her scrambled eggs to realize what was happening.

I leaned against the wood cabinets to catch her attention. Her blue eyes, still soft from sleep, reflected the morning light. It flooded in from the sink window and haloed around her beautiful face. I had teased Hope that she would be the death of me, but if she brought me to my end, I knew it would be paradise. Every day, she offered me heaven on earth, and she only had to answer one simple question.

“My great-grandmother,” I told her. “Among other things, I inherited this ring here, and well, I think you should have it.”

Hope stopped cooking, the bamboo spatula slipping from her hand. She watched with a surprised expression as I pulled out the crimson velvet box. Blinking slowly, she brushed the hair falling across her face and stared at it.

“You . . . you can’t be serious,” she breathed.

“I was going to give it to you on Christmas Eve,” I confessed. “There was going to be an obscene amount of roses, and I might have put on a suit. Oh, I also was debating hiring a strings trio.”

“No, no,” Hope quickly insisted, waving her hands. “I don’t need any of that. I—oh, God, just show me the ring before I pass out!”

I tried not to laugh as I opened the box and placed it in her palms. She didn’t even notice me turn off her pan and scrape the finished eggs out onto a plate. Hope was transfixed by the round two-carat diamond cushioned against a pure platinum band. I wondered what captivated her more, the massive rock or everything it represented.

“Hope Hayes,” I said softly.

“Yes, Felix?”

“Will you accept this gift from me and agree to be my wife?” I asked, pulling the ring from its cushioned box. “You have given me more gifts and more happiness than I ever expected, and I know it’s not much. This one diamond will never compare to the daughter you’ve given me. I only ask that you let me spend the rest of my life making up the difference.”

Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. Wiping them with my thumb, I waited with bated breath for her reply.

“Yes,” Hope agreed. “A thousand times, *yes*.”

I had already had the ring fitted to Hope’s size the week before. I had thought about my declaration a million times over, but there was nothing that prepared me for her answer. My heart nearly burst at the sound. The kiss she offered was tender and warmed me from within. As the ring settled onto its new owner’s finger, Hope’s palms wrapped around my cheeks, and I felt the cool metal band brush along my jaw.

Somewhere behind me, the toaster chimed.

“I think the toast is ready,” Hope murmured against my lips.

I kissed her again. “And the eggs are probably getting cold.”

“Maybe we should have breakfast before we get too carried away.”

I nodded softly, my hands pulling away from her hips. As we settled down across from each other at the kitchen table, I knew it didn’t matter how many times we pulled apart. Hope would always find her way back to me. Her bare feet would brush against mine under the table. Her smile would sparkle from across the room. I didn’t care if it took ten weeks or ten years for Hope to meet me at the end of an aisle.

Hope Hayes was going to be my wife, the mother of my child, and my everything, and I couldn’t stop smiling about it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EPILOGUE: HOPE - ELEVEN MONTHS LATER

Snow floated down like goose feathers from the sky. All around us, the world was white and glistening and absolutely beautiful. I thought I was going to wait to marry Felix Jacobson. We already had our home and our first child together. There didn't seem like much of a need to rush.

By springtime, my tune had changed. I didn't want another Christmas to pass without this wedding happening. I wanted to be Felix's wife more than anything else.

"Knock, knock!" Inez called as she opened the suite's door. "Are you ready for us?"

I had an army of hair and makeup professionals rushing in and out of my room all morning. My half-eaten breakfast grew cold on a hotel tray, and I wanted to say no. I wanted five more minutes to myself, five more minutes to hold onto the dream. Once I walked down the aisle, there would be no turning back.

I only got one chance to marry Felix. It had to be perfect.

Of course, it was all his fault. I could have had a simple fall wedding in our back yard. There was a lawn big enough to fit a party tent and one hundred guests, but Felix encouraged me to go all out. Like a snowball turning into an avalanche, I booked out an entire Aspen resort for the last weekend in November, and it went on from there.

Nearly two hundred guests were gathering downstairs on the sundeck where they were going to watch me and Felix exchange vows in front of a panoramic snow-capped mountain landscape. A plated dinner and an abundance of wine provided by Felix's mother would be served afterward. Her wedding gift to us was a bounty of cases and cases of wine from her husband's winery, yet where was her Chardonnay when I needed it?

I didn't know why, but my heartbeat wouldn't slow down. I needed to breathe.

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be!” I called out to Inez, inviting her inside.

She stepped into the luxurious suite wearing her evergreen velvet gown. As my maid of honor, Inez didn’t hesitate to unzip the massive garment bag hanging by the closet doors. My matron of honor, Grace, twinned with Inez. Their hair was coiled into perfect curls running down their backs. Pearls adorned their ears, but my two friends couldn’t compare to the toddler in Grace’s arms.

“Mommy!” Clara exclaimed.

“Hi, Clara!” I greeted her, matching her upbeat energy. “Don’t you look precious in your outfit!”

She was shining in her gold velvet flower-girl dress with a crown of ivory rosebuds in her hair. Grace set Clara down to let her scamper over to my vanity bench. As she bent down, Grace’s growing belly peeked through the pleated fabric of her long wrapped dress.

“How are you feeling today?” I asked while holding Clara for comfort.

Gracie had to be about four months along. We were going to know if her little one was a boy or a girl soon enough. My bet was a baby boy, but I kept that to myself.

“A little nauseated, but it was nothing some saltines and soda couldn’t cure,” Grace replied. “What about you? How are you feeling?”

“So happy that I’m scared?” I declared skeptically. “I mean . . . is that even a thing?”

Grace shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“Don’t overthink this,” Inez offered gently. “It’s just a party. You’ve thrown how many parties in your life?”

“Too many to count.”

“That’s right,” Inez said. “So, give your baby girl a kiss, and let’s get you into this ballgown!”

It took everything in Inez to heave the dress out of the bag, but I adored it. The second I put it on at the bridal boutique, I knew I had to have it. The sheer long-sleeved bodice sparkled with intricate beading and crystals with layers of tulle and organza flowing out into a full skirt. It was *Swan Lake* in the best possible way, but this white swan was going to have her happily ever after.

“Is Dad ready?” I asked Grace.

“He was fixing his tie last time I saw him,” she assured me.

“And the caterers, the photographers, they’re all here?”

“Everything is set,” Inez insisted. “Now, come on. Someone is wanting to see you downstairs.”

“Wait!” I realized. “My veil!”

As I slid on my glittering heels, Grace grabbed my veil from its hanger on the bathroom door. I squatted for easy access, letting her tuck the comb into my low braided bun. My fingers instinctively checked my silver tiara, and I looked in my vanity mirror one last time.

I let out an exhale of satisfaction. “I’m ready.”

The girls led me down the hall and toward the elevator. Keeping any speck of dust or grime away from me, they snuck me downstairs and out a side door, not letting anyone catch a glimpse of me first. There was one person I wanted to see. I wanted to watch the gold of his brown eyes gleam and a smile spread across his face.

If I could just have that, the rest of the day wouldn’t matter so much.

“We’ll be right in the foyer if you need us,” Grace assured me.

The photographer was already waiting. Felix stood outside on a heated patio, waiting patiently for my arrival. I could hear our string quintet playing music for our guests. The instrumental pop covers and lively conversation kept everyone occupied while Felix and I had our moment.

“Can he see me?” I whispered to the middle-aged woman with the camera.

She shook her head. “No, I told him to turn around.”

Nodding, I let out one steady breath before stepping out into the afternoon air. The cold air couldn't nip at my cheeks, but I saw how snow collected on the ledge and ground just beyond where the patio's roof stopped. At the ledge, Felix stood with his hands in his black tuxedo's pockets, overlooking the frozen landscape.

The world felt impossibly quiet, yet my heart echoed in my head. It pounded like a drumbeat with every step I took. With my hands balled up together, I tried not to think about the photographer behind me.

“Am I allowed to turn around yet?” Felix asked.

“I don't know,” I answered. “The view I'm getting from behind isn't too bad.”

Felix chuckled as he turned around. Slowly and then all at once, I got the reaction I craved. His handsome face lit up, and the world felt right again.

“I'm not allowed to kiss you, am I?”

I shook my head. “You might smudge my lipstick too soon.”

“That's a damn shame,” he remarked.

“You're right,” I sighed, wrapping my hands around his clean-shaven jaw.

He looked so perfect standing there. His dark waves of hair flowed perfectly. The white blossom pinned to his lapel was without blemish. Everything about him looked like a picture, and I didn't want to share it with anyone. All I wanted was to let his hands wrap around my waist and hold onto me forever.

Since we arrived a few days earlier, Felix and I barely had five minutes for each other. We were in separate suites and set to separate tasks. People pulled us apart at the welcome events, and we were passing Clara back and forth like a hot potato. Everything had become such a whirlwind. Finally, I

was getting the chance to be still, but that wasn't enough for Felix.

"I don't know how I'm going to find my way under all this skirt," he muttered in my ear, not letting the photographer hear him. "How many layers is that thing? Fifty? A hundred?"

"It's just ten, maybe twelve!" I laughed, my hands falling down to his broad chest.

"Well, it looks like I'm going to be spelunking in your skirt tonight," he teased.

He pretended to gather up the skirt, hunting for my legs under all the layers of fabric. It felt like my face would break from grinning so hard. Nearby, a camera clicked several times.

"Stop," I begged him, trying not to cackle or snort like a fool. "Please, I can't take it."

"Fine, fine," he sighed, still grinning.

"So . . . do you like the dress?"

Felix cocked his head to the side. "Hope, you could be wearing a potato sack right now, and I would think you're gorgeous."

"That's not the point."

Pulling me back to him, Felix let his forehead fall against mine. "You look beautiful, darling. I'm only disappointed that I can't kiss you right now."

"You *can* kiss me," I replied softly. "You just can't kiss me on the lips."

My eyes fluttered shut as I felt Felix kiss my temples and my nose.

"It's not enough," he swore, levity still in his warm baritone.

"Then, I guess we need to head inside. You can kiss me once the ceremony is over."

"I have a lot more planned than that."

"Felix . . ." I chided gently.

“I know, darling,” he said, taking my hand. “Before we go inside, I just want to say . . . thank you.”

I reached up to smooth the tendril of hair falling across his forehead. “For what, baby?”

“For letting me buy you that drink at the Viceroy hotel,” he answered with an earnest look.

“I guess I should thank you too, then.”

His eyes gleamed. “For what?”

“For every moment after that,” I told him, kissing his cheek. “I’ll see you at the altar.”

“I’ll be the one in the tuxedo, grinning like an idiot,” Felix joked.

Squeezing my hand, I watched as he went inside. I waited sixty seconds before following him and finding my father in the empty foyer. The guests were all seated underneath the canopy of greenery and vaulted wood ceilings. The instrumentalists were ready and waiting for their queue in the corner by the fireplace. I could see the whole layout in my mind’s eye. Before, I thought my heart would beat out of my bedazzled chest, but now, everything felt calm again.

“You look beautiful, sweetie,” Dad told me before kissing my cheek. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” I answered confidently. “I am.”

I heard the thrum of cellos as the processional began. Inez stepped through the tall double doors, then Grace. Dad linked his arm with mine as a venue assistant handed me my bouquet of white flowers and fresh winter greenery. Everything was just as it should be.

All the pomp and splendor were nice to have, but it wasn’t important to me anymore. All I needed was for Felix’s hands to find mine again. I had my glimpse of a happy Clara perched in her front-row seat. All the money in the world couldn’t buy the happiness swelling inside me. No palace or jewels could make me as ecstatic as our officiant’s final declaration.

“By the power of your love and commitment to one another, and by the power vested in me by the state of Colorado, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Felix, you may kiss your bride.”

“Finally,” I heard him whisper as the room filled with applause.

A chorus of strings played, and petals flew up into the air like the snowflakes outside. None of it could be real. It had to be a dream.

Felix’s hands were at my waist. It almost became too difficult to kiss him back. I was grinning so much, but we did it. I stopped smiling enough to let our lips find each other.

At last, we had our happily ever after.

BOOK 3: HER SECRET
SANTA

INEZ AND COLE



CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE: INEZ

This was insane, absolutely *insane*.

Tightening the gown's corset, I knew it wasn't designed for a full-figured chest. I struggled to breathe, yet I persisted. I stood there in the handicapped bathroom stall, determined. I tugged at the bodice until my lungs had room to move. My breasts were going to pop out at any second, but I took it as a silver lining. I shoved my leggings and hoodie into my canvas tote bag. Hopefully, my breasts would stay in place and my crazy scheme would work.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," I muttered under my breath for maybe the hundredth time.

I was trying to harden my resolve, but it wavered with every frantic beat of my heart. I was sneaking into a Halloween costume party hosted by one of the biggest stars in Los Angeles. She was *obsessed* with the holiday, and every year, she would invite everyone she knew to these massive parties the weekend before Halloween night.

That included the writers, directors, and producers she'd worked with in the past. Those were the people I needed to meet. Checking my makeup in the tall, skinny mirror, I headed out of the women's restroom to see my friend, Paul, leaning against the wall.

"You don't look too bad in my dress," he admitted.

"I don't know how you breathe in this thing," I told him. "This corset is so suffocating!"

He flashed a megawatt smile, even brighter against his rich brown skin. "Beauty is pain, honey, and beggars can't be choosers. You wanted to get into this party. This is how your drag mother gets you here!"

"Don't you mean fairy godmother?" I asked.

Paul snapped his fingers. "I said what I said! Now, give me a turn on the runway. I want to make sure you're gonna be

able to walk in my dress.”

Even in his catering waiter’s uniform, Paul was still a little bit of Lady Ghiradelli, his drag persona. We met years ago as part of the young Los Angeles artists crowd doing every legal job to pay our bills. Back then, I was a temp in a corporate mailroom, and he delivered sandwiches on a bicycle while dreaming of being an operatic drag queen.

Paul was the only person I knew who had a costume in his trunk at all times.

“Like this?” I asked Paul while throwing my shoulders back.

“Yes, use your hips,” he told me. “Think tippy toes!”

There were a million layers of petticoat and cream-colored silk if I fell over to cushion my fall. I looked like Marie Antionette, ready for my last tea party before the guillotine. I had long, ruffled sleeves with bows on my elbows, a skirt that stuck out like a cupcake, and pearl pins holding back my curled hair. Once I had his ladyship’s approval, Paul traded my canvas tote for a tiny beaded purse and a lace fan. I quickly shoved a handful of business cards into the bag.

“Okay, so you know the deal,” he reminded me. “I clock out at two. I’ll meet you back here to get your phone and clothes, and you’ll give me back my dress. I’m going to need it tomorrow.”

“For what?”

“A volunteer gig. I’m singing at a retirement home for artists.”

“Aww, that’s nice!”

“Yes, yes, I’m a saint,” Paul insisted, hurrying me along. “Now, come on, I’ve got to get back to work, and you have a room to work!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I exclaimed.

Paul grabbed me by the wrist and led me to a side door of the grand ballroom. Music filtered out through the door as wait staff passed in and out with fresh trays of finger foods. If it

weren't constrained by Rococo-style corsetry, my heart would have burst out of my chest. I wasn't ready for the massive size of the ballroom. Paul mentioned a thousand people had been invited, but somehow, my head hadn't processed the insane crowd that entailed.

The Venetian-style ballroom glittered in deep violet uplighting while wispy black branches were used as floral arrangements. I guessed the idea was to give the gilded venue a spooky, gothic vibe. Maybe that was why the hostess herself was up on stage in a ghoulish lace gown, looking like some kind of undead bride.

"Before we get too carried away," she gushed into the microphone, "I want to thank everyone for coming and to our staff, our bartenders, and our amazing deejay!"

The room vibrated with applause. Even the tiniest claps added to the noise. With a deep inhale, I knew I needed to focus.

I started at the bar. Time passed with no luck. Most people ignored me until one woman noticed me. Dressed up as a yellow butterfly, the smile I found was a familiar face. I didn't know her, but I certainly knew her work. She was a former actress now directing award-winning comedies.

"Love the dress!" she gushed while waiting for her vodka tonic.

Dance music blared over the speakers, some new remixed mashup of two pop songs getting the guests excited. People were having a good time, but this was nothing like Hope's parties. It wasn't a gathering of friends who choked each other with hugs and made up dumb jokes. This was just a crowd of acquaintances being friendly.

"Thanks," I replied. "I borrowed it from a drag queen."

"That's amazing!" She laughed, clearly on her second or third cocktail. "I don't think we've met. I'm Olive Hutton."

"I'm Inez," I told her. "Inez Sideris. I'm a screenwriter."

"Oh, really? Would have I seen anything of yours?"

The bartender came over and asked for my drink. I decided to go bold with a rum and Coke.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted to Olive. “I’ve co-written some Indie films. One of the shorts got an honorable mention at LA’s short film festival last year.”

“Oh, wow,” she said with a tipsy grin. “You know, I’ve got a new project I’m working on, a new coming-of-age thing. How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

This was it. This giant dress was about to land me a chance to be in a writer’s room with one of the most prominent new female directors in town. If Paul weren’t gay, I’d kiss him for getting me here.

Hell, I might kiss him regardless.

“Well, I . . .” Olive said, but then her eyes went elsewhere. “Cole, hey! I haven’t seen you in ages!”

She waved to a tall, broad-shouldered figure sweeping around me and my skirt. The amber-eyed man kissed her hand and flashed a crooked but heartbreaking grin. As his maple-syrup eyes poured over me, I remembered them from when I was a kid.

This was Cole Crawford, the former teenage dream who had his smile plastered on a million walls a decade ago. One of my cousins had been infatuated with his sitcom character. He might not have been a boy anymore, but Cole had undoubtedly maintained the charm. It didn’t help that he was dressed like some storybook prince too, embroidered tailcoat and all.

I’d never seen a man make breeches look so good.

“You’re looking lovely tonight, Olive,” Cole told her in a voice that reminded me of cognac, all warm and full-bodied. “Is this one of your new ingenues?”

His eyes wouldn’t leave me.

“No, this is *Iona*,” Olive insisted over the music. “We just met!”

My heart sank. For two seconds, I had been kidding myself.

“Inez, actually,” I amended.

“Inez,” Cole echoed, my name sounding decadent in his rich baritone. “Cole Crawford.”

“You two look like a perfect pair!” Olive gushed.

Cole’s smile brightened. “It’s almost like we were destined to meet.”

I snuck into this party to meet someone possibly interested in my scripts. I was looking for a miracle, not an actor taking an interest in my other . . . *assets*. Olive, too swept up in her gin and the party’s revelry, vanished without a second thought. She slipped through my fingers like desert sand, and my heart plummeted deeper.

This wasn’t going to plan. Of course, I hardly had a plan to see through. I was fishing blindly for a miracle, yet somehow, I caught the attention of Cole. He ordered a drink for himself. Leaning against the black bartop, he didn’t disappear.

Why wouldn’t he go?

“So . . . what studio backlot did you steal your costume from?” I asked, knowing the teasing question had bite.

He ran a hand over his light brown hair and laughed. “It’s my costume from last Halloween, actually. Just don’t tell anyone here that I dared to wear an outfit twice.”

Sipping my cocktail, I smiled into the glass. His line shouldn’t have sounded so charming.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” I assured him, “but what made you decide to go with the Prince Charming get-up?”

“My niece.”

As he answered me, Cole’s eyes sparkled with some quiet reflection of love. I leaned closer at the sight. It might have been the most genuine emotion in the endless ballroom.

“Your niece?” I repeated.

“I took her and her brother trick-or-treating last year,” he explained. “She wanted to be a princess, but her twin wouldn’t play along. I decided to get in touch with an old costume designer friend. My niece got a princess dress. My nephew agreed to be a knight. I got this costume made, and well, here we are.”

At that moment, I didn’t try to hide how Cole was enchanting me. There was no hint of deception in his expression. Every word was authentic and warm, and the anxiety I had weaving through the ballroom felt distant.

“That sounds like a wonderful Halloween,” I mused. “I would give anything to go trick-or-treating again.”

“Yeah, why do adults suck the fun out of holidays?”

Taking another sip of my drink, I laughed, “Maybe because life sucked the fun out of us.”

Cole threw back his drink, and before I knew it, his warm hand was wrapping around mine. I remembered why so many girls had loved him once upon a time. I saw it there in the sweetness of his eyes, realizing nothing about his charm was an act.

“Then, maybe you and I can make this fun again,” he offered.

I had gone there on a mission, yet my heart decided that could wait.

“We can certainly try,” I agreed with a grin.

People parted like the sea to let us onto the dance floor. My larger-than-life dress gave us space to twirl, laugh, and forget the watchful eyes around Cole and me. Time became irrelevant. As the music slowed down, his hand slid down the small of my back, and our faces became impossibly close. I breathed in Cole’s cologne with notes of warm spice, citrus peels, and dark amber. Like a glowing fireside, the scent coaxed me closer, compelling me to settle against him.

“People are going to think we came here together,” I murmured under the music.

Cole's lips brushed against my ear. "Is that such a bad thing?"

"No . . . I don't think so."

"If you would like," he told me, "we could get out of here. I have a room booked here for the night."

"Are you trying to get me to run away with you, Prince Charming?"

Cole chuckled under his breath. "Only if you'll run away with me, Princess."

I studied his soft smile, hopeful and expectant. Only two words came to my mind.

"Why not?"

I couldn't find a reason to deny his hand guiding me to a side door. My lips were already tingling for his, begging to part and invite Cole closer. We reached an empty elevator, and as soon as the doors closed, Cole's hands wrapped around my face. My back pressed against the dark wood wall. In a rush, our kiss sparked and took off like wildfire.

I had never wanted a man so badly.

"You shouldn't be real," Cole muttered against my throat, his mouth sending shivers across my skin.

"I could say the same about you," I murmured.

He had my knees growing weaker by the second. As my fingers trailed down his arms, I could see that Cole had the strength to hold me up. He could keep me pinned against the elevator wall all night long, but the robotic bell chimed. The doors crawled open. Before I knew it, I was rushing down a carpeted corridor and grinning like a fool.

My reckless streak was taking a new, drastic turn. It had my fingers pulling at the strings of Cole's costume as he unlocked his suite's door. Inside, the room was spacious, glamorous, and echoed with the style of old Hollywood. The bedroom and parlor looked like something from a bygone era, but so did I.

I was stuck in a confining costume. Cole was already pulling at the bust, nearly ripping the snap closures and ribbons keeping me together. In the darkness of his hotel room, I was shedding this second skin, yet I was able to breathe again. I could breathe in the scent of Cole's cologne and the salt on his skin. I could gasp softly when his hands found my breasts, massaging them as he kissed me deeply.

"You have to play fair," I teased softly.

Cole kissed behind my ear. "Says who?"

"Says me," I murmured while my nipples stiffened against his touch. "It's time to get you out of those breeches."

His intoxicating laugh filled the air. Every piece of his clothing became a pile of fabric on the floor. There were no more masks, no more pretense. It was my skin against his. I savored the feel of it as my arms laced around his neck, dragging Cole down with me. My legs were twisted with his as we rolled together toward the center of the palatial bed.

"I've been dying to know how you looked without that damn dress," he muttered, his tone darkening.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I noticed."

"But did you know that you're more gorgeous than I imagined?"

"I do now," I replied, my fingers memorizing the sculpted edges of his chest.

Impulse overwhelmed me. All I knew was the feel of Cole's body growing against mine. My heart fluttering with excitement, I reached down and wrapped my hand around his rigid length, twisting and stroking until Cole dripped with desire.

"Do you like this?" I whispered in Cole's ear.

A drunken grin spread across his face. "What man wouldn't?"

"Would you like to be inside me?" I furthered, letting my lips find his.

“God, yes,” he growled, his member throbbing at the thought. “Look on the nightstand.”

I noticed what he meant. A leather travel bag sat unzipped, and inside, there were foil-wrapped condoms.

“You came prepared,” I teased.

“A gentleman always does,” he bantered back, “especially when that gentleman has a latex allergy.”

I don’t know why we laughed together, but everything felt so funny, so exciting. The sight of that little square packet set me ablaze. I couldn’t get it on Cole fast enough. My fingers rolled down his rock-hard erection before I lowered myself onto him. I anchored my hands against his chest, and slowly but surely, I rode us both toward euphoria.

“Hell,” Cole cursed between gritted teeth.

Gripping my hips, he encouraged the motion. I could feel my head growing light in the pleasure of it all. Higher and higher, the feelings rose inside me until I was ready to come out of my skin. My toes curled, and I bit my lip to stifle back a scream.

A climactic wave crashed over me. One second later, Cole felt the rush of his release too.

“Oh, my God,” I gasped, finding the will to speak again.

I collapsed over Cole’s chest. It was so warm and welcoming. I could have stayed there all night. My lips parted, and I breathed in the hot air around us as Cole kissed my forehead.

“Can I keep you?” he murmured. “Just stay the night.”

“I . . .” I whispered back, but my honest answer vanished.

The clock on the side table read 1:50. Panic took hold of me. Wide-eyed and frantic, I shot out of Cole’s embrace and began looking for my clothes.

“I gotta go,” I insisted while pulling on my underwear.

I didn’t have time to fuss with the corset. I was just going to have to run downstairs half-dressed. In my haste, I hardly

noticed Cole reaching out for me in confusion. I didn't stop until his hand found my elbow.

"Inez, wait," he began, but I shook my head.

"I'm sorry," I answered quickly. "Tonight was fun. I—I . . . call me."

"How?"

I snatched up my purse to pull out a card. It was the only one I'd shared that night. I had hoped to go home empty-handed, but I was a fool to think people would want to network at a holiday-themed boozefest.

"Here," I insisted, shoving the piece of cardstock into his hand. "And really, you're wonderful."

I couldn't leave without kissing him one last time, without memorizing his amber gaze. I let the sight of him sear into my mind as I rushed out the door. The empty hotel corridor resonated with the pounding of my run. I couldn't press the elevator button fast enough, all the while trying to remember how to get downstairs to where the staff entrance was.

Tonight hadn't gone according to plan. Still, as the elevator opened, I refused to think of it as a waste. Perhaps I didn't get a chance to pitch a script, but I found Cole. Leaving without his number, I could only hope that he would find me again.

CHAPTER TWO

COLE - ONE MONTH LATER

“I’m guessing that it was Colonel Mustard in the conservatory with the rope,” Essie declared proudly. “Asher, do you have those cards?”

My nephew looked down at the Clue cards in his hand. “Nope, I don’t.”

“Uncle Cole?”

I wanted to tell her no, but that wasn’t the point of this board game. Flipping through the cards in my hand, I flashed Essie the rope card. She nodded, her brown eyes looking intent.

“Thank you,” my niece offered.

“You’re welcome,” I replied.

Asher looked around through his shaggy dark curls. “Where did Mom go?”

“She said she was going to put the leftovers away,” I reminded him. “Here, I’ll go check on her.”

“It’s your turn!” Essie pointed out.

“I could go for you!” Asher offered.

His sister pouted. “Yeah, right, you would just take the opportunity to cheat.”

“No way,” Asher swore. “You’re just worried I’m going to ruin your winning streak!”

Essie held her chin high. “I’ve won the last two games, and I refuse to quit now!”

Asher laughed. “You’re going to eat those words! Come on, Uncle Cole, take your turn! We’ve gotta beat Essie!”

Looking down at the dining table, I picked up the die and let it roll across the evergreen tablecloth. It fell on two.

“There,” I said, moving my purple piece two spaces across the board. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay,” the twins echoed back.

Asher picked up the die to take his turn, rolling with an eager expression. I reached over his small arms to pick up our dessert plates. They held nothing but pie crust crumbs, smudges of dried whipped cream, and used silver spoons.

It had been a good Thanksgiving, overall. The house still smelled of rosemary, sage, and garlic, and the kids enjoyed the chance to spend their afternoon in the pool. It wasn’t your typical November activity, but hey, that was Los Angeles for you.

“Nat?” I called as I stepped into the kitchen.

It had been twenty-some minutes since Natalie decided she would clean up the kitchen. She left the twins and me to start a new game of Clue, but she never returned. Now, I knew she had cleaned the entire kitchen and lingered in the silence. She had poured a generous glass of red wine and let her mind wander elsewhere.

Based on her expression, it wasn’t a place Natalie needed to be.

“Has the turkey been giving you trouble?” I asked my older sister.

She blinked, coming out of her haze. “Sorry, what?”

“I was just asking if the turkey was giving you a hard time about being put away,” I explained, the joke losing its luster. “You’ve been in here for a while.”

“Have I?” she realized.

Her pond-green eyes shifted to the clock on the oven. Time had apparently gotten away from her, and Natalie frowned at the thought. All our lives, she had always been the dependable one, the resilient one. It was weird to see her like this . . . falling apart and vulnerable. Natalie took a large gulp from her amber wine glass and pursed her lips.

“Sorry,” she muttered.

I pulled the dishwasher open and smiled. “Don’t worry about it, Nat. The twins and I have been getting along fine. Asher was just wondering where you were.”

My sister sighed. “They’ve been doing that a lot recently.”

Leaning against the sunny yellow cabinets, Natalie looked a little out of place in my kitchen. Her clothes were too tailored, and the styled waves of her brunette hair were too neat. She didn’t belong here. Natalie, much to everyone’s dismay, didn’t really belong anywhere. Ever since she left her husband, my sister had been listless, and technically, homeless, but she was always welcome in my Spanish-style house. Even if it wasn’t to her tastes, my life would always have space for her.

“No, they haven’t,” I assured her. “They wonder what you’re doing no more or less than any other kindergartners. They’re kids. Asher and Essie forget things all the time.”

“They haven’t forgotten their father,” she mumbled.

No, they hadn’t. I kept making up excuses for the bastard, but it was for the twins’ sake, *never* his.

“They’re still having a great holiday,” I pointed out while sliding the spoons into the dishwasher’s basket. “They had your legendary cinnamon rolls for breakfast, spent the afternoon swimming, and they got to have dinner with us, Mom, and Dad.”

Our Mom and Dad had come down from Bakersfield for the day. It was always good to see him, but his passive-aggressive remarks about Natalie’s husband hadn’t helped.

“I thought that at the very least, he would call them or text,” Nat fretted. “Roger didn’t even acknowledge the holidays when we saw each other to mediate visitation rights! It’s like he doesn’t even want to see them! God, I could just *see* the I-told-you-so running through Dad’s mind during dinner. He never liked Roger.”

“Did Roger ever like Dad?”

“Hell, no,” Nat scoffed wryly. “Roger doesn’t like anybody who can’t benefit him in some way. I thought that

with me . . . Well, it doesn't matter anyway. He went off and screwed the nanny, and now, I'm going to screw Roger. When I'm through with Roger, he's going to wish I'd just castrated him. He's a damn moron if he thinks I'm letting him keep that house. With his salary, he couldn't even afford the mortgage."

Though it hadn't always been like this, Natalie's interior design and decorating firm offered her a salary that was triple the amount Roger made as a cardiologist. I had my suspicions, but I guessed that insecure piece of shit didn't like Natalie being the breadwinner. He was intimidated, emasculated, and so he went looking for a pretty young thing who might stroke his ego and his dick.

I could still hear Natalie screaming on the phone, crying the first afternoon in November.

"In our bed!" she wailed as she cut up Roger's designer ties. "That bastard was screwing the nanny in our fucking bedroom! He didn't even have the decency to go to the guest bed! No!"

When Roger refused to leave that bedroom, Natalie stormed out, taking the kids, her clothes, and everything else. She called the dealership to return Roger's new Mercedes. Then, she took off in hers to come to stay here ever since.

It was nice having my niece and nephew around. My dog certainly loved having someone else to play with, but I only wished it weren't at the expense of Natalie's happiness. Between work, divorce preparations, and trying to parent her two six-year-old children, Natalie's sanity was starting to look paper-thin.

"Come here, booger nose," I told her, spreading my arms wide.

Nat swallowed back the last of her wine. "I thought I told you to stop calling me that. I had the flu. I was eight."

"And you had enough boogers in your nose to cover Laurel Canyon," I teased lightly.

She frowned, but Natalie still set down her glass. She leaned into my chest, her hands resting on my heathered gray

sweater. Without her heels, her head tucked itself under my chin. I kissed the top of her head, and I noticed it still smelled like cinnamon from that morning.

“You’re allowed to be angry,” I whispered in her hair. “You’re allowed to be upset. Divorce sucks. Roger sucks, but don’t let him keep hurting you, Nat. He doesn’t deserve to live rent-free in your mind.”

“I know,” she agreed with a sigh. “It’s just . . . with the holidays here now, I keep thinking about the kids. I don’t want them to think their father doesn’t love them.”

“Don’t worry. You and I will love them plenty. Plus, they’ve got grandparents ready to spoil them rotten.”

Natalie laughed. “I heard Mom ask you if this made you think twice about not having kids.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ugh, don’t remind me. Come on. I’m sure Essie is waiting to win Clue right now.”

Letting my sister go, we walked back into the formal dining room where the twins were still sitting. Essie was waiting as I expected.

“Uncle Cole,” she asked hurriedly. “Is it Colonel Mustard in the conservatory with the, the poison?”

Natalie smiled beside me. “Are you guessing, or are you asking?”

“It’s my guess!” my niece swore.

I picked up my cards off the table and shook my head. “Nope, I can’t refute that!”

“Then, I win!” she yelled.

“No, honey,” her mother explained. “You’ve got to check the cards in the little envelope. If you have guessed wrong, you lose, and you’ll be out of the game.”

“Are you willing to risk it?” Asher teased, hoping to create doubt in his sister’s mind.

Essie was never short of resolve. Reaching across the board, she picked up the paper envelope and squealed with

delight.

“I win! I win! I won Candyland, Go Fish, and Clue!”

Asher refused to be left out. “Well, I won both games of checkers this afternoon!”

“Good for you, both of you,” I complimented them. “I think, though, it’s time for you two to race up to bed.”

“No!” Asher complained.

“It’s after nine, honey,” Natalie insisted. “It’s time for you both to get to sleep.”

“I’m not even tired,” Essie protested.

Her mother folded her arms. “*Esther . . .*”

“Okay,” Essie surrendered. “Can we at least get a story before bed?”

Natalie let her arms fall back to her sides. “Alright, sweetie. If you both head upstairs and start getting ready for bed, I think we’ll have time for a book.”

The two kids scrambled from their seats. In their hustle, they bumped the table and nearly knocked over Natalie’s chrysanthemum centerpiece. I caught it before the glass pitcher turned to shards.

“Careful!” Natalie yelled after them.

In the living room, I heard Ziggy bark from the excitement. His clicking toenails scrambled against the hardwood as he bounded up the stairs with the twins. He’d taken to sleeping in their room. I guess he liked taking turns cuddling with them. One morning, I caught the little beagle-mutt wrapped up in Asher’s arms like a teddy bear.

That dog was getting spoiled rotten.

“Before I forget, I’ve decided on a new nanny. She’ll be here Sunday,” Natalie said before turning away.

I followed after her. “Nat, I told you. I can look out for the kids.”

“Cole, you’re supposed to be auditioning and meeting with your agent. You don’t need to be taking care of the twins full-time. It’s been how many years since your last real gig?”

“Two.”

I didn’t like thinking about it, but I’d sworn I would only take a role worth having. I was done with stupid gimmick movies and TV spots. I wanted to be a serious actor, not just a pretty face who used to be famous. I didn’t even need the money.

This was all about my damned pride.

Reaching out, Natalie patted my shoulder. “You’ve gotta take care of yourself. This new gal is nice, and she’s come with a recommendation from one of my staff. We’ll benefit from having her around, you’ll see.”

“Alright,” I offered with a nod.

I watched Natalie head up the sweeping staircase before I went to get some water and head to bed. Barks from Ziggy echoed down the long hallway as I heard the kids laughing in the bathroom. With a click, I closed my bedroom door and shut out the noise. Ambient lights filtered through the balcony doors and windows, and I fell into my pattern.

I clicked on my bedside lamp and sank into the bed. Setting my drink down, I opened the top drawer and pulled out a piece of thick ivory cardstock with gold-foil letters.

Inez Sideris.

Her number and email were written on the back. It had been a few weeks now, but I didn’t know how to explain my absence. Part of me didn’t feel like I should explain my sister’s business to a stranger. Still, something about Inez felt familiar. Her green eyes took me back to an old memory.

I was a boy, and my parents said I could choose how I spent my first real acting paycheck. I decided we should go up to see the redwoods one weekend. We packed up the family station wagon. Mom made sandwiches for the road and booked a motel. I wasn’t making millions, but it was enough money for a fun family weekend in the off-season of the

redwood forest. Misty rain had kept most of the tourists away that Saturday.

The trees towered over me, making me feel so small in turn. The gray fog hung in the air. The mist clung to my hair, but *the green*. I'd never seen anything like it. The green of the ferns and the moss on the forest floor was unmistakably vibrant. Its magic was ageless, and it almost didn't feel real.

Inez's eyes were that shade of green. There was no hint of blue or brown. They were green all the way through, right down to her precious heart. She had no guile about her or need to impress me. I hadn't forgotten how her nose scrunched up when I interrupted her conversation.

After twenty years in Los Angeles, that reaction was oddly refreshing.

I turned the paper over in my hands again and again. I debated calling her. I thought about how I'd apologize for not reaching out sooner, yet I sighed. The little card went back in the drawer.

Heading toward my shower, I knew it would be another night of dreaming about her and maybe getting off to the memory of her skin pressed against mine. I kept telling myself that I'd call when things settled down at my house. When Natalie was calmer and the kids were used to their new routine, my life would be freer to pursue a relationship, or hell, even go out to dinner.

She was still haunting me like a beautiful ghost. Her ageless green was burned into the back of my eyes, and I knew I would have to see them again. For the sake of my sanity, I needed to find my way back to Inez.

CHAPTER THREE

INEZ

I didn't know how I managed to fit everything in the back of my old station wagon. Everything was piled up in suitcases and a handful of cardboard boxes I'd taken from behind the liquor store. My books were in a vodka box. My shoes were piled up where rum used to be, and my little Christmas cactus was nestled among some crap in a box decorated with a whiskey logo.

"I think that's everything," I mumbled with a slight sigh. "Let me go check the apartment one more time."

I wiped my forehead of sweat before hustling back up to the second-story apartment. December was just around the corner, but California's weather didn't care about the holiday season. Santa Clause wore swim trunks, and twinkling lights were wrapped around heat-loving plants. Santa Monica was evergreen, even during the longest nights of the year. I didn't know what a "white Christmas" was like, but it wasn't such a bad thing.

"Hey, Kira," I called from the front door. "I think I'm all packed up."

Kira tried not to look too pleased about it. Standing by her silver tinsel tree, my soon-to-be-former roommate was wrestling with rainbow string lights for their holiday tree alongside her fiancé. The cramped apartment was filled with kitsch, vintage decor, but there wasn't a single Baby Jesus in sight. In this place, the 'reason for the season' were tacky sweaters and eggnog.

"Oh, you're leaving so soon?" Kira called back, dropping the light strand in her hands.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm just gonna check over the apartment one more time to make sure I didn't miss anything."

"Well, you can always come back," she insisted. "Arlo and I are still hoping you can make it to our Winter Solstice dinner!"

Walking over toward the galley kitchen, I replied, “I’ll do my best. I don’t know what kind of hours my new job will have yet. My new boss says her hours are extra-long right now.”

“Oh, right, nanny gigs can be that way,” Arlo agreed while unboxing his new rainbow Peruvian ornaments.

“Yeah . . .” I mumbled in agreement.

I knew they didn’t mean it maliciously, but it was clear that Kira and Arlo were ready to see me go. When they got engaged last September, Kira told me she and Arlo would move in together. This was her apartment, and there was only one bathroom. It took about three days for me to see the inevitable end. The only trouble was that there weren’t many places I could go with my budget. Amicable roommates and affordable apartments didn’t exactly grow in palm trees.

It was lucky that Hope offered me this job. Otherwise, I might have had to go back to my mother’s house in suburban Santa Barbara.

Opening a kitchen cabinet, I noticed a mug I almost left behind. I set it out and went into the fridge. I’d completely forgotten about food. I pulled out some leftovers from my family’s uber-Greek Thanksgiving, including piles of spanakopita, baklava, and a variety of herbaceous grilled meats. I grabbed a paper bag from the pantry and pulled out the takeout boxes I’d almost left behind.

I couldn’t help but notice Arlo looking disappointed across the room. He really enjoyed my cousin’s baklava.

I sighed. “Hey, Arlo, I, um, don’t know if I can eat all these leftovers by myself. Would you eat some of Olympia’s baklava if I left it behind?”

He instantly grinned. “Oh, yeah, I would be happy to have some!”

“Alright then,” I agreed with a smile.

I left half of my haul in some old Chinese food containers before checking the bathroom and my old bedroom. It was

strange to see it so hollow. I had slept there for the last two years, so it was hard not to be a tad nostalgic.

“Greener pastures, Inez,” I told myself. “You’re moving onto greener pastures and a job with a regular salary.”

I kept telling myself that as I took my brown paper bag and made my goodbyes. This new gig was the start of something better. Even if these twins turned out to be two Tasmanian devils, I would rather face them than the I-told-you-so smiles of my mother and extended family.

They didn’t think being a screenwriter was a serious profession. Even at Thanksgiving dinner, they made their unsubtle comments, encouraging me to come back home. I could help manage the wait staff at the family restaurant and write *on the side*.

I was trying to build a name for myself in the business, not start a kitchen garden. Screenwriting wasn’t just some hobby to pass the time. It just didn’t offer a full-time income yet.

Shaking the bad thoughts away, I headed north to Pacific Palisades. The canyons rose up in the backdrop. Houses grew larger and started hiding behind tall, manicured hedges. Whoever this brother was, he certainly had money, but I knew that when Natalie said I would be staying in the pool house.

I turned down the tucked-away street and realized that Natalie’s hedge was the tallest of them all. The Spanish-style home grew up over the greenery, and the black steel gate kept anyone from whipping into the driveway. My car crawled to a halt, and I fished out my phone. Natalie had already sent me the key code.

“Six-Five-Eight-Three,” I mumbled while I punched in the numbers.

The keypad chimed in celebration, and the steel gates rolled back with a slight groan. I was able to inch forward past the three garage doors and up to the driveway’s circle. The babbling fountain in the center sparkled in the afternoon sun.

“Inez!” Natalie greeted me with a wave. “You made good time. I wasn’t expecting you for another fifteen minutes.”

I hadn't noticed her coming out of the front door. I'd never met her in person, but she looked more polished than she had on our video calls. I didn't know anyone who would walk around the house in a lavender pantsuit on a weekend afternoon. My olive-green overalls suddenly felt too casual.

"Hi, Natalie," I replied, grabbing my canvas tote and shutting my wagon's door. "I found a shortcut off Sunset Boulevard, so I was able to avoid the traffic."

She smiled eagerly. "That's great! I actually need to go see an anxious client. I hope that's okay."

"Sure, that's what I'm here for, right?"

I hadn't imagined that my probationary weekend would start so immediately, but I'd never been afraid of a baptism by fire. The kids seemed nice enough anyway when we talked on the video chat. What was the worst thing that could happen on a Saturday afternoon?

Leading me inside, Natalie launched into her quick tour of the house. The century-old Spanish home was filled with old-world touches like terracotta tiles outside and colorful tiles built into the sweeping front staircase. Fireplaces and nooks of bookshelves curled into ornate shapes. Dark heavy beams lined the tall ceilings, yet the walls were snow white. The furniture was contemporary. The whole house felt like a fresh summer vacation in the sunny hills of Spain or Portugal. It made my shoulders feel light as we walked through the living room toward the kitchen.

That feeling was lost when a boulder of realization dropped on my shoulders.

"Here's the kitchen," Natalie continued. "We mostly eat in here at the nook over there, and you're free to come inside and use it whenever you like. Your studio has a little kitchen, but it's not much. Oh, Cole, this is Inez, the new nanny. Nanny, this is Cole, my brother."

I was looking at a ghost, a rude-ass ghost who didn't know how to call a girl after having sex with her. I knew Natalie's surname was Crawford-Levy, but Crawford wasn't an

uncommon name. I didn't imagine that her little brother was Cole Crawford himself.

My knees threatened to give out right there on the tile floor. He filled out his jeans and navy T-shirt too well, and his tousled hair dared to fall across his forehead perfectly. As he pushed it back, those amber eyes stared back at me. Those haunting eyes hadn't met mine since that night in the hotel room, and part of me wanted to punch them out after slapping the smile on his face. Or did I want to kiss those lips?

I couldn't decide.

"Inez," he greeted me while shutting the massive steel fridge. "It's good to meet you."

I did my best not to scream. He was an actor, a liar by trade. I shouldn't have been so surprised that he could wear a mask of ignorance so damn well.

"It's good to meet you too," I answered. "Your, um, house is really lovely."

Damn manners. I couldn't be hateful, especially with Natalie standing right beside me.

"Thank you," he replied. "I hope you'll feel at home here. Based on my sister's particular taste in homes, you might be here for a while."

Natalie frowned. "I'm not going to run out and buy the first house I find near Essie and Asher's school. That's an easy way to get screwed on a real estate deal."

"I'm just teasing, Nat." Cole laughed, the sound too rich and warm. "You know you can stay here as long as you want."

Natalie could stay, sure, but could I? Standing there, it was already a herculean effort to keep my breathing normal. I shifted back and forth on my feet. My hands were tight fists in my overall pockets. I didn't want to stand there for a second longer, pretending I was okay.

"Speaking of the twins," I piped up, "I guess I should meet them. I hate for you to keep your client waiting."

Natalie looked down at her silver smartwatch and gasped. “Oh, crap, you’re right.”

“The kids are playing with Ziggy outside,” Cole told us.

The sound of excited barking told me Ziggy was a dog. As Natalie stepped outside onto the patio, I saw he was some kind of small hound dog with floppy brown ears and a white-tipped tail. On his hind legs, he jumped and jumped until his little boy tossed the colorful piece of knotted rope.

“Get it, Ziggy!” Essie yelled to him.

The dog zig-zagged across the green lawn, running the length of the Caribbean-blue pool. In their swimsuits and oversized T-shirts, the twins clapped for him to return.

“Essie, Asher!” Natalie called. “Come meet Inez!”

“Okay!” Essie called back as she took the rope from Ziggy’s mouth.

Ziggy was the first to bolt toward me. Faster than the twins, his little paws propped against my knees as he barked in excitement at a new friend.

“Don’t jump on her, Ziggy,” Natalie fretted. “Sorry, Inez, this is Cole’s dog. My brother never bothered to teach him any manners.”

I squatted down to scratch his smooth ears. “Oh, it’s fine. I’ve always loved dogs.”

I had wanted one for ages, but apartment living wasn’t conducive to keeping pets. Plus, my ever-changing schedule wouldn’t accommodate a dog’s steady routine.

“Hi, Inez!” Essie greeted me first.

Her soft brown eyes looked excited, and her brother, wild brown curls blowing in the warm breeze, looked like he could bounce off the stuccoed sides of the house and the towering privacy hedge and trees.

“Hey, Essie, it’s nice to see you in person,” I replied. “Have you two been swimming?”

“Mom said we could if you would too!” Asher answered quickly. “Will you, Inez? Do you have a swimsuit?”

Essie added, “If you don’t, Mom has one you can borrow!”

I laughed lightly. My hips fit snugly in my size-twelve clothing. In the corner of my eye, I couldn’t decide whether Natalie’s lithe figure required a size six or eight. It didn’t matter. I doubted she wanted me wearing her designer swimsuits, and I did have one in my suitcase.

“I’ve got one, don’t worry,” I assured the little girl.

“You don’t have to humor them,” Natalie insisted. “My kiddos know how to get what they want a little too well.”

Asher grinned proudly. “Ziggy has been teaching us puppy-dog eyes!”

The boy proceeded to pout like a forlorn basset hound. I couldn’t help but laugh. The twins might pump each other up, but they were sweet and friendly. I could already tell that being their nanny would be fun.

“He’s taught you well,” I told Asher.

“Thank you,” he replied.

It was easy to laugh and listen to Natalie hurriedly explain her plans. The mild afternoon was soothing, and the kids were fun. Still, latent frustration simmered underneath my skin. I could feel a pair of honeyed eyes on me, staring me down from somewhere else. No matter how much I wanted to run, I had to stand there, smile, and pretend like nothing was wrong.

I *needed* this job. I was desperate for this weekend to go well. If Cole didn’t want me, fine. I could learn to ignore him. For a steady income and time to write, I could learn to do anything, even moving on from oh-so-charming Cole Crawford. One night with him would be more than enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLE

Of all the kids in all the world, she had to be the new nanny for my niece and nephew. I stood at the kitchen sink, my fingers curling over the counter into the cool, white porcelain enamel. My skin was burning by comparison.

Inez somehow looked even better than I remembered. Without all that faux finery, her dark auburn hair was a mass of unkempt waves and curls billowing over her tanned shoulders and white T-shirt. Her soft curves weren't constrained by the utilitarian clothes she wore, and her eyes were brighter for it. She looked happier, more comfortable, but that seemed to change when she caught sight of me.

That ancient forest green held me captive, but her expression masked contempt. I was pretty sure I knew why, too. With no way to explain myself in front of Natalie, I had to play the fool, the absolute fucking fool who was dumb enough to let her slip away.

My hands pressed harder into the countertop. My heart edged closer to beating out of my chest. She looked so cool, standing there in the sunshine, yet I was quickly coming undone.

The twins got excited over something, and I watched as Natalie kissed both their cheeks before heading back inside. With a deep, emptying breath, I cooled myself down. My sister didn't need to know what was happening to me.

"I've got to go to the Hollywood Dells house," Natalie explained as she breezed through the kitchen, fixing herself a bottle of cucumber water. "The client is obsessed with not having any space under his furniture, and apparently, some side tables arrived that have an inch of space or something."

"Is he afraid of the boogeyman?" I wondered wryly.

My sister shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know. I just need to fix this before it gets out of hand. He's a major client, and I don't need him complaining all over Hollywood about this. It

will probably take me two hours, maybe two and a half with traffic. The twins convinced Inez to swim with them, and I told her to ask you if she needs anything.”

“Fine.”

“I promise I won’t be long.”

“It’s alright, Nat,” I assured her. “Go ahead. The sooner you leave, the sooner you can come back.”

She took a quick sip of her water. “Okay, okay, I’m going.”

With a quick wave, Natalie was gone, and I swallowed hard. I could hear the twins following Inez through the living room. She must’ve been going to get something from her car. Eager to please, the kids waited with Ziggy on the patio’s blue sofa until Inez returned. It was my worst nightmare coming alive. I tried to putter around the kitchen, but it was pointless. My eyes could hardly leave the windows.

Inez had put on her swimsuit, a royal blue two-piece tied up at her hips and neck, and I had to stand there suffering. She smiled as she sprayed a fresh layer of sunscreen on herself and the kids. The glistening oils made her skin glisten, and I nearly died.

“Uncle Cole!” Asher screamed. “Come swim with us!”

I stepped out onto the patio. “I’ve got some emails I need to send. Maybe I’ll come out once I’m done.”

Asher nodded. “Okay!”

I couldn’t go out there, pretending I was okay. Smiling at my nephew, I headed upstairs to my study, but the wide window over my desk looked right down into the back yard. I could see Inez as a beautiful blue spot on the pool’s ledge, kicking her feet as the kids played with an inflated beach ball. She scratched Ziggy’s head as he plopped down beside Inez.

I had to shut the curtains to keep myself from looking. The two hours Natalie was gone felt like a millennium. I played Solitaire on my computer, paced around the halls, and did everything I could to keep myself from heading outside. It felt

like sweet relief when Natalie's SUV returned to the garage. I could finally go talk to Inez alone.

Dammit.

Inez and I were going to be *alone*.

Heading downstairs, I found Essie and Asher bundled up in bright towels and eating turkey sandwiches at the kitchen table. Essie yawned into her bread.

"I think I wanna nap," she decided, pushing the wet hair from her face.

"Well, I'm not tired," Asher lied.

Natalie laughed lightly. "Maybe you could lie down for twenty minutes, just in case."

"Where's, uh, Inez?" I asked the room, my hands sliding into my jeans pockets.

"Getting her things from her car," Natalie answered. "I told her I would watch the kids this afternoon, so she can settle into the pool house before dinner."

I looked back out through the glass doors. Sure enough, she was wrapped up with a towel around her waist, dragging a massive yellow suitcase across the yard. Her damp curls were piled on top of her head, and my heartbeat quickened.

"Do you think she needs help?" I wondered.

My sister replied, "She said she could manage on her own."

"Well, um, I'll go ask, just to be sure."

Nobody bothered to stop me. Taking their last bites of food, the twins followed their mother upstairs. I was left to walk across the patio, down the length of the pool and outdoor kitchen, and toward the stuccoed and tile-roofed pool house tucked under the palm trees. As I got closer, I noticed the front door was ajar.

"Hello?" I called as I knocked.

The heavy brown door inched open more, but it was clear that nobody was inside. I sighed. For a second, I guessed she had gone back to her car, but then, I heard the water running. There was a shower on the other side, hidden behind the house and the dwarf orange tree. I followed the pebbled path around the side of the house to catch a glimpse of something I shouldn't have seen.

Inez was still in her swimsuit, covered and decent, but that didn't account for the water running down her bare back. Her eyes were shut. Her expression was relaxed. Inez's hands swept around her neck, and I quickly turned away. I wasn't going to ogle her.

That was a damn lie. I already had.

Forcing a cough, I turned back, adjusted the tight space in my jeans, and called out, "Inez?"

The water slowly turned off, and the spigot's handles squeaked into silence. My pounding heart echoed through my ears.

"Cole?" Inez called back.

I stepped back around the orange tree to see Inez again at the end of the path. A rainbow beach towel was wrapped around her body again, but I'd already seen too much. I knew what lay underneath. The single glimpse of her half-dressed body took me back to the night I couldn't forget.

"Hey, I know you're busy," I began, feeling like a stupid teenager. "I just thought I should explain myself . . . and apologize."

Inez gripped the towel over her chest. "For what? For not calling me or pretending you didn't know me today?"

"Both." I exhaled, running a hand over my hair.

Bristling against my presence, Inez pursed her lips. Her bright eyes wouldn't look my way. They glanced toward her bare feet, the little bushes, and the garden wall. She looked anywhere and everywhere to avoid my gaze.

“Fine, just . . .” she finally replied. “Say what you want to say.”

“I had every intention of calling you,” I began. “I was going to wait a day not to look so desperate. I was already trying to decide where I would ask you out to dinner and debating whether I could get you flowers. I had everything planned in my head, and then my sister called me sobbing. She was leaving her husband, and she needed a place to stay.”

Inez still held onto her towel, but her eyes finally flitted my way.

“My friend, Hope, mentioned something about Natalie catching her husband with the nanny,” she recalled hesitantly. “I guess . . . you’ve had a crazy November.”

I laughed lightly. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“Would you prefer to use some . . . choice words?”

“If you mean swears, yes, I could use an insane amount of swear words,” I half-joked. “My sister’s pride was crumbling. The twins’ lives were being upended. My house was noisy and chaotic and strange, and I’ve been the one filling the role of babysitter most days.”

“I guess that doesn’t leave much time for dating,” Inez mused softly.

I took one step closer. “No, and I wanted to tell you. I thought about calling you every single night . . .”

“But?”

I took another step. “I didn’t know if my sister’s business was mine to share, and I didn’t know if you wanted to hear some vague excuse.”

“So, you just left me wondering?”

I hung my head in regret. “I didn’t say it was a good solution. I was just doing the best I could.”

Inez, biting her full lower lip, took a step closer toward me this time. Her green eyes looked up at me with mixed emotions, but some understanding lingered there. This lovely

little creature wasn't the vindictive kind. I might have wounded her pride. I might have been a fool, but that didn't keep Inez from wanting me.

Her hands left the towel. Tucking the pieces of wet hair behind her ears, Inez exhaled softly. Her body relaxed. Her stiff shoulders softened, and her expression grew more compassionate.

"I guess it takes nerve to admit when you messed up," she considered softly. "I guess I can't blame you for putting your sister first, either. I mean, we had only hooked up once."

I couldn't help but smile. "Oh, you meant a little more to me than that. I'm still not over how you ran out on me. I might owe you an apology, but you owe me a cup of coffee in bed."

Inez tried hard not to grin back, but I saw the expression toying at the corners of her mouth. Her wild green eyes looked down to the left.

"So, what?" she wondered. "Are you just trying to get another night out of me now?"

My hands, close to vibrating, dared to reach for her soft face. My knuckles brushed along her temple and cheek, and I found myself creeping closer.

"Oh, I don't think one night is enough," I murmured, "but we can start there."

"You think you're so cute, don't you?" Inez teased, her breath warming my skin. "One well-worded apology, and I'll come running right back."

"You can push me away if you want, Princess."

She sighed. "Oh, I wish I could."

I would have grinned if my lips hadn't been tingling for her touch. All those nights wondering, dreaming of this moment, poured into that one inevitable kiss. Inez's lips gently parted for mine. She inhaled deeply while her hands curled around the fabric of my T-shirt. Every bit of contact sent another jolt of electricity through my skin, and my body came alive.

All at once, I pinned Inez against the pool house, her towel falling to the ground. My hands gripped her waist. The damp skin was soft and cool under my fingertips, but it didn't quench the fire igniting inside me. The only relief I could find lived between her pouting lips and shapely thighs. My mind was already racing with how many ways I could get into her swimsuit. I imagined how easily I could undo the bows on her hips and at the nape of her neck. As the world melted away, my fingers were already trailing down to slip under her swimsuit bottoms.

"You can tell me to stop," I muttered again, my voice thick with desire.

Inez swallowed. "I don't want you to stop."

I thought every inch of her skin was cool, but I was wrong. The precious place between her legs was hot and eager to be touched. With two fingers, I traced the outline of the slick entrance and gently circled her little bud. Inez whimpered into my mouth, my lips refusing to pull away from hers. My growing length protested against my jeans. My body suddenly grew desperate to be set free. It ached to find its way back to Inez, to everything it had missed.

Three high barks sent a shock to my system. Inez and I both jumped apart, and between gasping breaths, I realized Natalie must have let Ziggy back outside. Had she come out too? As I got a grip, I began to see the reality of what we'd almost done.

"We . . . we can't get carried away," I declared breathlessly.

"No, you're right," Inez agreed, her disappointment reflecting mine. "I'm working for Natalie now. We shouldn't do anything reckless."

"Well, it's a little too late for that," I teased gently.

"We should quit while we're ahead, then."

I grinned and shook my head. "Oh, Princess, I don't think I'll be able to quit you so easily."

“I just mean we should slow our roll,” she replied. “You said it yourself—I owe you one morning coffee.”

“To start,” I reminded her.

“To start,” she echoed.

Unable to help myself, I kissed Inez one more time and told her, “I’ll be counting down the days.”

I left Inez to unpack, even though it pained me. It would have been easy to drag her into the pool house and make a mess of her new bed. My arms would have wrapped around her naked frame and never let her go, but we weren’t free. We both had obligations to the people inside my house, and time was limited.

Still, I knew one day, I would get my second night with Inez. Her bare skin would press against mine and her heat would keep my bed warm. I would have Inez again. After feeling the desire between her legs, I was damn sure of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

INEZ

The film scene played out in my head. I could see a tall figure through a haze of hot sand. Greed had ravaged the land, destroying the soil and dragging the California canyons to hell and back again. The sky was endless, blinding blue with the sun piercing down. The leonine wanderer looked down at the Chinese shantytown, and his vision flashed back to his parents' tenement housing in the Irish neighborhoods of New York.

He headed out west for something better, but he only found more of the same. Prejudice, greed, and ignorance followed the wanderer everywhere he went. The gold rush only brought out the worst in human beings. Nobody cared if some poor Irish kid died protecting their gold, but the wanderer didn't plan on dying that day. He would see his mission through to the end because fortune favored the fearless.

Across the room, my phone sang out in heralding trumpets. The image left my mind. I blinked twice, checking the time.

"Time to get the twins," I realized.

I let the script document save itself and shut my laptop. My wanderer didn't have a name yet, but he was following me around the new order of my life in Cole's house. I started my morning fixing breakfast for the kids. Natalie would wake them up with a goodbye kiss, and I would get them dressed and off to school. A few minutes after two, I would head back to the school to get the kids and entertain them until dinnertime.

It had already been a week of this new life, and my circadian rhythm had already settled into the pattern. I did my best not to hit the Mercedes and Tesla cars in the pick-up line, and I smiled as the school custodians ushered my two kindergarteners into my backseat.

"Hi, Inez!" Essie and Asher greeted me.

“Hey, you two,” I replied while pulling away from the busy school. “How was your Monday?”

“We got our progress reports,” Essie told me. “I’ve got all As.”

“Good job,” I told her. “Asher? What about you, buddy?”

“I got a B in Spanish,” he confessed reluctantly.

“Hey, no need to pout,” I assured him while pulling up to a spotlight. “A B is a good grade! If it’s bothering you, though, you should tell your teacher. She might be able to help.”

Essie and Asher’s first year of school was nothing like mine. Their school was progressive and focused on cultural immersion. The twins had a Spanish teacher coming into their classroom twice a week, and apparently, they had already learned basic sign language during preschool. They celebrated all kinds of holidays and cultural events. Last Friday, the kids came home with field trip waivers to visit a local Buddhist temple.

When I was in kindergarten, my old public school took us to the zoo once, but that was it. We definitely never visited any temples.

Asher, still lamenting his shortcoming, sighed. “I guess so.”

Essie and I both knew what was wrong. It wasn’t that Asher got a B. It was that Essie got an A and he didn’t.

“You know, our music teacher wrote that Asher is doing really well,” Essie declared from her car seat. “I didn’t get a special note.”

Asher perked up. “You didn’t?”

She shook her head, and her brown pigtails rustled from the movement. As Asher’s face brightened, I tucked my smile out of view. It was cute how the pair looked out for each other.

“Well, it sounds like we all deserve something special today!” I chimed, hoping I didn’t sound too enthusiastic. “Your mom left us a task this afternoon.”

“What?” Essie wondered, her legs kicking in excitement.

“Well, now that it’s December, your mom thinks it’s time to dress up your uncle’s house for Christmas, and it’s our job to go pick out the tree and wreaths.”

“Yes!” Asher cheered, his hands going up like my car was a rollercoaster. “I love Christmas trees, and Uncle Cole’s house is HUGE! We’re gonna get the biggest tree!”

“I don’t know about that.” I laughed. “Your mom said it could be nine feet tall. Otherwise, it’s going to scrape the ceiling.”

“That’s still giant,” Essie pointed out.

“Well, if you’re polite and don’t fuss too much at the lot, we might have time to go to the bakery I know nearby. I’ll buy you two a treat for your good grades, and we can do some of your homework there.”

The twins lit up with delight. Rambunctious and eager, they bounced ideas off one another as I took us all toward the Christmas tree lot. Natalie had a regular contract with the owner of the place. She used him for most of her interior decorating work for the holidays, and I could see why. The lot looked like a forest covered in colorful party tents and displays of wooden yard decor. We passed some white deer to find the cashier’s shed. Essie and Asher followed closely, their eyes wide with wonder.

“Hi, um, I’m here to approve Natalie Crawford-Levy’s order?” I told the older worker behind the glass. “I’m Inez, Inez Sideris.”

The white-haired woman nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got it all made up. The wreaths were made just this mornin’. You wanna check ’em over or pick out the tree first?”

“I’ll look over the wreaths,” I told her before turning to the kids. “Essie, Asher, if I let you go look at trees, do you promise to stick together? That means no running, no hide and seek. If you get too rowdy, we’ll have to skip the bakery.”

Essie latched hands with her brother and swore, “We’ll be good!”

“All right, then.”

The two scrambled off toward a yellow-striped tent that looked taller than the rest. Trying not to worry, I followed the woman around her red shed, finding all of Natalie’s order marked and bound together. I pulled my phone from the pocket of my corduroy skirt and began to look at the list Natalie messaged me. Everything seemed to be in order. The wreaths of mixed greenery all looked good, and there were enough gold bows for each wreath plus spares. With that settled, I went and found the twins among some twelve-foot trees, debating which was better.

“This one’s fatter!” Asher exclaimed.

“But this one is greener,” Essie said.

“I hate to break it to you both,” I admitted, “but they’re both too tall.”

“Aww.” They pouted.

Their fretting didn’t last long. Once we found a worker, the twins and I were directed to trees more suited to Cole’s living room and den. We picked out a nice fir for the living room and a small spruce for the upstairs den. It was adorable to watch the twins, take pictures of them among the twenty-foot trees, and see how delighted they were in the fake sleigh for sale. Cute as it was, the feelings were all bittersweet.

Natalie should have been there, not me. If she hadn’t been at a deposition for her divorce proceedings, she would have been able to leave work early and pick up the kids. I knew I was a poor replacement for their mother, but my job was to help make the twins’ lives as happy and normal as possible.

“Now, you get *one* treat,” I asserted as I held the bakery door open.

The kids smelled like pine in their school uniforms, but it was all overwhelmed by the scents of sugar and spice. The red brick walls and concrete floors made the holiday music echo around the long room. Candy canes and snowmen were already decorating the space while a group of women talked

around one of the industrial-looking tables. With wide eyes, Essie and Asher rushed up to the glass cases.

“Hey, Inez,” Paul said from behind the counter. “Long time no see.”

“Oh, hey, Paul!” I greeted him with a wave. “I didn’t know you were working today!”

“I switched some shifts to get this weekend off,” he explained. “I’ve got a show this weekend.”

“Paul, this is Essie and her brother, Asher,” I introduced him. “You two, say hi to my friend, Paul.”

“Hi,” they both said with a wave.

“We’ve come to the bakery to get a treat for our good grades and do our homework,” I explained.

“Oh, in that case,” Paul decided with a smile, “you two can get the good-student discount.”

“That’s a thing?” Essie gasped.

Paul laughed. “No, but I can share my employee discount with you.”

The kids were thrilled to get their holiday sugar cookies and cocoa. Eggnog latte in hand, I charged the snacks to Natalie’s credit card and settled with the twins in the corner of the room. The round table was just big enough to let the kids spread out with their handful of worksheets. One was for English and another for math, but the kids worked faster together.

“What’s six minus one?” Asher asked me.

“I can’t tell you,” I reminded him, “but I can help you.”

“How?”

I held up six fingers. “If you take away one, how many fingers are left?”

Asher grinned as he leaned over the table. His tiny fingers pushed down my spare thumb and counted my remaining hand.

“Five!”

“Well, that’s your answer then,” I said.

Essie chewed on her mitten-shaped cookie. “Daddy used to help us with homework sometimes, but he usually had homework too.”

Asher’s grin fell. “Inez, do you know why Daddy’s so busy these days? We haven’t seen him in a long time. Mom says he’s got a lot on his plate.”

My gut twisted. Hiding my sympathy behind a sip of my latte, I wasn’t sure how to respond. It was the first time the twins had brought up their father, and Natalie never said much about him. All I knew was that he was named Roger, and he sucked. Still, the twins settled down into their chairs and stared at me, waiting for answers.

“He does have a lot going on right now,” I told the twins

“Because Mommy and Daddy are learning to get along apart?” Essie wondered.

I nodded. “That’s part of it, but just like how you moved into your uncle’s house, things are changing for your dad, and it will take time for him to adjust. It’s going to be tough for a while. Until then, you’ve got your mom to love you, your uncle, and me.”

“You love us?” Asher asked with curious surprise.

“Sure,” I replied. “I don’t love it when you fart up my car, but you’re both sweet kids. I’m glad that I get to take care of you both.”

Asher laughed at the memory of making my car smell like an outhouse that same morning. The boy found his stench *hilarious*, not that Essie or I agreed with him.

“But . . . will Daddy come see us?” Essie wondered softly.

“I’d like to think so,” I tried to assure her, but I couldn’t be sure. “Come on. You’ve done your worksheets. Let’s head home and see if the Christmas tree has been delivered.”

“I’ll bet Uncle Cole will love it!” Asher declared while packing up his book bag.

“Do you think he’ll decorate it?” Essie asked her brother.

He shook his head. “No! Uncle Cole wouldn’t start without us!”

We all waved goodbye to Paul and headed back home. Thankfully, the sad conversation about their absent father gave way to happier memories about their uncle. It was clear that the twins loved him. The way Essie and Asher talked about Cole could warm the most desolate heart.

It was one thing for Cole to be good-looking and debonair, but I’d quickly learned that he was a good man with a golden heart. With each passing day, I saw how much he loved his family, how kind and caring he could be. He was a better father to the twins than Roger Levy himself, and Cole’s gallantry was more tempting than any crooked grin.

I was trying to keep my distance. For both of our sakes, I needed to leave Cole beyond arm’s length, but it was growing harder and harder. I was heading back home to him. I was growing addicted to his laugh and sweet words. If he kept it up, I didn’t know how I would restrain myself.

CHAPTER SIX

COLE

Ten minutes after the delivery truck pulled away, I heard the third garage door crawling open. Inez and the twins were home just in time.

“Is it here?” Essie yelled into the main room.

I chuckled. “Hey to you, too.”

Her eyes were too fixed on the fat evergreen that she and Asher had chosen. It had been propped up in the far corner next to the ornate stone fireplace. My boxes of holiday lights and ornaments were already piled up around it.

God, I hoped I had enough.

“Wow, it looks better than I imagined,” Inez commented as she dropped her bag in a nearby armchair. “Is the little one up in the den?”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t call it little,” I remarked. “How tall is that thing?”

Inez shrugged. “I guess it was a few inches taller than me, so . . . like . . . five and a half feet tall?”

I shook my head. “Nat makes Martha Stewart look lazy.”

It would have been one thing if there were just the trees, but there were wreaths for the whole house, evergreen garlands, and plans for lights in the back yard. We had a little snow village of houses to put up in the living room and scented pine cones to turn into centerpieces. The only trouble was that my sister was nowhere to be found.

It was just me, Inez, and the blueprints Natalie had left behind. Luckily, we had two little helper elves waiting in their school’s blue plaid. The rest of Los Angeles had my sister’s help. Why didn’t I? I wasn’t a paying customer, but hey, I didn’t blame her. Neither kids nor divorce were cheap, and her business was probably the only thing keeping her sane beyond the twins’ faces.

“So, kiddos,” I began. “Your mom called me and told me she’s got to meet with a few more clients before she comes home. She asked if we would get started on the lights. Do you want to help me after you finish your homework?”

“We’ve done our homework!” Asher exclaimed. “Inez helped us with it, and we bought cookies.”

Inez quickly explained, “We stopped by a bakery where my friend works. Oh, and we got something for you, too.”

Inez dug into her black canvas bag to fish out a paper bag. The waxed paper crinkled as I noticed a blondie bar inside.

“Essie said it’s your favorite,” Inez added with a smile. “I guess it’s true what they say. Gentlemen prefer blondes.”

I grinned, wanting to banter back, but Essie tugged at my pants leg.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“I love it,” I replied, scooping her up in my free arm. “Now, are you ready to get to work?”

“Yeah!” Essie and Asher exclaimed together.

“Okay, great!” I agreed, matching their enthusiasm. “I’ll order a pizza for dinner, and we’ll get to work!”

Inez smiled. “Sounds like we need some music, then.”

Pulling up a holiday station on her phone, Inez let her music play through the speakers set up around the house. Old crooner classics played as I showed the kids how to pull the string lights in and out to ensure the tree had depth. Inez unraveled balls of lights and tested them in the nearby outlet.

Her pretty face would catch the light of the balls, and her smile would brighten each time a strand worked. Essie and Asher were content to talk with each other. It was easy for me to listen while watching Inez. It gave me an excuse to let our hands brush when she would pass me another strand.

“I’ll bet that’s the pizza,” Inez guessed as the doorbell rang. “I’ll run and get it.”

Jumping up from the floor, Inez overestimated her force. She stumbled forward, but all my stolen glances paid off just in time. My arms were right there to catch Inez when she needed me.

“Be careful, Princess,” I told her where the kids couldn’t hear. “I don’t need you getting hurt tonight.”

“Really?” she teased back. “I thought you would want me to get hurt.”

My eyebrows knitted together. “Why?”

“So you could try and kiss it better,” she replied, laughing.

It was hard not to kiss Inez when she said things like that. All week long, we’d been playing games like this. My hand would run along her shoulders and back. Inez would tease me and laugh. I didn’t care if her jokes were scathing. I was willing to pay any price to hear her laugh.

I just hated that I couldn’t swallow up the sound. With each passing day, I grew more desperate to kiss Inez until her laughs turned into soft moans and whispers of my name, but I was resigned to letting her hands push up the sleeves of my marled gray sweater. I wasn’t sure she meant to do it. Still, I didn’t stop her.

“I guess I should go get that pizza,” she mumbled while pulling away.

My skin felt colder without her touch. As the kids and I got the last strand on the top, Inez set the kitchen table. I could hear the clattering of plates being unloaded from the upper cabinet. I could almost see her short frame stretching to its longest length. She balanced on her tiptoes and wrapped her fingers around the plates.

I knew what I would have preferred them to wrap around, but there were children present.

“Did you get cheese pizza?” Essie wondered. “I like cheese the best.”

“One of them is, but it’s several kinds of cheeses like ricotta and mozzarella. I think you’ll like it,” I replied.

As we finished, Asher and Essie hurried to the kitchen to wash their hands and eat. Inez had thrown together a Caesar salad for the sake of health, but the two large pizza boxes were crowding up the stovetop. The health benefits of a few romaine leaves would be null and void.

“Here, make sure you get a napkin before you get a slice,” Inez told the kids. “I can’t have you too greasy when your mom gets here.”

“If they are, blame me,” I joked. “Nat will believe it.”

“Uncle Cole used to let us play in mud.” Asher giggled as he grabbed a piece of meat and veggie supreme. “Momma got so mad at him when she saw us!”

I leaned closer to Inez before confessing, “It took two days to get all the dirt out of Essie’s hair.”

Inez laughed as she handed me a plate. “No mud pies tonight, then.”

“Just pizza pies?”

“I’ll allow it,” she agreed. “This time.”

It was easy to let our arms brush against one another and to let her soft laughter reverberate inside me. With the twins clamoring to sit down with their pizza and glasses of limeade, nobody was at our end of the kitchen to notice, not until Natalie’s car pulled up in the garage.

My sister came into the kitchen looking worse for wear. I instinctively pulled away from Inez, but Natalie seemed too tired to notice anything. Her brown hair was ruffled. Her pinstriped skirt was a little rumpled. It might not have been much, but for Natalie, it was disastrous.

“Hey, everyone,” she greeted us with a sigh.

“Hi, Mom!” Essie exclaimed. “Uncle Cole ordered pizza!”

“And Inez bought you a cookie!” Asher added.

Inez smiled in Natalie’s direction. “We stopped by a bakery after tree shopping. The twins helped me pick out a sugar cookie for you. It’s in my bag.”

“Oh, isn’t that sweet of you guys,” Natalie replied with another exhale.

“Here,” I said, handing her a slice of cheese pizza on a plate. “You need nourishment.”

Natalie’s blue-green eyes looked grateful as she accepted the plate. With little energy left, my sister intended to spend it all focused on her children. They sat across from each other at the kitchen table while the twins talked about their day.

“Sounds like you had a full day,” Natalie commented. “You both should be ready for bed, then.”

“We’re not tired!” Essie protested. “We’ve got to put the ornaments on the tree, and there are no lights on the little tree!”

“It’s after seven, Esther,” her mother insisted. “We’ll do it tomorrow, okay? Mommy is tired, and you’ve got school in the morning.”

Like her mother, Essie looked reluctant to concede. “Okay, tomorrow.”

“You promise?” Asher added.

Natalie nodded, shoving the last bite of crust into her mouth. “Yes, yes, now come on. I want to sign your progress reports and get you both in the tub.”

It was a whirlwind of activity. The twins talked over one another and carried their plates to the sink and headed up the stairs. Their feet stomped against each step until, finally, there was silence. All that remained was Inez’s soft humming as she cleared away the food.

“You’re good with them,” she remarked softly. “The twins really love you, Cole.”

I shrugged. “They’re good kids, easy to love.”

Inez smiled. “That’s true.”

“Even if they are a tad rambunctious.”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “They’re definitely that.”

I spent the last nine nights dreaming of an opportunity like this. As I went to load the dishwasher, I let the side of my hand touch Inez's back. The pumpkin-colored cardigan she wore was soft to the touch, but it was nothing like the feel of her lips and thighs. I wanted so many things from Inez, and the way she looked in the low kitchen light was starting to make me feel selfish. It made my whole hand press against her back.

I waited for Inez to push me away.

"You know . . . the kids were able to have their fun," I remarked softly. "So, haven't we earned a little fun ourselves?"

Inez knew the truth of my words. It reflected in her eyes as she turned to face me.

"Wouldn't that be reckless?"

I grinned. "I've thought long and hard about this."

"That means you weren't thinking with your brain," she teased me. "How typical."

A chuckle rumbled under my breath. "Don't tell me you haven't given this any thought."

"Oh, I have, but I prefer to think about it during my shower or right before bed," Inez boldly replied. "I find I do my best thinking in both of those places."

Realizing what she meant, a thrill coursed through me, and her full lips became all I could see. Their perfect cupid's bow sent an arrow straight to my heart. The obsession began to consume me from within. It wasn't enough to let my thumb run along her lower lip. I needed to taste Inez, every possible inch of her.

One kiss became two. Two became three, and soon enough, my hands were gripping against her sides and pressing Inez against the yellow kitchen cabinets. My leg pressed between hers. Our bodies were as close as they could be, yet it didn't feel like enough.

"Why don't we go somewhere more comfortable?" Inez whispered against my lips. "We might get a little more privacy

in the pool house.”

I kissed her again before declaring, “Alright, let’s make a break for it.”

Inez grinned as I grabbed her wrist, pulling her toward the glass-paned doors. We didn’t waste time with shoes or jackets. The chilled night air couldn’t settle on our skin. Inez and I ran too quickly, and we were too eager to feel anything but each other. I could feel myself becoming young again, turning into that wide-eyed boy ready to be lost in the ageless green forest. With every hungry touch, time grew more and more irrelevant.

“Just let me type in the code . . .” Inez mumbled as I kissed the nape of her neck.

The door’s lock chimed, and hurriedly, we stumbled inside together. I didn’t bother with lights. The ambient glow from the yard offered me enough to see her silhouette. As my eyes adjusted, I focused my attention on the zipper of her skirt and pulled off her cardigan and T-shirt. Every scrap of fabric felt like a nuisance.

“Let me taste you,” I urged Inez, my hands tugging at her top. “I’ve already had dinner.”

“And now you want me for dessert?”

I laughed. “Exactly.”

“Alright, Cole,” she agreed. “You can have whatever you like.”

“Those are dangerous words, Princess.”

“I don’t care,” she declared, and I could just hear the smile in her voice.

My hands roved across her body as we stripped each other bare. I bumped my side against the small sofa as she danced over to her bed, and my thin sweater fell against the small dining table. In the darkness, I couldn’t see the personal touches she had added to the studio. I didn’t know the book’s title by her bed or the clothes in her half-open closet, but I could learn those things another day. Right then, I only needed to memorize the outline of her glorious curves.

Inez sprawled out beneath me. My hands were able to get caught up in her thick auburn hair as my mouth trailed down to her chest. Our skin brushed together, growing hotter in the friction and frustration of desire. My tongue circled her breasts, and I felt the rise and fall of her chest growing.

The room was becoming impossibly hot.

“Always so precious,” I muttered against her skin, savoring the sensation.

I felt like a starving man finding manna from heaven, yet I forced myself not to ravish her. Inez deserved to be enjoyed and appreciated. Besides, if I rushed to the end, it would only mean leaving her bed that much sooner.

My hands wandered down to slowly spread her legs wider. Inez welcomed the touch.

“Touch me,” Inez whispered into the darkness.

The words almost didn't sound real. Coming from some ethereal place within Inez, the delicate words struck another blow to my heart. I was growing weaker by the second. As my mouth trailed along her inner thigh, I didn't know how I had survived so long without her. The salt of her heavenly skin consumed my skin, and her fingers tangled themselves in my hair. All those nights of wondering led to this moment.

Finally, I had my first taste of Inez. Her pheromones took hold of my sanity, and I knew I could never go back. Inez had to belong to me as much as I belonged to her.

My tongue pressed against her warm, slick folds. I drank in everything Inez offered. With every lick, Inez's breath grew higher. A soft, whimpering moan escaped her lips, and I felt her nails scratch against my scalp. It was the sweetest kind of pain.

“Cole,” she finally pleaded. “Let me have you.”

“Whatever you want, Princess,” I assured her, my own body growing desperate.

With every breath that escaped her lips, my body reacted. Anticipation built inside me and flooded down to my rigid

length. There was no denying it. I *ached* for her, body and soul. It was only when I hovered over her that I realized my mistake.

“Inez . . . I don’t have anything on me,” I realized regrettably.

I cursed myself internally for being so stupid. All of my condoms were in the house. Still, she smiled. Her hand reached for my jaw, and I turned my head to kiss her palm.

“I do take pills,” she murmured, her lips so close to mine. “If you’re willing . . . I am too.”

Words failed me. Anything I could have mumbled back would have sounded too desperate. Instead, I nodded and kissed her, my urgency lowering from its boiling point down to a steady simmer.

Inez was putting her trust in me, in us. I wouldn’t fail her.

Finally, I slipped inside her. I slowly pushed deeper until I was fully sheathed within Inez’s inviting body. Her legs twisted around mine, and her head buried itself in the comforter. With another rocking grind, I kissed the crook of her neck that Inez exposed. We found our rhythm together, Inez’s hips rising to meet mine. Her limbs wrapped around me, and I prayed she would never let me go.

I wanted to be trapped in that moment and in the pleasure Inez provided. I wanted her teeth always nipping at my ear and her lips always whispering my name.

“Cole, I’m so . . .” Inez murmured, words failing her now.

“Let go, Princess,” I urged.

I had been on the edge of release for a good minute, but I wasn’t going to give up until Inez had her satisfaction. With her eyes shut tightly, Inez writhed beneath me, close to coming out of her skin. I kissed her with all my might, taking every pleading moan that escaped her body. Euphoria rushed through Inez, and I felt it. I studied every tremble as her body clenched around me.

I pulled Inez tightly against me. In the thrall of our shared moment, I let my satisfaction course through her. I shut my eyes and held onto the feeling for as long as I could.

Inez was mine. I was hers. Even if the tethers couldn't last, we were bound together for that one fragile moment in the dark.

"You can't stay," Inez told me softly, but it sounded more like chagrin than a command.

"I know," I assured her, "but . . . I don't want to keep pretending, not with you."

"Well, nobody needs to know, do they?" she murmured.

"No. No, they don't."

After being traumatized by her last nanny sleeping around with her husband, I didn't know how my sister would handle my wanting a relationship with Inez. Natalie was still fragile. Whether she liked it or not, my older sister's heart was made of glass, and these days, it was my duty to keep it safe.

I could keep her and the twins safe. I could keep Inez safe too. The only trouble was that I didn't know who would care for me. Who would cover my blind spots and hold me in the dark? Looking into her eyes, I wished on every lucky star that it could be Inez. I needed it to be her, even if she had to carry my heart in secret.

As long as nothing went wrong, nobody would need to know the truth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

INEZ

The wanderer took a long drink from his cup before staring at his dominoes. He didn't like gambling, but desperation drew him to the pai gow tables. In my head, I knew he wasn't trying to be greedy. He was just looking for enough money to get him through the night.

Nobody in the Chinese town of railroad workers trusted white people, but his money still spent the same as anyone else's. After one good hand, the wanderer tipped his hat and bowed out of the game. I could hear the sound of his boots hitting the uneven floorboards as he left a tip with the bar.

Gallantry was never rewarded in this dying world, or rather, allowing the wanderer to live was payment enough. No gunshots were fired toward him as he walked down the street at dusk, heading to his horse and hoping he would find a clean place to sleep for the night.

For so long, my wanderer had been a gray silhouette, but he had amber eyes these days. He had a golden heart that went unseen and light brown hair falling across his sun-kissed forehead. He could be chivalrous, but that didn't mean he didn't have a streak of danger living inside him. He still knew how to use the weapon pressed against his thigh.

He still knew how to go in for the kill.

I jumped as a silvery chime echoed through the studio. My heart beat like a hummingbird's wings as I realized my mother was calling me. With a sigh, I picked the phone off the desktop.

"Hey, Mom," I answered too brightly.

She would know everything I'd been doing over the last few days. I needed to sound calm.

"Hi, Inez, honey," she greeted me with a voice sweeter than her semolina cake. "I haven't heard from you in a while. Is everything okay?"

Classic maternal guilt trip. Mom wasn't pulling any punches this afternoon.

"Oh, yeah, I'm just busy," I assured her. "New job and all, but it's good. The kids are good, and the family is pleasant to be around. I'm just getting used to the new hours."

I pushed myself away from the little writing desk and looked around the room. The pool house hadn't been what I'd expected inside. The beadboard walls were painted a robin's egg blue, and the furniture looked like it belonged on an island in the Mediterranean. It was cheerful and happy, like the colorful Moroccan tiles running along my little kitchen wall. In the windowsill, my Christmas cactus was getting a few pink blossoms.

"Sure," she offered in understanding. "The kids, they're well-behaved?"

"Yeah," I replied. "They're six, but they're good for six-year-olds."

"And the mother pays you well?"

"She probably pays me too well. I don't think I could afford a cardboard box in this neighborhood, let alone a whole studio apartment, but she doesn't seem to deduct much from my wages for room and board."

"I hope you're giving it your best, then."

"Of course, Mom. I always do."

"That's good. I'm glad you're working so hard," Mom remarked. "You get that from your Yaya. She's always been the hardest worker in the family. All of you girls have her dedication."

"How are the cousins?" I wondered absently, watering my tiny plant.

"Oh, they're all doing well. Tessa is getting the restaurant menus redesigned, and Chloe is trying out a new recipe on our dessert menu. They miss you. We all miss you."

"Mom . . ." I said with a sigh.

She didn't relent. "You know, you could probably earn more money working with them. You would get to see your family every day, and you could come live with me in your old bedroom! You could even keep writing on the side."

I tried not to groan right into my mother's ear. As the lone daughter of a single mom, I found myself being her Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of her focus, but she didn't understand. She didn't know why I'd insisted on studying writing and film at Pepperdine. My Yaya called it a "waste of a scholarship" and equated my scripts to the blankets she knitted. My mother grew more silver hairs from her worrying, and at the end of the day, my relatives decided to dump their anxieties onto my shoulders.

I should have been used to it. This had been happening for years. When I saw Mom at Thanksgiving, we had this same argument in my grandparents' driveway, but I wasn't impervious to the jabs. They were killing me with their kindness, wanting "only what's best" for me. They never tried to understand that their image of my ideal life was nothing like they envisioned. If I ever found myself back in that old Santa Barbara restaurant, I would probably lose the will to live.

"Inez?" Mom asked from the other end.

How long had I been leaning against the kitchen counter?

"Sorry, I just got distracted by something," I half-lied. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm good here. My studio is nice, and the pay is decent. I'm happy here."

"But . . . do you think . . . are you allowed to bring young men to the house?"

She came in with her second sucker punch, a direct hit. I winced from the pain.

"What if I don't want to bring 'young men' to this house?" I posed, growing more embittered.

Mom gasped. "Honey, you aren't telling me that you're . . .? I mean, I voted for the marriage bill, but your Papa might—"

I cut her off. "Mom, I'm not a lesbian!"

“Oh, Inez, that’s a relief.” She exhaled before adding, “Not that there’s anything wrong with that life! Being gay is okay!”

“Mom . . . *stop.*”

“Sorry, honey. I’m calm. I’m listening.”

“I only meant that I’m not interested in seeing one at the moment,” I finally explained. “I . . . I just have a lot on my plate right now. Maybe I’ll try the dating scene in the new year, but not now.”

For a minute, I thought about telling her I was seeing someone new, that I was happy even if we were still figuring things out. I didn’t mind that my relationship with Cole had to be low-key. I would drop the twins off at school and come back to his lips waiting for me in the kitchen. As long as the house was empty, we could carry on like nothing was amiss. It was only when Natalie and the twins were home that we kept each other at arm’s length.

Still, I could always count on a stolen smile or glance from across the room. Cole would make his weak excuses to touch me, and my breaths would get a little deeper when I caught a whiff of his warm and spicy cologne.

It wasn’t normal, but it was probably the best relationship I’d had in ages. Hell, Cole might have been the best man I’d ever dated, even if he’d never taken me out on an official date. It didn’t matter, though. A sandwich with him by the pool was better than any five-star restaurant.

“You’re capable of so much, Inez,” Mom encouraged me. “Don’t sell yourself short.”

“I know, Mom,” I replied, “which is why, with all the love in my heart, don’t ask me about dating or work. Just . . . tell me how you’re doing.”

I spent the rest of the hour listening to my mother ramble. By the end, my body was tired, and my mother’s words were still twisted around me like a thorny vine. They wouldn’t let go of me, no matter how hard I pulled away. It left my head hurting and my throat dry.

I needed a drink. I went into the kitchen in the main house to pour myself some of Natalie's infused water. I took one sip of the watermelon and mint water and then another. Still not settled, I went to see what I could compulsively tidy up around the house.

"Hey, you okay?" Cole asked as he found me alone in the living room.

He was dressed in something other than his usual jeans. The sleeves of his light blue chambray shirt were rolled up to his elbows, showing off the light dusting of hair along his toned forearms. His tailored pants were military green and cuffed around his fashionable brown boots. It was like he wanted to look photo-ready without trying too hard, like he knew cameras had been hiding in the bushes.

I stopped wiping the glass coffee table and sighed. "Yeah, I'm okay."

The twins had cultural holiday projects they were working on for school. I was impressed with the paper star Essie had been decorating to represent Switzerland's tradition of Star Singing, but the damn glitter was stuck all over the table. Even if the world ended, I believed those silver specks would survive. It would undoubtedly take a miracle to get them out of the Persian rug.

Not worried about the mess, Cole sat down on the linen couch near where I sat on the floor. His hand pushed the rebellious curls from my eyes.

"You don't sound like it," he remarked. "You don't look like it, either."

He shouldn't have known me so well. We had only been spending time together for a few days, not even a week, yet his expression already looked empathic. Cole leaned forward, and I took a deep breath.

"Why don't you tell me how your meeting went with your agent? Then, I'll tell you about my morning," I suggested.

"There's not much to tell," he insisted with a shrug. "There's talk of pitching a reboot of my old show, but I'm not

interested. There's been an offer for me to do some of those made-for-television holiday movies."

"Would you be interested in those?"

Cole laughed with a wry edge. "They aren't offering me nearly enough money to sell my soul like that. Those greeting card people will find some other sucker, anyway."

"You said the other afternoon that you wanted a more serious, dramatic role," I recalled. "Was there nothing like that?"

"I think my agent prefers low-hanging fruit. For me, any easy paycheck means an easy bonus for her, but it's her ass on the line now. We've been going back and forth for months over this. If there's nothing better soon, I'm going to need to find myself another agent."

I patted his nearby knee. "Hey, maybe we can both look for agents? Do they have agents for screenwriters?"

"If you offer somebody enough money, I'd bet an agent would sell anything."

We laughed lightly as Cole covered my hand with his. Pulling it toward his face, Cole kissed the inside of my wrist. His eyes remained on me.

"Now, I told you about my day," he added. "I believe it's time for you to talk about yours."

"My mother called," I confessed, my shoulders hunching.

"That's all?"

Shaking my head, I laughed. "You don't know my mother. She's got all the subtlety of a drag queen in a pride parade, and I'm the only child she has to focus on. My existence is the center of her universe."

"Not the sun?"

"God, I wish," I sighed. "It's just when my family heard I was between jobs and about to move out of my old apartment, well, they all started hoping I would go back to Santa Barbara. I've got a job and a place to live, but they're having a hard

time shaking the notion. My aunt, Alexandra, asked me back during Thanksgiving what days I wanted to work in the family restaurant. I'm guessing they're all still pestering Mom to get me back, so . . ."

"Your mother is still on you about it?" Cole guessed.

"Yep, that's about right," I agreed. "Writing is no more than a hobby, and I'm wasting my youth on a pipe dream."

Cole, still holding my hand, turned it over and began tracing the lines in my palm. The sensation brought about both comfort and temptation, the two emotions swirling together in my head.

"If you're interested in wasting your time," he mused in a low tone, "I know how I can keep you occupied."

"How?" I asked with feigned ignorance. "Did you spill glitter too?"

Cole's laugh was a deep, warm vibrato that made my skin tingle. His lips pressed into my palm, my inner wrist, and all the way into my inner elbow. Every kiss drew me closer until our faces were inches apart.

He flashed a crooked grin. "I'd be happy to let you check me for the stuff. It can get *everywhere*."

"It's going to have to be a thorough inspection."

My eyelids were begging to shut. With Cole so close, I longed to shut out the world and get lost in him. He was the only person who could overwhelm my thoughts. Even as his breath warmed my cheek, I could feel my insides stirring in excitement. I couldn't remember what had me so bothered in the first place.

"Come upstairs, Princess," Cole murmured seductively. "I'll happily let you look over every inch of me."

Our lips met, and my mouth parted. Cole stole the gasping breath from my lungs. As his tongue found mine, the rest of my body begged for more. It begged to be touched, held, and a thousand sinful things in between. Considering it all, I felt a soft, pleading moan threatening to escape from my chest.

I couldn't wait anymore. My hands were already itching to pull apart the brown buttons on Cole's shirt.

Pulling away, I whispered, "I think it's about time you lead the way."

CHAPTER EIGHT

COLE

It was awful how I lived for these moments with Inez. As time ticked by, I found that stealing twenty minutes of her time was enough to brighten the rest of my day. I woke up craving the chance to touch and taste her. Once I got what I so desperately wanted, it wouldn't be long before my mind started thinking up ways to have her again.

Up in my bedroom, I had mine and Inez's clothes in a pile at the foot of my bed. Soft light filtered through the drawn sheer curtains, so nobody got a chance to see her heavenly form but me. Inez's soft curves and dreamy eyes were for me alone. In the expansive room of ivory and beige, she was the brightest spot of color and the only thing I cared to admire.

"I haven't found a single speck of glitter on you," she teased as her hands ran over my chest. "I could double-check, though . . ."

As she offered, her fingers wandered back down my abdomen to find the hard shaft pressed against her thigh. All her taunting had my body reacting, and the gentle brush of her fingertips elicited a quiet groan from deep within me.

"I think your hands have done quite enough today," I growled in her ear, listening to her ragged breath that tickled my neck. "Tell me, Princess, do you trust me?"

"Always," she swore.

"Are you going to let me waste your time in the best possible way?"

A grin spread across her pink lips. "Of course."

This had been on my mind for the last few days. Finally, I had the perfect opportunity, and I wasn't going to waste it. I left the warmth of Inez's body to grab a tie from my walk-in closet. I always hated the things. They were choking, restrictive, and stuffy, but the black silk tie in my hands was about to serve a far more interesting purpose.

“Are you going to blindfold me?” Inez guessed from where she lay.

“Close,” I replied, “but not quite.”

Willing and eager, Inez didn't resist when I pulled her higher on the poster bed. She allowed me to bring her arms over her head while my thin piece of silk bound her wrists together. With the knot gently tightened around her wrists, I let the other end wrap around the nearest bedpost. Inez watched with curious eyes as her fingers curled around the raw wooden edge of the headboard.

“My scoutmaster always swore that knot-tying was important,” I joked. “It's nice to know he was right.”

Still smiling, Inez laughed at me, “I never took you for a scouting type.”

“It didn't last long,” I remarked. “They kicked me out for always causing trouble. I only ever wanted to play games.”

“Bad for them,” she mused softly, “but good for me.”

“Good for you and me both.”

Inez's bubbling laughter softened into a gasp when my hands found her bare breasts. My thumbs rolled over her nipples as I stole her second moan, letting it get lost in another kiss. The feeling of such power stroked my ego, but I wasn't stupid. I only had what Inez offered. She could grant me the world and take it away in an instant. I couldn't let my pride get in the way of such tempting pleasure.

Instead, my left hand wandered down her side to find the space between her legs. My thumb slowly circled her clit. With the gentle motion growing, Inez began to rock against the feeling. Her hips bucked, and her moans turned to whimpers.

“You're mine now,” I muttered, my lips moving to her throat.

She wouldn't run. I wouldn't hide. In the faint afternoon light, the invisible strands binding me to Inez only grew stronger. I had her toes curling in ecstasy, but I was the one

who needed her. My body was begging to thrust itself inside hers and never pull away.

“I’m yours,” Inez agreed breathlessly. “I’m all yours.”

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I moved my hand to let my tip press into her entrance. I watched Inez’s expression as I entered her, studying how her lips parted and her breath caught. Her eyes, shut tightly, shot open. Every piece of her was coming alive, her evergreen flourishing from within.

I rocked myself into her again and again. With my pace steadily growing, I anchored my grip against the sides of her breasts. I let Inez’s teeth tug against my bottom lip and her legs wrap around me. Her hands occupied, Inez was intent on grabbing me any way she could.

Her soft moans pitched higher as I consumed her hungry mouth in another kiss. Selfish, I wanted it all—her taste, her sounds, and the very air from her lungs. Inez Sideris had become my greatest obsession, and all I ever wanted was to make her happy. All the hours of pining led up to that one fraction of a minute where pleasure rushed through her, causing her body to writhe. My climax took hold of me, and I collapsed into the feeling.

I slowly reached up to undo the knot binding Inez as I caught my breath. Her hands instantly reached for me, pushing the tangled hair from my damp forehead. We lay side by side in the quiet. The bed smelled of salt, pheromones, and traces of my cologne mingling with Inez’s herbal shampoo. With a soft sigh, I inhaled traces of rosemary and mint as my face got buried in her curls. I’d never loved the scent of rosemary so much.

“I’m sorry nobody is offering you a better role,” she whispered. “You deserve better.”

I pulled back from the crook of her neck to look at Inez better. “And I’ll bet your script deserves to be read.”

She laughed lightly. “You bet?”

“I don’t know anything about what you write,” I pointed out with a grin. “You’re like a secretive little hermit holed up

in the pool house.”

“You only ever had to ask, Cole,” she countered.

“Alright, then,” I replied. “What’s your current script about? What are you writing all morning and afternoon when I’m not wasting your time?”

Inez laughed again. “It’s a Western. I have it written as a limited series right now, but it could turn into a movie or a full series, maybe.”

My eyebrows knitted together. “Really?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Why is that so surprising?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed. “I knew you said you liked period pieces, but I guess I imagined something with fancy dresses and men in ruffled shirts.”

“Like that dress I wore to the Halloween party?”

“Maybe,” I conceded.

Inez laughed again, letting her hand run along my jaw. “I thought you knew me better, Cole Crawford. I’m not a frilly, girly type.”

“I don’t know,” I mused, my hand wandering down to her back. “You certainly *feel* like a girl to me. I’ve never met a man with an ass this nice.”

“Stop it,” she insisted, beaming and trying not to giggle.

“Only if you tell me about this Western of yours.”

“It’s about a young man from Boston, a son of immigrants. He went out to California in the final months of the Gold Rush to work as a gun for hire, and he kind of moves through the unseen places of the New West. He travels through the immigrant towns set up in the outskirts and protects gold being shuttled to the new train systems. It’s framed as a cowboy film, but I was more interested in exploring the diversity of the period. There were a lot of Chinese towns set up at that time, and tons of immigrants faced discrimination when heading out to San Francisco for work. Since my grandparents emigrated from the Greek islands, I guess that kind of life has always

interested me, the experience of going to something new with not much more than your own courage.”

“It sounds special,” I had to admit. “Will you let me read it sometime?”

Inez sighed. “I don’t know. It’s still kinda rough.”

“Come on, let me read it,” I urged her.

A smile toyed at the corner of her lips. “Well, I . . .”

I had learned more about Inez than she herself realized. As she remained hesitant, I knew exactly where I could touch to make her surrender. I let my hands travel up to just under her arms until a shock and a peal of laughter took hold of Inez.

“Promise me!” I demanded while tormenting her.

“Cole!” Inez laughed like a child. “Cole, stop it!”

“Not until you promise!”

“Fine!” she shrieked between fits of giggles. “You can read it sometime!”

I ceased with the tickling, and Inez caught her breath. It was strange to consider. Though I didn’t dare to say it aloud, it was moments like that these that I craved more than the sex. Being with Inez was always amazing, but the minutes after always offered a deeper satisfaction that I couldn’t put into words.

“Thank you,” I replied as the room grew quiet again.

Looking at her sweet face, I could feel my hunger returning. I wanted to keep her there in bed, but her eyes were glancing past me to the clock on the bedside table.

“I need to go get the twins,” she realized softly. “We can’t be late for swim lessons.”

“No,” I agreed. “I guess I’ll see you at the dinner table.”

Inez kissed me one last time. “If you feel a foot brush against your leg under the kitchen table, it’s probably me.”

“Probably?”

“I don’t know,” she teased. “Ziggy’s always running around looking for crumbs during dinner. It might be him.”

“Alright, alright,” I insisted. “Go do your job.”

Inez didn’t waste any more time finding her clothes. After fixing herself in my bathroom, Inez found her little red flats by the sitting room’s fireplace. I sat up on the bed as I watched her slide on one shoe and then another before offering me a wave goodbye.

I always hated saying goodbye, and it was even worse that Inez was leaving me with energy still pent up inside me. With nothing else to do, I headed downstairs to my home gym, finding my dog sprawled out before the sunny French doors.

“This is where you’ve been hiding,” I told him.

His tail slapped against the warm wood floors in response. The gym wasn’t too fancy, just a guest suite I didn’t need. The white walls were bare, and the machines and weights were organized neatly. Looking out into the side yard where the firepit and olive trees lived, I sat myself down on the rowing machine and began to blast my workout playlist through the speakers. Ziggy grumbled about his peace being disturbed.

“You want me to start the treadmill for you?” I asked him.

Barking once, Ziggy took off upstairs, probably to his basket in the living room or the twins’ space. I didn’t worry too much. I just focused on the steady motion of my rowing, pulling the resistance ropes with a deep inhale and relaxing with every outward breath. The movement became a rhythm as steady as ocean waves.

I let myself get lost until a phone call halted my music. Looking down, I read Natalie’s name on the top of the screen.

“Hey, Nat,” I greeted her, a little out of breath.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I assured her. “I’m just working out. So, are you calling me to say you’re coming home late? Honestly, you should just start calling when you’re actually going to be on time.”

I heard her grumble across the line. “Yes and no. I’ve decided I’m taking Friday afternoon off, and I’m taking the kids out of town for the weekend. I have to stay late tonight, but if I do, Essie, Asher, and I can have a long weekend together.”

My heart slowed to a halt. Realization washed over me.

“You’re taking the kids out of town?”

Natalie answered, “Yeah, I was just at another deposition on my lunch break, and well, let’s just say I really need this. It’s Hanukkah. The kids’ grandmother wants to see them, but Roger is apparently on-call this weekend.”

“I didn’t know cardiologists could be on call,” I admitted.

“Well, who knows, maybe Roger is lying to me,” my sister huffed, latent frustration seeping through her words. “All I know is that his mother would like to see them, and I could use a few nights away. I’ve already booked a family suite in San Diego. Miriam is going to spend Saturday with us on this safari tour, and we’ll have dinner at her house for the holiday.”

I had to ask, “Do you feel alright seeing your mother-in-law?”

“Oh, sure. She likes me better than her own idiot son. We get along well enough, and it’s just one day.”

“As long as you’re sure, I think it would be good for all of you.”

It would be good for her, the twins, and especially me. The house was going to empty for the first time in weeks. Inez would be around with no nanny duties for two and a half days. If I could swing it, I would make her waste every hour with me.

We would waste our time in the living room . . . the kitchen . . . by the pool. The possibilities spun like a carousel through my sinful imagination. Then, all those flashing images turned into one brilliant light bulb, and I smiled at the thought.

I knew exactly how we would spend our weekend alone.

CHAPTER NINE

INEZ

It was one more night before Natalie and the kids were off on their San Diego adventure. Essie and Asher were excited to see giraffes and their Grandma Miriam on their safari tour. Yawning audibly, I was excited to wave them off. I didn't know why, but something about all this extra excitement had me feeling more tired than usual.

I guessed I was spending too many nights burning the candle at both ends. I chased the twins around all afternoon. I spent the mornings with my computer and time in between with Cole. I needed to carve out time for myself . . . and a very long nap.

Standing at the kitchen table, I double-checked that the kids had finished their homework before packing the folders back into their colorful backpacks. They were already up in bed, Natalie reading them a story, but it was my job to make sure the coffee was ready for the morning and the kids had snacks to take to school. The fancy private school had nutritionists and professional caterers making seasonal lunches for the kids, but they were still expected to bring their own snacks for the playground.

Was there no room in the school's budget for grapes and graham crackers?

"Inez?" I heard Cole call out.

I pulled my head out of the fridge and shut the heavy metal door. As our eyes met, it took me a split second to see the triumphant mischief in his expression. I didn't know whether to be excited or worried.

"Right here," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

Cole leaned against the sunny pantry cabinet, knowing I needed to get inside it. It was just an excuse to place my hand on his chest. As I pushed him aside, Cole grinned.

“I was hoping I could ask you something,” he admitted before leaning closer to me. “Natalie’s in the shower.”

“That’s not a question.”

I turned to make up separate packs of carrot sticks, green grapes, and pretzels. In her attempt to be sustainable, Natalie had a little bento box for each of the twins, green for Asher and purple for Essie. I filled up all the little compartments and snapped the lids shut. Cole was still beaming.

“That’s not what I wanted to tell you, Princess,” he insisted. “I just didn’t want you to get nervous when I asked you out.”

I stopped mid-movement. “Asked me out?”

He nodded. “And I mean on a real date. Not leftover pizza in the living room or turkey sandwiches on the patio. I want to take you to a real restaurant with overpriced wine and waiters.”

“That’s all?”

“Well, we can start with dinner,” Cole mused, closing the distance between us. “If I play my cards right, I was hoping you might come home with me too.”

His hands pressed into the countertop on either side of me. Turning around, I found our faces to be inches apart. Temptation lingered in those lips and that devilish grin, and I couldn’t help but adore it.

“I live in your pool house,” I teased softly. “I’ll have to come home with you, Cole.”

He laughed. “You know what I mean.”

My hand brushed the fallen hair across his eyes, and I nodded. “Yes, I know what you mean.”

“I haven’t forgotten about the morning coffee you owe me,” he murmured against my lips.

“We’ve had breakfast together.”

Cole shook his head. “Not in bed.”

I smiled at the thought. Of course, I knew Cole and I would be alone, but I never expected him to plan something like this. I just figured he would find a reason to keep me in his bed. I liked the idea of walking around the house in his T-shirt, but Cole surprised me with the offer of more.

He was always so full of surprises.

“Is that all we’re going to do in bed?” I asked coyly. “We’ll just eat breakfast?”

“In the morning, maybe,” Cole answered. “You’re going to want that coffee after I keep you up all night.”

A thrill raced up my spine. “All night, you say?”

“All night . . . all afternoon . . . all night again.”

“You’re never going to give me any peace, are you?”

“What’s the old line?” Cole wondered with a darkened chuckle. “There ain’t no rest for the wicked.”

My eyes grew fixated on his mouth. “I prefer another old saying.”

“And what would that be?”

My hands reached for Cole’s chiseled jawline, and my thumb ran across his lower lip. With his body pressed against me, I could feel the length growing against Cole’s jeans. It begged to be set free, to find its way back inside me.

“If this is wrong,” I remarked with a teasing smile, “I don’t wanna be right.”

Cole fastened his grip against my hips as his kiss finally claimed me. In the low light of the kitchen, my senses were pushed to their limits. The tile floor felt icy to my bare feet. Heat pooled at my center, and the world grew impossibly bright. With a gasp of air, I inhaled the scent of Cole’s cologne and the salt of his skin. It lingered behind his ear just as his hands lingered against my sides.

“Why don’t we . . .” I began to say, but footsteps cut me off.

“Shit,” Cole cursed.

In a heartbeat, we pulled ourselves apart. My body ached to go back to Cole, but I couldn't. I forced my attention back to the kids' school snacks as Natalie came into the kitchen wearing her lavender pajamas and an alien-green face mask.

"Hey," she greeted the room with a small yawn.

I yawned compulsively. "Um, hi, Natalie."

"Hey," Cole muttered too.

He was pretending to fuss with something in the kitchen sink. As I brushed past him to put the bento boxes in the fridge, I felt energy rolling off him in waves. Our unmet desires hung like static in the air, but Natalie didn't notice.

"I've got a client early tomorrow morning, Inez," she reminded me. "I'll need you to wake up the kids, but I'll be picking them up from their half-day. Are their bags all packed?"

"Suitcases or backpacks?"

Natalie pulled her fancy infused water pitcher from the fridge as she said, "Both."

I nodded, trying not to look at Cole. "Yeah, the twins and I packed their suitcases after dinner, and I just finished packing up their stuff here. They're all ready to go."

"Good, good." Natalie yawned again. "Well, I guess I should head to bed."

"Sweet dreams, Nat," Cole offered, still hunched over the sink.

"You too, Cole," she said with a wave.

The kitchen remained dead silent as footsteps wandered back toward the staircase. My heart pounded as they went up and faded away. For a moment, I stood perfectly still, acting like the kitchen itself was a minefield.

It wasn't just the kitchen, though. It was the whole house.

"Do you still need help with your . . . *dilemma*?" I wondered softly.

My eyes traveled down to Cole's crotch, and he knew what I meant.

"Definitely."

I didn't waste another second. The house didn't feel safe anymore. Grabbing Cole by the wrist, the only thought running through my mind was getting outside. We could be alone in the pool house. We could be safe there, hidden in the shadows of my bedroom.

My feet sank into the grass, damp from a stray afternoon rain shower. I felt the soil stain the soles of my feet, but I didn't care. I could only think about freeing Cole of his clothes. In the quiet safety of my pool house, I could strip him bare and give him everything he wanted.

"I hate seeing you suffer," I murmured against his bare chest. "Let me help you feel better, Cole."

"You always do," he told me before a groan rumbled through his chest.

My hands were already pulling down his snug black boxer briefs. His erection was growing harder right in my palm. With Cole underneath me, I let my lips wander across his body, trailing down across his toned torso until my mouth met where my hands already were. My fingers purposefully slid down his rigid shaft, letting my tongue meet his tip. Glancing up through my eyelashes, I saw Cole's head pushing back into the pile of pillows. A low groan rumbled through him.

"Holy shit," he cursed under his breath.

I laughed lightly, letting the sound vibrate over his body as I licked from base to tip. When I took hold of him in my mouth, Cole's hands hunted for my hair, for any piece of me he could find. I savored every bobbing stroke. At that moment, I had the power and his trust. I only hoped I was serving him well.

Based on the sounds Cole made, it certainly sounded like it. I could feel him coming closer to a release. His grip on my hair was getting tighter, and his muscles were stiffening.

“Are you going to come for me?” I wondered as I came up for air.

Not wasting time, my tongue was already circling his tip again when Cole groaned, “God, yes.”

“Then let go, baby,” I urged him.

One more bob of my head, and Cole accepted my invitation. I swallowed back every drop of his release. Down between my legs, my body wished it could have a similar satisfaction. I let the taste of Cole linger on my lips, but every fiber of my being already begged for more. Catching his breath, Cole sat up and pulled me closer. His teeth brushed against my ear as he seemed to read my thoughts.

“All that hard work shouldn’t go unrewarded,” he growled. “Tell me, what have you always wanted? What have you always wanted a man to do to you?”

Electricity shot through me. Any other time, I would have never admitted the truth, but I was drunk on the smells of sex and sweat. Cole’s amber eyes stared into mine, and any hint of inhibition disappeared.

“I want to sit on your face,” I answered, almost not believing my words.

Cole’s eyes sparkled with wicked delight. His lips returned to the crook of my neck.

“That almost sounds like a reward for me.”

“Well, it’s what I want,” I replied between uneven breaths.

Never short on confidence, Cole replied boldly, “Get on your knees, then, Princess. It’s time for me to go where no man has gone before.”

I wanted to laugh, to ease some of the anxious anticipation building under my skin, but my body was too overwhelmed with excitement. My heart raced as I found myself straddling Cole’s handsome face. My grip braced against the brass headboard in the shadowed bedroom, and my eyes shut tightly. It took all of a minute for me to be in the throes of euphoria.

Cole ate me out with a hungry ferocity. I could feel how fervently he wanted me, wanted this. Every flick of his tongue sent me closer and closer to the edge. My spine contorted as my body grew closer to release. Cole's hands reached up around my hips, anchoring me right where he wanted me.

I should have found satisfaction, but Cole pushed me past my known limits. This unexpected angle had me going farther than I ever had before. Then, all at once, I bit my lower lip and felt an orgasm crash over me.

"Fuc—" I whimpered, not having the air to finish the word.

My body was emptied of everything I had. Cole claimed it all. Holding onto me, Cole used his tongue to lick me clean before I fell away like a limp pile of skin and bones. I sprawled across the bed, and Cole and I became a tangled mess of legs, both gasping for air. Somehow, our hands found each other. Cole laced our fingers together, saying nothing.

How many times had we been like this? How long had I been here? What even *was* time?

My mind was reeling, and I couldn't make sense of anything. The only thing keeping me tethered to reality was Cole's hand laced with mine. He was all I needed, all I wanted.

He just couldn't stay.

"You have to go back," I realized quietly.

Cole's grip tightened around my hand. "I know."

"Just . . . one more minute," I said for us both.

When we both regained our sense of reality and the hot air grew cool, Cole got dressed. I watched him pull the thin cotton over his back and saw the flickering disappointment in his glowing eyes. Every time we did this, it got a little bit harder to let go. Cole and I both felt it, but it was our agreement. These were the secrets we had to keep.

I pulled on a robe, knowing I needed to head straight to the shower. Still, I followed Cole to the door. One hand lingered on the doorknob, the other on his chest.

“Tomorrow evening can’t come fast enough,” Cole murmured against my lips.

“I know,” I agreed softly while hating the words.

As he kissed me goodnight, I felt the regret in his touch and the pain of having to sleep elsewhere. Our ecstasy always grew bittersweet, but it would be different that weekend. Finally, I would give Cole the one thing he really wanted.

He was right. Tomorrow couldn’t come fast enough.

CHAPTER TEN

COLE

I had never been so happy to say goodbye to my family.

I spent all afternoon deciding which suit to wear, consulting with Ziggy for over an hour. Champagne was chilling in the fridge, and my car was washed. Hell, I hadn't been so anxious over a date since I was a teenager, but Inez was worth the agony. Part of me wondered what she had decided to wear out.

Was she nervous? Was she out in the pool house fluffing out those mahogany curls? A million thoughts raced through my head as I paced around the living room, my hands running along the soft linen of the L-shaped sectional. I looped around the back of the couch before wandering around the coffee table and in front of Ziggy's cushioned basket.

Finally, we were getting our first real date. Somebody needed to pinch me. No, I scratched that thought. If this was a dream, I didn't want to wake up.

My feet stopped as I heard the back door open. Heels clicked across the tile floor, and a smile met mine.

"Hey," Inez greeted me casually. "Are you ready?"

My heart stopped at the sight of her.

Her curves were wrapped up in golden yellow satin and tied with a bow around her waist. A black ribbon loosely tied back the hair from her illuminated face. Her long sleeves ballooned around her wrists, making her look airy and light. On top of everything else, dainty little necklaces were layered around her neck. Inez smiled as she toyed with one of them.

"Are those for me?"

I looked down at the pink lilies in my hand. Buying groceries that afternoon, I'd stopped by the flower section to pick something for her. I had never considered what Inez's favorite flowers might be. Did she even like flowers? I stood there like a fool until the pink Asiatic lilies caught my eye.

They were vibrant, and the other bouquets paled in comparison.

“Um, yeah, they are,” I replied, realizing I’d been staring in silence. “You look beautiful, Inez.”

“Thanks,” she told me. “You look pretty handsome yourself.”

“Come on,” I said, closing the distance between us. “Let’s go have that dinner.”

Inez took the flowers from my hand, her fingers crinkling the green paper. Her painted smile brightened.

“Alright. Just let me put these in water first.”

I was happy to help her leave the flowers in a glass pitcher filled with water. With Ziggy walked and food in his bowl, we were free to take off in my convertible toward the oceanfront. We were free to do whatever we damn well liked.

I had spent weeks imagining where I might take Inez if this day ever came. When it did, I knew I wanted to watch her eyes take in the beauty of the best view I knew. It would never compare to the endless scenery in her brilliant green gaze, but it was the best I could do.

With Inez’s hand in mine, I drove south into Santa Monica, passing through stoplights and traffic until we came to a rooftop restaurant overlooking the oceanic sunset. Hues of pink and violet painted the sky as we were seated in a far corner of the modern Mediterranean restaurant. Soft candlelight glowed around Inez’s face as she took in the view.

“Is this where you take all your girls?” she teased with a grin.

“Only my favorites,” I teased.

Inez laughed lightly, brushing a stray curl from her eyes. In all that grandeur, I could only admire her. Maybe it didn’t matter whether we were having leftovers in the living room or dining at a five-star restaurant. As long as I was with Inez, everything felt . . . *natural*. The chaos of the world grew still,

and it became easy to laugh and smile. In a world that tried to tear me down, Inez made me feel light.

“The chef is offering a complimentary amuse-bouche tonight,” our waiter said after taking our drink orders. “It is a taste of grilled octopus and hearts of palm, seasoned with olives and capers and brightened with a slice of tangerine. Can I interest you in one?”

Inez shrugged. “I’ve never tried octopus before.”

“Let’s try it, then,” I agreed.

The ceramic spoons were left with us as the young man fetched our cocktails. Toasting the little mouthful of food, Inez threw it back and winced. She chewed slowly and swallowed hard.

“I don’t think I’m gonna try octopus again,” she confessed quietly, trying not to be heard.

I mulled over the flavors in my mouth. The octopus hadn’t been grilled. It was more like they touched it against a lump of hot coal before placing it on the single-serve dish.

I shook my head. “Yeah, no, not for me, either.”

We laughed at the moment, both of us chugging water to wash down the strange brine. When our negronis arrived with the appetizer plate of little toasted bruschetta, I welcomed the familiar flavors. The honey drizzle over the pear and cheese toasts overwhelmed the seafood.

“Can I ask you something, Cole?” Inez wondered between sips of her drink.

“Always.”

She set down her glass and looked at me intently. “What made you want to be an actor?”

I swallowed back my bite of food and mulled over the question. My answer could easily give too much away. I was walking out on a tightrope.

“I always loved stories as a kid,” I replied. “I liked feeling transported to another place when my parents would read to

me or let me watch movies. I liked pretending to be in those stories, running through magic forests and playing the hero. When I learned about acting, I asked my parents if I could give it a try. They sent me to a summer camp, a talent scout came to our end-of-summer program, and . . . the rest is history.”

Inez smiled as she realized, “Wait, how old were you when you first started acting?”

“Eight,” I replied. “Most people don’t know about my years of working in commercials, but I think my old fast food commercial is part of a meme now.”

“Oh, God, you’re joking!” Inez laughed.

“Nope,” I assured her, “but that gig got me the audition for *First Things First*.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “Yeah, one excited look over a cheeseburger helped turn me into a household name.”

Inez propped her head on her chin. Her expression softened as she took another sip of her drink.

“What was that like?” she wondered. “I mean, you don’t have to tell me, but I have always wondered what it was like for you, growing up on television.”

“Well, it was exciting when I was fourteen and making my own money. My parents and I picked out a house in Beverly Hills so we could all live here when I was working. I paid off the mortgage on my childhood home in Bakersfield, and I was able to help Natalie go to college. It was nice to see my paychecks put to good use.”

“How noble of you,” Inez teased, but her eyes were sincere.

I smiled. “Oh, trust me, I wasted money on dumb stuff too. I bought myself this tacky car with doors that swung up and out when I turned sixteen. I had an arcade room in my attic and had more sneakers than I could count. If it was trendy, I bought it.”

“Yeah, that sounds more like a teenager with more money than sense.”

“The other kids in the cast and I shared tutors, so I kinda got the school experience,” I recalled. “But you know, I was twenty-five when the show ended. Each season was written as a school semester to help drag it out. I was shaving off my five o’clock shadow every day before filming, and I didn’t honestly believe anyone thought I was a senior in high school. They wanted me to do a spin-off, a college years thing, but I refused. That’s how *Summer’s Days* came about. The writing team pitched that spin-off when I wouldn’t play ball.”

“Wow,” Inez said with genuine surprise. “I didn’t know that.”

“Most people don’t. I’m pretty positive that Shelby Warburton always hated that she was a second choice, but hey, that’s her axe to grind, not mine,” I remarked with a shrug. “So, now that you’ve heard about my weird life, what was it like in Santa Barbara?”

“You mean with my eleven first cousins and helicopter mother?”

As she let out a lone laugh, the waiter arrived with our dinners. Inez eyed her truffle pasta with more promise, and I had to admit my scallops looked far better than that amuse bouche thing. We took our first bites of food while I waited for Inez’s fuller reply.

“I can give you one word,” she finally told me. “*Loud.*”

“Loud?”

She took a bite of pasta and nodded. “Everything about my childhood was loud. Mom and I lived with Papa and Yaya, her parents.”

“What about your father?” I wondered before checking myself. “Actually, you don’t have to answer that.”

“No, it’s okay,” she assured me. “My father was never in the picture. Mom met him during some backpacking trip when she was young and impulsive, and that was before you could look someone up on social media. I’ve never missed him,

though. I had enough family in my life. I never felt deprived or anything.”

“What was it like, living with your grandparents?”

“Cousins, aunts, uncles, and everyone else were always at the house. Yaya and Papa own a restaurant too, so I was put to work rolling napkins and wiping down menus as soon as possible. Some girls went to Scouts. Others took ballet. I learned to run a restaurant.”

“Sounds like we both had alternative childhoods,” I mused with a laugh.

“I guess so, but nobody was paying me hundreds of dollars to look excited over a cheeseburger.”

All through dinner and the ice cream we shared, Inez shared stories about her childhood, trading them for recollections of my antics as a child actor. The sun settled down and disappeared out beyond the Pacific Ocean. The stars started shining overhead. As the golden evening turned to night, I didn’t want the conversation to end, and I smiled as I realized it wouldn’t.

With the outdoor dining room almost empty, I paid the bill and extended my hand to Inez.

“You ready to head home?” I asked casually.

Inez nodded. Her hand took mine with comforting ease. As she stood, her lips pressed against my cheek.

“Yeah, Cole,” she agreed softly. “Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

INEZ

In my mind, I imagined this was just any Friday night. Cole and I were always like this. His hand holding mine over the convertible's console, Cole took the scenic route home, passing through neighborhoods of houses with palm trees illuminated in red and green. Wreaths hung on front doors, and inflatable snowmen sat where no snow ever would. It was easy to lean back in my seat and pretend. I was getting so good at it, too.

Pretending that I wasn't fooling around with Cole.

Pretending that I wasn't worried our affair would lose its allure.

Pretending that I wasn't falling in love with him.

Cole looked so debonair in his black suit and crisp white shirt. Clean and classic, he had an ease to him that felt new. Maybe having space to breathe helped. Maybe Cole didn't like pretending as much as he claimed. When we arrived back at the house, his shoulders remained relaxed, and his grin held its usual crooked charm.

"I've got some champagne chilling in the fridge," he remarked as we stepped through the garage door. "Would you like some?"

"What, no amuse bouche to go with it?" I joked.

Cole chuckled. "No, nothing like that."

Ziggy's toenails clicked along the floor as he came to greet us in the kitchen. His brown tail wagging, the little dog looked almost disappointed.

"You miss the twins, don't you?" I realized while scratching his ears.

Ziggy grumbled in agreement.

"How about a treat to cheer you up?" I asked while taking off my heels. "Come on, boy, you want a treat?"

The dog barked and jumped as I walked over to the ceramic jar on the counter. I pulled out a peanut butter bone and waited until Ziggy sat still to hand it over, but he was off like a shot once he had it. Darting out through the laundry room and his little doggy door, Ziggy celebrated outside.

“Do I get a treat too?” Cole teased while shrugging out of his suit jacket.

His amber eyes were sparkling like the Christmas tree lit in the next room. Its warm glow filtered through the curved open archways of the house, and the silence made everything feel still around me. By comparison, my heart was thumping like a bass drum.

“Is champagne not a treat for you?” I wondered, wandering toward the living room.

Cole’s footsteps followed. His hands wrapped around me from behind, and I could feel his lips against the nape of my neck.

His voice darkened. “Not the kind I’d prefer.”

“Well, then,” I declared with a soft sigh. “Why don’t we have your treat first, and we can drink champagne afterward?”

“Sounds fine by me.”

There was no need to run or hide. All alone, Cole and I let our clothes get scattered across the stairs and down the hall toward Cole’s bedroom. Every grazing touch sent another thrill through me. If he had asked, I would have taken him right there in the hallway, the doorway, or the couch in his bedroom. It was a miracle that we made it to the bed, our mouths and hands growing hungrier by the second. My fingers skated up his sun-kissed arms as Cole gripped my waist, pulling me against him. Lost in our kiss, I almost fell backward when the backs of my knees hit the bed.

“How do you want me?” I asked as my lips wandered along Cole’s clean-shaven jaw.

Cole chuckled, the tone deep and tempting. “That’s a very long answer, Princess.”

“Where shall we start, then?” I wondered before teasingly nipping at his ear. “You can have me any way you want tonight. It’s all up to you.”

His thumbs hooked around my nude lace underwear, the last piece of fabric on my body. I felt them slide down my thighs and stop at my knees.

“You should get out of these and lie back on the bed.”

Ready and willing, I stepped out of the little thong and slid back into the downy cream-colored comforter. My palms pressed into the soft fabric as I propped myself up, watching Cole creep over me like a lion on the hunt. Every craving reflected in his golden eyes was carnal, and the sight of it held me captive. As I inched farther down and deeper into the bed, I gained the weight of Cole’s broad chest. His hands roved over me with ravenous fervor.

“Spread your legs,” he urged.

I didn’t hesitate. I welcomed the feel of his fingers wandering down between my legs. He traced my entrance and teased my clit. I could feel the smile on Cole’s lips when he slipped his finger inside me. The smug grin curled against my breasts. Then, I felt his tongue turn my nipples into stone.

Hunger and desperation lived inside us both.

Overwhelmed by the sensations, I felt the oxygen being sucked out of the room. I forgot how to breathe and how to think. The only thing I could perceive was the feeling of being consumed by the man above me, but it was all I wanted. Cole Crawford could ruin me as much as he liked. All that I had, I offered to him. Body and soul, it could all be his.

Cole wanted to keep me once. Maybe he wanted forever too.

“Have me,” I murmured from some unknown place.

“How?” I heard him ask.

“Any way you’d like.”

I remembered when I was small, my mother took me to the beach. Sweat pearled against my forehead. The golden sun

burned against my skin, and it forced me into the cold Pacific. Looking for relief, I found myself caught in a riptide. My body twisted and turned with the water. I didn't think to fight it. All I could do was move with the current until I came out on the other side.

Cole felt like that riptide as he turned me onto my stomach. He was a force of nature I didn't try to understand. I could only move with him, hoping his rushing torrent of desires would carry me to a kinder shore.

"I want to hear you come undone," Cole whispered into my ear, his voice growing husky. "I only want my name on your lips and for you to know this is *exactly* what you do to me. I fall apart every day, Princess, and it's all your fault."

"Okay, Cole," I agreed breathlessly.

My face buried itself into the pillow as I felt Cole enter me from behind. My ass propped itself against my heels as I felt Cole's grip anchor against my waist. He was above me and around me, and I let the moment take its hold. My body moved with every rush of pleasure.

I didn't know if I was sinking or flying, but Cole was taking me somewhere. Euphoria made my head grow light. My words vanished. All I could do was bite the pillow beneath me and stifle back a moan. My fingers curled tighter around the blankets, clutching the soft fabric for dear life.

The riptide came for me. The wave of a climax washed over my body, but Cole was there to bring me back to reality. His hands curled around my body, letting satisfaction claim us both. I felt how he ground against me a few more times before his lips lazily pressed against my spine. They traveled up over my shoulder and around my throat until finally, Cole turned me over. His eyes glowed like that burning sun, radiant and unrelenting, but I needed the light to live.

I needed Cole Crawford, even if I didn't fully understand why.

"Cole," I murmured softly before he kissed me.

I love you. Let's end this charade. Let's be happy all the time.

The words screamed in my head, but they wouldn't cross the threshold of my tongue. All I could do was wrap my hands around Cole's face and kiss him back, praying that he felt it all. I wanted him to know more terribly than I'd wanted anything else.

It was a long time before Cole muttered, "So . . . how about that champagne?"

"Sure," I agreed.

"Stay here," he told me gently. "I'll go get it."

I'd never had a man bring me wine in bed before. I'd never used a man's citrus soap or had him buy a spare toothbrush for me just in case. Cole was always full of surprises, but there was nothing better than the pleasant realization of how nice it was to fall asleep against his chest. With my head over his heart, I drifted off to the faint beating thrum sometime in the early hours of the morning.

When I woke up the next morning, things didn't feel as sweet. Cole's eyes were still heavy with sleep. His brown hair was a tangled mess against the ivory pillows, but he looked so precious. At thirty-eight years old, he somehow managed to look like a carefree boy.

"Morning," I murmured hazily.

"Good morning," Cole greeted me, groggy but grinning. "You want breakfast?"

"Yeah," I agreed.

I did my best to sound hopeful, but acid churned in my stomach. It took everything inside me not to show the ill feelings. Cole looked so happy and perfect. I didn't want to ruin the moment.

"I'll go get it started," he told me, kissing me tenderly.

I watched as he rolled out of bed and found some sweatpants to wear. Taking the empty champagne bottle with him, I watched as Cole left the room. His footsteps faded

down the hall, and as soon as the sound disappeared, I ran for the bathroom.

The stone tile was cool against my legs as I crumpled to the floor. In my haste, I flung open the toilet lid. I wrapped my arms around the porcelain. Another wave of torturous acid rolled through me. I could have sworn I was going to be sick. I heaved twice. Tears misted in my eyes.

When it finally came, the relief was short-lived.

It wasn't like me to get so sick from a few glasses of wine. I could blame it on the weird octopus appetizer, but if it was some bad seafood, Cole would have probably felt bad too. No, I had been getting more indigestion struggles in the last few days. I had been feeling more rundown, and I touched my bare breasts gently.

They were tender, but maybe that wasn't Cole's fault . . .

Horrorfied realization coursed through me. When was the last time I'd had a period? Leaning back against the bathroom wall, I remembered spotting the first week of November, but that was over a month before.

"No," I fretted under my breath. "No, this can't be happening."

It couldn't be true. I was taking birth control pills. Cole and I still used his special condoms when they were on hand, but maybe that hadn't been enough. I buried my face in my hands, forcing myself not to cry.

Somewhere downstairs, Cole was warming up a pan on the stove. He was pulling out French roast coffee and probably talking to Ziggy. I needed to face him. As long as I wasn't sure, I could add this deception to my ongoing list of lies. I could smile and give Cole the weekend I'd promised him.

I found my underwear and a gray T-shirt of Cole's. Throwing them on, I took a deep breath and jammed my worries deep, deep down. I tried not to think about what I was doing. I just wrapped my hair up in a bun and headed downstairs.

"Coffee?" Cole asked as I came into the kitchen.

I glanced toward the kitchen table. My pink lilies looked so perfect in the mid-morning light. They were almost as picturesque as Cole parading around shirtless and unkempt. The air smelled of coffee and warming butter, and I told myself to smile.

“I think I’ll just have juice,” I remarked.

“You know,” Cole began as he got the orange juice carton for me, “I was thinking about that script of yours. Would you let me read it today?”

“When?”

He grabbed a tall, skinny glass and shrugged. “After breakfast?”

“Alright,” I agreed, unable to deny him. “I’ll, uh, go get my laptop from the pool house.”

“Wait,” Cole called.

I froze. Could he tell something was wrong?

“How do you want your eggs?” he asked. “You like omelets?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that would be good.”

“Two omelets, then!”

Cole looked so happy as I turned away and headed outside. I couldn’t run. I didn’t scream. My hands balled up into fists, and I felt my feet sink into the green grass. Everything was going to be okay. I could smile, nod, and keep pretending.

It was all a lie, though. Inside, I was drowning in the unforgiving truth. It washed over me in great waves and made it a struggle to breathe. I was pregnant, and the only possible father was Cole Crawford.

CHAPTER TWELVE

COLE

My feet tapped against the floor. My legs, feeling strange in beige chino pants, bounced along with them. I had been sitting in the office lobby for twenty-three minutes, but I would wait all day for this and for Inez.

“Cole?” a familiar voice called.

I looked up to see Diana Peterson smiling at me. Laugh lines were forming around her cinnamon-brown face. Her black pixie cut was starting to show streaks of silver, but she was still the same no-nonsense firebrand I remembered. I wondered what she saw when she looked at me.

Was I still the same lanky teenage kid in her eyes?

“Diana,” I greeted her as I stood. “Thanks for meeting with me on short notice.”

“I might be a busy woman, but I’ll always make time for one of my kids,” she said as a half-joke.

Diana had been one of the producers on my old television show back in the day. She was the one who made sure we had time with our tutors and that we weren’t neglected on set. Too many child stars were treated like circus animals, dragged out for the show and then shoved back in their respective cages. Diana never wanted it to be like that.

She took us seriously. She demanded respect from everyone around her, and it all turned her into a vice president for J. Brothers Studios. She helped manage acquisitions for the company. Luckily for me, she was the one person I knew who could make my plan a reality.

I knew it was a risk when I forwarded Inez’s scripts to myself that Saturday afternoon. As we sat together on the couch, Inez watched a documentary on Chinese food and let me read over her Western. I realized this was what I wanted to do for Inez. This could be the one Christmas present I could give her that would actually mean something.

I just hoped she wouldn't kill me for doing it in secret.

Following Diana into her office, I admired the pale gray grasscloth wallpaper and the view overlooking the sprawling studio soundstages. I thought about standing at the picture window and trying to look for my old set, but I had other things to do. Turning away from the landscape and its overcast sky, I knew my nostalgic impulses could wait. Instead, I settled down on the curved ivory sofa and smiled, hopeful for a positive answer.

“So . . .” I began. “I guess you’ve read the scripts?”

Diana, spritzing her purple orchids across the room, nodded. “Yes, I read them over last night before bed. I didn’t get the chance to read every word, but I read enough.”

“And?”

“Would you like some water? Coffee, maybe?” she asked instead.

“No, I had some mineral water in the lobby,” I assured her. “Your assistant was very attentive.”

“I’m glad she’s doing her job so well.”

Her face remained diplomatic as she came over to sit beside me on the couch. Picking up a coffee mug from her long, narrow desk, she crossed the carpeted room and perched beside me. She took a sip of her drink, and I knew she was toying with me. Diana always liked to keep the upper hand in her grasp.

I ran a hand through my combed-back hair as I tried to be patient. It was useless.

“I would like an answer sometime this year,” I offered teasingly, trying to brush off my anxiety with a laugh.

Finally, Diana’s brown eyes met mine. “It’s special, Cole. Honestly, this is exactly the kind of thing I need right now.”

“Really?” I replied with honest shock.

I knew it was an amazing story from the first episode I read. Still, I could hardly believe that somebody else saw what

I had seen too and that my plan was coming together. Diana and her staff were constantly getting bombarded with scripts. I had come into the office with a bit of hope in my back pocket, but I knew this meeting was a long shot. I didn't expect Diana's eyes to brighten or her words to be so earnest.

"Between you and me, J. Brothers is starting a production partnership with Cripps Technologies. We are planning to announce a new streaming platform in the new year, and our studio will be developing all of their original content."

"Cripps?" I echoed in shock. "The electronics people?"

They made computers, tablets, and about half of the cell phones in the world. I had heard they'd launched a new Cripps TV service last summer. I guess this was their idea of taking technology to another level.

Diana sipped her coffee and smoothed her black pencil skirt. "Everyone is all about streaming and nostalgia now. I wouldn't be able to interest you in rebooting your old show, would I? People would go nuts for it on the new service."

I chuckled. "I respect your hustle, Diana, but I don't think I want to go back to being a football quarterback. Sam's got a bald spot, and Trish has, like, twenty thousand kids. America might enjoy it, but the gang and I prefer getting together without cameras. No, I want to move forward with my life, and I want to know what you can do with this script."

"Well, the level of diversity is exactly what Hollywood's looking for right now," she mused. "It's different, and it's compelling. Of course, it does need some polishing, but all pieces go through a writer's room. Do you know if Miss Sideris is looking to sell the rights, or does she want more creative control?"

"Uh, knowing her, she wants to be a part of everything."

"Fine by me," Diana replied. "It's clear that she's done her homework. The piece is well-researched. It's a very high concept. Even if she didn't want to be the head writer and a producer, her knowledge base would be invaluable."

"I'm sure."

“I’ll tell you what. I can put this forward to be optioned before I leave today. I don’t know how long it will take for the script to make its rounds, but my department wants to have a new lineup of content to prep and market before the new year. It will have to go through a series of hands. Still, I think I could get your answer by the end of this month.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

I wanted it to be sooner, but if this didn’t work out, I had an emerald necklace for Inez on standby. She would call it beautiful. She would smile and thank me, but I knew this was the gift Inez deserved. Her story *deserved* to be told.

“If it helps,” I added while scratching the back of my head, “I’d love to be considered for the cast.”

Diana’s smile faltered. Her eyes focused on me in confusion. Then, she cackled.

“Wait, I thought that’s why you were bringing me this!” she exclaimed. “I figured the main character had been written with you in mind!”

In shock, my eyes stared off into space. Had it really been written for me? Had Inez cast me as her stoic cowboy looking for the promise of a better life? He didn’t even have a name yet—most people didn’t bother to use it, anyway. It was part of the interest of the character. He moved around the Western frontiers nameless and quiet, finding it easier to be more like a phantom than a full-fledged man.

Diana continued to laugh over my remark, adding, “I’ve never known an actor to push a script without any interest in making it. Are you the first?”

“No,” I assured her, flashing a smile. “This story is very, *very* important to me. I’d do anything to see it get made.”

“I can’t make any promises, but I’ll do my best, Cole.”

I nodded in appreciation. “That’s all I’m asking.”

Not taking up more of her precious time than necessary, I thanked Diana and headed out to the parking garage. I walked down the hall and stepped onto the elevator. As it slowly

descended to the basement level, I mulled over Diana's laughter and her remark about Inez's protagonist. Those fictional scenes I'd read on the couch played out in my head.

Holy hell, it *was* me. Inez had written me into her script. Whether it was intentional or unconsciously, I didn't know.

How hadn't I seen that before? How had I allowed myself to be so blind?

Inez wasn't just the love affair I'd always wanted. Even when I was young and in the limelight, I'd wished for a girl like her, who never showed much interest in the fool's gold and the false glamor of my life. Her happiness and radiance lived in the small moments. No matter where I was in life, I felt Inez would still curl up under the covers beside me.

I could still be the boy enchanted by those ancient and evergreen trees rooted deep within her heart.

Yet, Inez was more than a leading lady in the story of my life. I slid into the driver's seat of my car and compulsively glanced over to where she'd once sat. Inez once told me that she went to that Halloween party looking for a miracle with her career, yet the fates threw us together. Maybe that was the point.

I was supposed to be the secret Santa who made her writing dreams come true, and perhaps Inez Sideris was destined to be the saving grace of my career. Staring at the empty seat, I considered how much she had helped me over the last few weeks, how she'd made me happier than I'd been in a long time.

Inez had somehow become the unspoken answer to every question and dilemma in my life. She'd offered me so much day after day, and I loved her for it. The words were right there, and I had been too thick-headed to see the truth right there in front of me.

I was truly, madly, and deeply in love with Inez. I had been falling for her from the moment I caught sight of her in that crowded ballroom, and even if I never stepped onto another set in my life, I would be okay with that. I wasn't only meant to

be an actor. No, I had a far truer purpose than that. I was made to love Inez Sideris, mind, body, and soul.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

INEZ

“I guess there’s no easy way to tell you this,” I confessed with a sigh, “but, um, I went to my women’s clinic this week. It turns out I’m pregnant, and I’m due next July.”

A fork clattered onto its porcelain plate. Two pairs of eyes gawked at me, one baby blue and the other a rich brown. They stared at me, mouths agape, before turning back to each other. Under the shade of the garden gazebo, it felt like it was as good a place as any to tell someone my news, especially my friends. Our annual holiday brunch was spread out on the round iron table, and the sun was bright. Rain was due that evening, but for now, Hope, Grace, and I were all able to enjoy the fresh breath of air in Hope’s new home.

It seemed I wasn’t the only one with a secret affair. When the truth about Hope’s relationship with Felix Jacobson hit the newsstands, she came running to this storybook estate and the father of her child. It was clear how much Felix adored Hope and Clara, and looking around the mansion and sprawling gardens, I could see why Hope made this place her haven. She looked happier than ever living here.

Hope had Felix. Grace had her husband, Jasper. I only hoped I could find my shelter before the coming storm arrived.

“Pregnant,” Grace echoed, toying with her favorite hoop earrings. “Um, wow, that’s just . . . *wow*.”

Hope, pushing up the sleeves of her white blouse, asked, “How are you feeling about this?”

“Scared,” I confessed. “You’re the first people I’ve told.”

“You haven’t told Cole?” she furthered.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “Honestly, I don’t know how you didn’t mention that your boss’s little brother was Cole Crawford.”

Hope smiled and shrugged. “I didn’t think it mattered, really, and I definitely didn’t think that you had slept with

him.”

Her copper-colored dress caught the light as Grace reached for my hand across the table. “I appreciate your telling us. You know we’ll do anything for you, Inez, but you know what I’m going to say.”

“I need to talk to Cole.” I sighed.

Grace’s scarlet lips brightened with a smile as she nodded. “Yes, but we’re always here to talk it through first.”

I had already explained our meeting on Halloween weekend and the secrets we’d been keeping over the last few weeks. As I revealed it all, I realized how tired I was of hiding. I had grown sick of the lies. I wanted to be honest with Cole, myself, and everyone else.

I squeezed Grace’s hand and looked down toward my paper-bag skirt. My free fingers toyed with the bow-tied sash. The words in my head were slow to form into complete thoughts.

“It’s just that Cole and I haven’t been together that long,” I considered aloud. “It’s only been a couple of months since we first met, and I understood why we kept everything under wraps at first. Natalie was fragile. The twins needed our attention. It wasn’t the right time for us to try and be in a serious relationship, but I can’t make a baby wait to be born. I can’t ask it to stop growing for a few extra months.”

“I know,” Hope offered lightly. “I tried with Clara, but she wouldn’t listen at all.”

The three of us laughed lightly. I reached for my water glass to wet my drying throat.

“When spring comes, everyone is going to *see* what we’ve been doing,” I continued. “The only trouble is that I don’t know if Cole wants this . . . or me. I . . . I’m worried that after all the struggling and fighting, I’m going to have to go back to Santa Barbara. I’ll have to become my mother.”

I knew how the family struggled to accept my mom as a single parent. I knew she had given up too many dreams to give me a better life. Even if Mom didn’t realize it, I had

always wanted my writing career to work out for her as much as me. I longed to prove that her sacrifice was worth it, but I feared history was about to repeat itself.

I couldn't be a nanny and a new mother. I couldn't write and raise a baby on my own. If Cole decided he didn't want this life, I would have to go back to the one life I'd never wanted, but I would do it for my child. Even if I never got one of my stories told on the silver screen, my baby would be my greatest creation.

I just didn't know if Cole would feel the same way. Our relationship was so young and so new. It couldn't promise that we had the strength to survive such bombshell news.

"You don't have to be your mom," Hope swore adamantly. "Inez, you have always been kind to us when we needed it. You helped me when Clara was born, and I was on my own. Don't think for a second that I'm not going to be there when you need me."

"Same," Grace agreed. "You were the best college roommate a girl could ever want. I love you. Hope and I both love you. We'll do whatever we can to support your choices."

"And you know," Hope added, "I've got my condo furnished and empty right now. You're free to stay there if you want."

"You won't be going back?" Grace asked in surprise, brushing the brunette waves of hair from her face.

Hope shook her head. "Between us, I don't really think I want to move out."

"Wow," I gasped. "Miss Independent is going to live with her boyfriend."

"I remember when you got drunk and screamed about marriage being a patriarchal construct when we were at Pepperdine," Grace teased. "I never imagined you were going to get all domesticated on us. I mean, here we are, in your nice mansion, eating quiche and salad *you* made."

"I remember when I taught you how to cook an egg," I recalled.

Hope flipped her cornsilk hair and laughed. “I know. It’s insane, but . . . I love Felix. I love the life I have with him. Even if it’s not what I imagined for myself, that doesn’t make it any less special. My old ambitions will just need to make space for the new ones.”

I smiled. “I know what you mean.”

This wasn’t the life I’d imagined for myself. This wasn’t the path I expected my life to take when I agreed to be Natalie’s nanny, but I couldn’t change what had happened. I could only move forward, clinging to what I knew without a hint of doubt.

I loved Cole Crawford. I didn’t know how it would look or how we would fare together, but if he was willing to take this journey, I would take his hand and never look back. We would build a life together. We would make space for all our old dreams, and we would learn to be happy together . . . or even as a trio.

Or would it be a foursome? After all, Cole did have Ziggy.

The dog curled up beside me on the couch as I sat in the living room with the twins. Natalie, off working on yet another Saturday afternoon, left me to watch the kids after brunch. Grace and Hope’s support gave me some fresh confidence to look over the information my new obstetrician’s office gave me. I had to fill out a mountain of preliminary paperwork and give them my insurance card, but that was buried somewhere in my purse.

“Yes!” Asher exclaimed. “First place!”

The kids were playing some kind of racing video game together, throwing bananas and racing along a rainbow track in the sky. I didn’t pay too much attention to it, but it was nice to see them high-five and giggle with each other. I smiled as I watched them debate which tournament to try next.

“I like the underwater ones,” Essie told her brother. “Let’s do this one.”

“Okay,” he agreed, though I knew he had his eye on another.

“Scooch, Ziggy,” I said while standing. “I gotta get my purse.”

I lifted his brown and white head off my leg to head toward the mudroom. My purse, hanging on a hook in there, had to have my health insurance card. I just needed some light to see to the bottom of the large tote. Taking it into the kitchen, I scrounged out paper pamphlets from my clinic and samples of stomach medicine for my morning sickness. I was so intent on trying to find my wallet that I didn’t hear the garage door open.

“Hey, Inez!” Natalie greeted me as she walked into the kitchen. “I’ve got frozen lasagna for . . . din . . . ner.”

I looked up to see her shocked eyes were staring at the pink paper on the countertop. It was hard to miss the title. I snatched up the brochures, but it was too late. My heart began racing a mile a minute.

“Oh, my God,” Natalie muttered under her breath. “Inez, you’re . . .”

“Um, yeah,” I whispered.

Surprise was frozen on Natalie’s polished face. She walked past me to set down the paper grocery bag and messenger bag at the kitchen table. Her blue-green eyes shifted to see the twins before fixing themselves on me. Her hands smoothed her scarlet sweater dress anxiously, but I was the one who should be jittery.

“Oh, my God, Inez,” she hissed under her breath. “When did you find out? When are you due? Wait, no, how are you feeling? What are your symptoms like? God, I remember Esther and Asher made me have the worst acid reflux for the full thirty-six weeks they were inside me.”

This wasn’t the reaction I expected. Hope told me her boss has big mother-bear energy. I knew she loved her children fiercely, but it wasn’t just about the twins. She was intense with everyone for whom she cared. I guessed that now included me, too.

“I didn’t know for sure until this past Thursday,” I confessed. “I’m due mid-July, and I’ve got my morning sickness under control for now. I’m starting to feel the urge to pee all the time, but luckily, there are six different toilets in this house.”

“Well, you’re so good with the twins,” Natalie continued. “I know they would love to have you around as long as it’s feasible. You can be their nanny and stay with us, and I’ll be sure to make sure that you have a job when you’re ready to get back to work. It’ll be tricky, but I know we can put our heads together. We’re both smart women.”

“Yeah,” I agreed half-heartedly.

The twins turned the volume up on the television. Over their excited shouting, I almost couldn’t make out Natalie’s next question.

“How did your boyfriend take the news?” she wondered.

It was the one question I didn’t want her to ask. Natalie knew I wasn’t married or engaged, so she assumed I had someone elsewhere, not right there under the same roof. With Cole out on some errand picking up gifts for the twins, I didn’t feel the need to make up a total lie or evade Natalie’s curiosity.

“I haven’t had the chance to tell him yet,” I admitted. “He doesn’t know I’m pregnant.”

It was only then that I heard sneakers squeaking to a halt on the tile floor. My eyes shut with dismay.

“Pregnant?” Cole repeated somewhere behind me. “Inez, you’re . . . pregnant?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

COLE

I could hear Natalie talking as I got home and the sounds of the twins playing one of their video games together. Asher yelled at the screen as I realized all my shopping bags couldn't be seen. It was all their gifts for Christmas from me, and I couldn't spoil the surprise. Quickly, I shoved the toys into the laundry room's cabinets. The twins would never go in there.

"How did your boyfriend take the news?" I heard Natalie ask.

The word caught me by surprise. My ears instantly perked up. Had Inez made up a cover story about a boyfriend? Was Natalie talking about someone from Inez's past? We had talked so much over the last few weeks. I figured Inez would have mentioned it if she just got out of a relationship, but perhaps I was wrong.

Inez's voice sounded hesitant as she answered, "I haven't had the chance to tell him yet. He doesn't actually know I'm pregnant."

The word made my footsteps screech to a halt. Standing in the kitchen's side entrance, I braced my hand against the archway's wooden frame. Shock turned to denial. Denial turned to confusion. In a matter of seconds, my mind went careening off a cliff, yet I caught sight of a balled-up piece of pink paper in Inez's hand emblazoned with the word *PRENATAL* in large, bold letters. I swallowed hard.

"Pregnant?" I managed to get out before trying again. "Inez, you're . . . pregnant?"

Slowly, she turned. Her face was flushed with a damning shame of crimson, and her eyes filled with remorse. Inez wrapped her arms around her chest and let her fingers clutch the fabric of her emerald cardigan.

I didn't know what that meant. My head spinning, I couldn't think straight long enough to make sense of anything.

“Yes,” Inez answered quietly. “I found out Thursday.”

“Thursday?” I repeated dumbly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to surprise you like this.”

She was always so radiant, but I watched as Inez shrank away from everything . . . including me. Her eyes flitted down to the floor and her sock-clad feet. She rocked back on her heels anxiously, but I wasn’t the only one to notice.

Natalie looked at me, then to Inez, and back to me again. She had been so focused on getting her life back in order that Natalie had never bothered to see what was right under her nose, but she couldn’t avoid it now. The truth flung itself at all of us like a runaway train.

“Cole,” Natalie said, sharpening her words like she was scolding one of the twins. “Cole, tell me why you should be so surprised right now?”

“Nat, it’s not like that,” I tried to say.

Natalie pursed her lips. Her eyes flashed with bitter resentment.

“What is it, then?” she hissed back at me. “You *haven’t* been fooling around with my nanny?”

“Well, obviously . . .”

“She’s thirteen years younger than you. She’s working under your roof. Goddammit, are all of you men the same?”

“No, Natalie, I—”

Inez cut me off. “I met Cole before I ever took this job. I didn’t realize he was your brother, Natalie. Hope didn’t think to tell me. If you don’t believe me, you can do the math. I’m almost two months along, but I’ve only been here for a few weeks. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Natalie. I never wanted my history with Cole to affect you.”

If that was true, I realized that Inez had to be pregnant this whole time, including those weeks I’d left her in the dark. I hated to think what Inez might have done if she hadn’t shown up here, if she had learned about her pregnancy alone. I

thought we'd been careful. I'd never considered worrying about Inez that night, but nothing was ever perfect.

I was a bigger fool than I ever thought possible, and Natalie clearly agreed. My sister's shoulders slumped in concession. Still, her bitterness didn't leave her eyes. She was never one to forgive easily, and she hated being left in the dark.

"Then, why did you two lie?" she wondered icily.

"Because of how you're reacting right now," I pointed out. "I met Inez before your marriage fell apart. I put her on the backburner for you and the twins to come here and have a semi-normal life, so don't start lashing out. I did everything trying to make *your* life easier. I know I didn't always make the right choices, but at least I was fucking trying."

Natalie's jaw clenched. "I guess I can't be mad at that. I . . . I need to get out of here. Essie! Asher!"

The television grew quiet. The twins had paused their game.

"Yeah, Mom?" Essie called back.

"Why don't we go to a movie at the dinner theater?" Natalie yelled out. "It's an early Christmas surprise!"

The kids grew boisterous as they clamored into the kitchen. They were both too excited to see the tense expressions on all our faces.

"What are we gonna see?" Asher wondered.

"We'll decide in the car," Natalie declared before muttering under her breath, "Mommy just needs a spiked milkshake and a dark room."

"Are you guys gonna come?" Essie asked, looking at Inez and me.

My sister shook her head. "Uncle Cole and Inez have some secret Christmas business. Now, go put your shoes on. I'll be in the car in a minute."

The kids raced to do as they were told. Grumbling, Natalie quickly pulled out a frozen lasagna from her grocery bag and shoved it in the freezer alongside some breakfast sandwiches.

“You two need to talk,” she muttered. “I’ll get over this. I just . . . I can’t look at you right now, Cole.”

I gave Natalie her space. Storming past me, Natalie wrangled her children and left in a huff. The house grew quiet again, but it didn’t bring me any comfort. The silence felt deafening.

“I didn’t mean for you to find out like this,” Inez murmured, her voice picking up speed. “I was just looking through my purse when Natalie came home. I didn’t mean for her to see the papers. I didn’t want her to know anything until we talked, but . . .”

She was still so anxious, her body shrinking away from me. I had given her space to doubt before, and I realized I’d done it again. Inez’s green eyes were filled with worry that I would become a ghost again. My muscles grew heavy with anguish, and there was only one way I could find relief.

Inez was still mumbling, still trying to offer an explanation I didn’t need. Closing the chasm between us, I crossed the kitchen and put my arms around Inez. Her stiff body softened as I kissed her temple.

“I’m right here, Princess,” I swore to her. “I’ll always be here.”

“But . . . is this what you want . . . with *me*?”

“I want to sleep beside you tonight,” I whispered into her hair. “I want to wake up to your beautiful face in the morning, and I want to waste the rest of my weekend with you. Then, maybe you’ll give me a week, and then a month. We can work our way up to a lifetime. I don’t care how long it takes. I love you, and I’m sorry I haven’t said it sooner.”

I felt Inez’s arms wrap around my waist. A shuddering breath left her chest.

“I love you too, Cole.”

A weight I hadn't noticed on my shoulders suddenly vanished, and I only realized its presence as I felt Inez hug me tighter. We had put too much on each other and ourselves. With one small declaration, it all went away.

Inez and I were going to be together. We were going to make this work because we loved one another. It was as simple as that.

Pulling back, I felt a new emotion flooding through me as our eyes met. All of my old desperation was replaced with promise and contentment, and it lured me toward Inez's lips. My eyes closed as the kiss flourished. I felt a soft breath leave Inez as her lips parted for me. She invited me closer, allowing my hands to press into the small of her back.

I would never lose that affection. Inez, rising up on her toes, would always meet me in the middle. My name would always be on her lips, and I would never be afraid of losing her again.

Just then, Ziggy's bark snapped me out of my daydream. I looked down to see him pawing at my leg.

"It's dinnertime," Inez realized with a light laugh.

I groaned as I pulled away, getting a scoop of dog food from the container. Ziggy spun around in delight before plopping himself in front of the bowl. When I turned back to Inez, her green eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Why don't we go to the pool house?" she murmured. "Nobody will bother us out there."

It was easy to follow her across the back yard and into her little shelter. As the nearest table lamp turned on with a click, I was free to kiss her again, to let my hands wander along her sides, and to let my fingers tug at the hem of her skirt. Inez and I didn't hurry our pace. We relished the feeling of our clothes being lost piece by piece. We kissed and traced the skin we exposed until we were both naked on Inez's unmade bed. After all, we had nowhere else to be.

"I'll never get tired of you like this," I swore as I held Inez beside me.

I felt Inez's lips curling with a smile. "I could say the same thing."

"Could you?"

She laughed between kisses. "I could, but you've already said it so well."

Her bubbling laughter filled the shadowed room. The yellow glow of the front door's lamp cast silhouettes across the bed, but my focus remained on the real woman beside me.

Her leg draped over my waist, and I felt my body react to the grazing touch of her skin. My length grew as it brushed against Inez's inner thigh. My thumb rolled over her nipple, and I felt the hum of her soft moan against my lips. The gentle vibration felt like a jolt of electricity. Still, I let our pace be languid and easy.

"I want you inside me," Inez finally pleaded. "Please, Cole."

"Whatever you want, Princess," I promised her, letting my lips trail across her cheek.

My tip was already dripping with desire for her, and as our bodies connected, I felt just how eager Inez had been herself. I slipped inside her warm, wet entrance and pushed deeper into her. I felt how her walls moved to welcome me closer, and I heard another whimpering moan leave Inez's lips. Her arms wrapped around my neck as Inez pressed her chest against mine. We slowly began rocking together, and in the heat of the moment, I began to forget where my skin ended and Inez's began.

Our legs were twisted together. Her fingers were curling around the back of my head. With every deep thrust, I relished the feeling. I let Inez borrow the air from my lungs and let her teeth tease my lower lip. She was so close that I felt every tremble of her body. On the brink of a climax, I could feel her body pressing hard against mine, but I knew not to relax or relent. My hands reached down and gripped her backside until ecstasy coursed through her body.

"I love you, Inez," I whispered in her ear.

As I let go, I heard her reply, “I love you, too.”

Even after we caught our breath, Inez and I stayed tangled up together late into the night. We ate sandwiches for dinner and talked on her little settee. We made plans and said all the things we should have professed sooner. At some unholy hour, our tired eyes pulled us back under the covers.

“Cole,” Inez whispered in the dark.

“Yes?”

“That first night,” she wondered softly, “why did you want me? It couldn’t have been the dress.”

I chuckled, brushing the stray auburn curl from her face.

“No, it wasn’t the dress. I guess . . . I looked into your eyes, and everything about you seemed so earnest and genuine. You were teeming with life and hope, and I wanted that. I think I’ve wanted that for a long time. It’s beautiful, Inez, and that beauty in you will never fade away.”

“That’s funny,” she murmured.

“What?”

Inez yawned. “I kind of thought the same thing. You are a good man, Cole Crawford, even when you’re pretending.”

As I watched her eyes close, I kissed each closed lid before pulling Inez into me. My sleep was deep and dreamless, and I almost didn’t wake up when I heard my phone ring. I heard Inez grumble as I rolled away to answer it.

“Hello?” I asked groggily.

“Cole, it’s Diana.”

“Who?” I grumbled while rubbing my eyes.

“Diana Peterson?” she replied.

My whole body jolted awake. Diana would only be calling for one reason.

“Diana, sorry, I just had a late night,” I apologized. “What can I do for you?”

“I won’t keep you, but I thought you should know the project has been green-lighted. We’ll be contacting Miss Sideris next week. I thought you might want to give her a heads-up and maybe give her the name of a lawyer. She’s going to have a lot of contracts to sign, and so are you. One of our long-time directors is interested in having you as the lead.”

“Wow, um, thank you,” I replied dumbly.

“I gotta run, but we’ll be in touch,” Diana said. “Bye, Cole, and Merry Christmas.”

“Yeah . . . Merry Christmas to you, too.”

I noticed Inez staring at me with half-closed eyes as I hung up the phone. Sleep could have taken her at any second.

“Who was that?” she muttered.

“It was my Christmas present to you,” I confessed. “I’ve got one more secret that I haven’t told you yet.”

Her eyes crept open. “What?”

“I kind of gave your script to an old connection of mine, and J. Brothers Studios wants to greenlight it. They want to buy your story.”

Inez jolted up. “Oh, my God, no!”

“Yes.” I laughed. “I’m sorry that I stole it, but . . . Merry Christmas.”

Inez, still dreamy-eyed, beamed brighter than the morning sun. Her hands wrapped around my face, and my body started reacting again.

“My own secret Santa,” she remarked between kisses. “I can’t believe you did this.”

I grinned. “And I can’t believe I get to keep you, Princess, you and our child.”

It didn’t matter how many mornings we shared or how many nights we would sleep together. I would never get over how lucky I’d been to find Inez. I could have kissed her every hour for the rest of my life. It wouldn’t have been enough. She

was my light and my answer, and I loved her with all my heart. With Inez beside me, the future shined bright.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EPILOGUE: INEZ - TWO YEARS LATER

The ballroom was buzzing with excitement. Cocktails flowed from the bar, and the air was alive with music and happy conversation. Critics were in love with the series. Cole was already being considered for awards, and the public was itching for our big Christmas Eve release online. My career as a screenwriter was more than I'd ever imagined.

Although, I had something far more satisfying at home. No golden statuette would ever replace the delight of kissing Cole good morning. That joy was worth more to me than my weight in diamonds, and at that party, it certainly looked like I was turning into a pile of sparkling gems. The silver sequins of my shift dress sparkled brighter than the disco ball, but maybe not quite as bright as the diamond boulder on Hope's finger.

"Order a drink for me, Inez!" Hope begged with a grin. "Tell me how it tastes!"

Seven months pregnant with her second child, a little boy-to-be, I was surprised Hope made it out to the party. Of course, she was a personal guest at the premiere, even if her husband did own the production company. After having a baby myself, I couldn't imagine squeezing my puffy feet into scarlet suede stilettos and a black cocktail dress. Hope couldn't have any of the themed drinks. She could only live vicariously through Grace and me while resting against the tall black bar.

"This whiskey and cider one is really good!" Grace exclaimed with a grin.

Done breastfeeding her son, Max, Grace Balsamo-Hayes was making up for lost time. Her hair was styled. Her post-baby curves were wrapped up in rosy silk, and she was drinking like the whiskey was water.

"Jasper is going to have to carry you out of here," I teased her.

"No, he won't," Grace swore, but I could already see her giggling.

“Here, Gracie,” Hope insisted. “Have a ginger ale with me. You’ll thank me in the morning.”

“Thanks, Hope.” Grace grinned as Hope ordered the sodas.

“Hey, you give me Max’s old baby clothes, and I’ll keep you safe from a hangover,” Hope declared.

“That’s what friends are for!” I exclaimed, raising my glass to the thought. “And thanks again for coming tonight.”

“We wouldn’t have missed this for anything!” Grace said, flipping her smooth, dark hair over her shoulder. “Speaking of babies . . .”

“No more about my baby shower!” Hope interjected.

“No, not that,” Grace insisted. “Where’s little Lily tonight?”

I couldn’t help but smile at the mere mention of my baby girl. With rosy cheeks and dark curly hair, Lily had been my favorite adventure from the moment she came into this world. I went into labor on-location in New Mexico, and for a bit, I thought I was going to have to give birth in a flimsy medical tent. It was a wild ride to the nearest hospital. Cole was still wearing his costume from filming when we arrived at the delivery ward, but Cole got back into his old jeans and a pair of scrubs in time for the birth. Lily had been an endless source of surprises and joy ever since.

“Mom came up from Santa Barbara,” I explained. “She was invited here, but Lily is far more exciting to her. She’s even watching the twins for Natalie.”

“Yeah, I talked to her when she showed up,” Hope realized. “Natalie is really living her best life. It’s great seeing her out here.”

“She deserves it,” Grace agreed.

We all looked across the room to see Natalie dancing and laughing with her new boyfriend, a good-looking art teacher from Essie and Asher’s school. He had thick blonde hair, kind eyes, and a good disposition for working with kids. I’d grown used to seeing him in the mornings when I was out walking

the dog and he was leaving with the twins for school. As far as next-door neighbors went, Natalie and her Beau weren't so bad.

"I wonder when they'll get married," I remarked as my champagne cocktail arrived. "Nat's divorce has been finalized for six months now."

Grace laughed into her drink. "We could say the same thing about you, you know."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I exclaimed with a grin.

Hope and Grace shared a look, snickering at my whine. Sometimes, it felt like a lifetime since we all became friends at our college freshman orientation. On nights like this, it felt like no more than a day, but here we were as mothers and partners, professionals and friends. None of our journeys looked like the dreams we'd once made together as students in Malibu hillsides, but reality felt far sweeter than anything I ever imagined.

"Hello, ladies," a relaxed but rich baritone said from behind me. "How are we enjoying ourselves?"

"It's the most fun I've had in weeks," Grace declared.

Hope flipped her long blonde hair and smiled. "Are you trying to steal our darling Inez away, Cole?"

I turned around to meet his amber eyes. The crooked grin on his face and his scheming expression told me that Hope was exactly right.

"Somebody wants to speak with us about a magazine feature," Cole told us.

"Go on, then," Grace encouraged me. "Go let your star shine!"

I laughed. "You do sound drunk, but thank you, both of you."

Grace kissed my cheek and beamed. "It's like you said, Inez. This is what friends are for."

My two friends waved me away as Cole took my hand. His familiar, warm grip around my wrist kept us connected as we weaved through the packed crowd. A few people stopped to congratulate Cole or me, but then we were stepping out a side door onto a path toward the hotel's garden.

"There isn't anyone here," I quickly realized.

Cole's mischievous grin grew. "I know. I lied."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted you alone for a moment," he murmured, kissing my cheek. "Is that so wrong?"

I looked Cole up and down in his charcoal-colored suit. His face was still kissed by all those days in the desert sun. For once, his hair was actually combed neatly. I sighed and smiled back. I couldn't stay mad at him, not when he looked this good.

"I guess not," I surrendered.

Linking his arm with mine, Cole said, "Let's go for a little walk, shall we?"

I leaned closer to him and nodded. "Alright."

We walked together in quiet company, heading toward the tall tropical plants and trees. A cool breeze blew through the night air, but it didn't bother me. Cole kept me warm.

He always did.

"You know, I was thinking about something that happened when we were shooting that first episode," he began. "Watching that canyon scene reminded me of it."

"What?" I wondered.

"We were in Nevada, and you were about six months pregnant with Lily," Cole recalled. "I remember we made a bargain in our hotel room. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

I laughed. "Vaguely. I remember more about the director trying to redo a pivotal scene. The path to compromise was a minefield."

Cole chuckled. “Yeah, he had you all huffy, and I suggested that we should head up to Las Vegas for our night off. I was trying to cheer you up.”

“You wanted us to elope!” I finally remembered.

“That’s right,” he agreed. “And what did you say?”

The garden path curved, and I began to hear the trickling sound of a pond somewhere nearby. Outside, we were perfectly alone. I could hear the click of my heels on the pavement and the fluttering of my heart.

“I said I would only marry you once we were done shooting and I could see my feet again,” I recalled.

“Well, Princess, we’ve wrapped on our shoot,” Cole pointed out. “We won’t be starting again until next fall.”

“That’s true.”

“And I’m guessing you can see your feet?”

I stopped to look down for the sake of theatrics. Yes, my pink heels were right where I could see them.

“I can,” I replied.

“So, I think it’s about time we settled our bargain, don’t you?”

As we turned a corner, I finally saw the pond illuminated by glass lanterns all glowing with flickering candles. Lily pads floated across the rippling water, and I found that nobody but the moon and stars could see us out here. Only I could watch as Cole pulled a slim velvet pouch from his jacket pocket and got down on one knee. My heart went from fluttering to racing with realization.

Don’t cry, I told myself. Hope had spent too much time on my makeup for me to ruin it here.

“Inez Alexandra Sideris,” Cole began. “I once asked you for one night and one morning, but since then, you have given me more happiness than I ever thought possible. You were the one person I never knew I needed. You gave me the chance to

be a partner and a father, but I'm selfish, Inez. I'm selfish and foolish, and I have to ask you for one more thing."

"Yes?" I managed to say.

"Will you marry me and give me the honor of being your husband?"

There was no hint of irony or boyish charm in Cole's words. His eyes and smile were so earnest, and I would never in a million years deny him. I could only nod and grin like the fool Cole claimed to be.

"Yes, Cole," I agreed excitedly. "Yes, I'll marry you."

As he stood to slide my new ring on my hand, I noticed how the white gold band was embedded with a dozen diamond specks. The main teardrop diamond caught the golden light of the garden, but I couldn't look at it for long. I needed to wrap my hands around Cole's face and kiss him for all I was worth.

"I love you, Cole," I murmured against his lips.

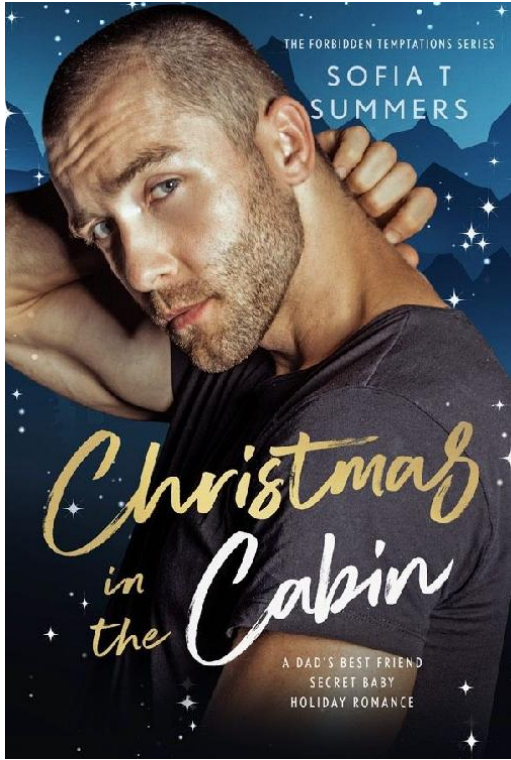
"And I love you, Princess," he murmured back.

I laughed as our lips met again. Cole's arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer to his chest. I thought I was floating in my elation, but I realized it was Cole's embrace lifting me off the ground. Of all the endings I could have written, of all the leading men I could have imagined, this moment outmatched any of them. This happy ending was sweeter and more satisfying than any of my wildest dreams, yet it wasn't an end at all.

Cole and I were just closing one chapter and turning to our next page. The story and the life we were making together were flourishing into something new. No, this moment wasn't an end. It was just the beginning of something better.

Thank you for reading **A Very Naughty Christmas**. I hope you enjoyed all three holiday stories.

*In mood for another holiday romance from this series? **Get my latest bestseller - Christmas in the Cabin, here.***



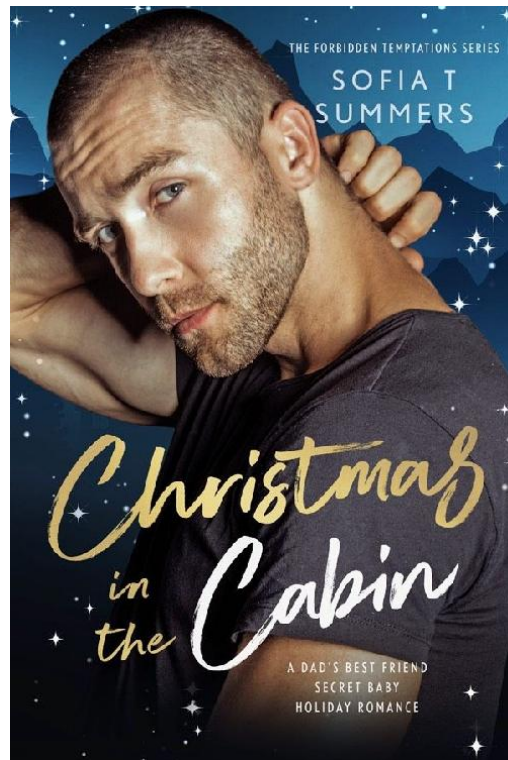
THE FORBIDDEN TEMPTATIONS SERIES

SOFIA T.
SUMMERS

Christmas
in
the *Cabin*

A DAD'S BEST FRIEND
SECRET BABY
HOLIDAY ROMANCE

CHRISTMAS IN THE CABIN (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**Driving home for Christmas, I couldn't outrun the snow or
Nick Wallace.**

**I had travelled the world, but nothing prepared me for
that fateful night in his cabin...**

Not even for the baby girl who arrived eight months later.

There were secrets pride urged me to keep.

Nick never learned about his daughter, *our* daughter,

And I kept my word that my father would never know what
we did.

Their friendship didn't need to be shattered like all my hopes.

**Now, fate is calling me back home for an extended holiday
season.**

There will be no quick getaway this time.

People say that time heals all wounds, but what can an all-
consuming kiss do?

Everything always looks better under the glow of holiday
lights,

But will the harsh light of reality be the end of everything I
once craved from Nick?

This Christmas, will I finally stop running?

PROLOGUE

DARCY

Over and over, I turned the key in the ignition. Every time I thought the engine might rumble to life, it failed me again, and all my hopefulness dwindled into helplessness. Stuck on the side of the mountain, I had another thirty minutes to get to my dad's place, but my Mustang wasn't going to make it. My dear Shelby was beautiful, but she couldn't fight the snow and ice piling up in this wild storm. She could only sit there and maybe keep me warm.

Looking at the gas gauge, I realized that wouldn't be much longer, either. The little red hand sat around the one-quarter mark. I didn't know if that was enough to keep the heat running all night long. If the gas could somehow make it to morning, I imagined the car's battery might not.

No bars on my cell phone. No chance of driving out of this ditch. Plus, I was a little too far out of the small mountain town to walk back for salvation.

"Merry freakin' Christmas to me," I muttered.

The cheerful music on the radio sounded like it was mocking me. With a huff, I pulled the key from the little slot. The speakers went dead. The heat stopped blowing from the vents, but there was enough heat in the car to keep me warm. I had my mittens and my hat . . .

I was definitely going to die. *Froze to death in her car*, the obituary would say. I could already see the local news's headlines.

"Black Sheep?"

The voice made me jump. Turning my head, a familiar pair of blue eyes met mine. I couldn't believe it.

"Nick?" I called through the icy window. "Is that you?"

I didn't need to ask. I had memorized every strand of his sandy blond hair and the crooked bridge of his nose. It was the

only imperfection on his otherwise perfect face. The smile he offered always looked wry, even when he was being earnest.

With that same grin, he exclaimed, “Funny running into you out here!”

“No, it isn’t!” I protested. “I’m stuck.”

“Then, get out of the car!”

I scoffed. “You just want me to abandon my car?”

“It’s not going anywhere!”

As I glanced through the windshield, snowflakes fatter than goose feathers were starting to cover my car. He was right. This was my one chance at a Christmas miracle.

I had to take it.

Bracing myself for the cold, I grabbed my purse from the front seat before rushing to the trunk. I shuddered against the wind, trying to unlock it with my mitten-clad hands. God, I didn’t want to take them off. My fingers would be purple in seconds.

“Give me the keys,” Nick insisted.

I looked over to his shoulder and then up at his face. His red knit cap had his blond hair pushed down across his intent gaze. He was used to the cold, making it easier to retrieve my suitcase and throw it in the backseat of his old blue Chevrolet. Shivering again, I didn’t protest.

“I guess I should thank you,” I said as Nick slid into the cab beside me. “I would probably have died out here.”

“Oh, you’re tougher than that, but why were you driving that thing in a snowstorm? What happened to your hatchback, and shouldn’t you have some boyfriend with you? Bill mentioned you were seeing someone.”

“I sold it when I left for Costa Rica. I didn’t need two cars, especially when I was going to be out of the country.”

“Is that where you’ve been?” he wondered while shifting into drive.

“Costa Rica was in the spring and South America this summer. I did a Schengen visa in Europe this fall. I got back from Copenhagen last week. That’s where I left the boyfriend.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “Don’t be. I’m certainly not.”

We had only ever been a traveling fling. He wanted to head east to New Zealand. I wanted to head home for the holidays. As fun as the guy was, there was no point in pretending we were a great love affair.

Nick laughed, flashing that teasing grin. “Did you visit that Red-Light District?”

“You’re thinking of Amsterdam, and do you think I’m the kind of person to visit brothels and sex shops?”

“No, Black Sheep, you’ve never been that kind of girl.”

“Darcy.” I sighed. “Why can’t you ever call me Darcy?”

He chuckled again, turning around the switchback edge of the mountain. It didn’t matter that we could barely see. Nick knew these roads like the back of his hand. He probably had every inch of Banner Elk and the surrounding mountains memorized. I just had to settle into my seat and try to keep calm.

It was never easy being around him, especially in close quarters.

“What?” he teased. “You don’t like your old nickname?”

“It was fine back in the day, but I’m twenty-five now.”

“How about Darlin’ Darcy Rose?” Nick persisted with his game. “I can’t call you that anymore either?”

I shifted in my seat, averting my eyes. “I would prefer you didn’t.”

“Fine, Darcy it is then.”

“Thank you.” I paused, glancing out the window. “So . . . why were you in town, anyway?”

“I was picking up my mail before the post office closed. I needed some odds and ends from the store. You know, the usual.”

Nick turned right when he should have turned left.

“This isn’t the way to my dad’s.”

He shook his head. “Oh, I’m not taking you out to your dad’s.”

“What?” I turned to watch the road’s fork vanish from view. “Nick, he doesn’t know where I am! My phone wasn’t working back there! Just let me out. I’ve got bars now. I can call him.”

“You want me to leave you out on the side of a road . . . on Christmas Eve . . . in the dark . . . in a snowstorm?”

As he laughed, I remembered hoping to be home in time for Christmas Eve dinner, but I figured that was a pipe dream.

“I’m sure Dad could come get me.”

“Visibility is getting worse by the minute. You really want your father out in this?”

“No,” I mumbled begrudgingly.

Nick flashed a triumphant grin. “That’s what I thought. Now, my cabin is only ten minutes from here. You can spend the night with me, and I’ll take you over to your dad’s house in the morning. You’ll be there just in time to dump out your stocking and eat your special Christmas breakfast. I promise.”

“Fine. It’s not like I have much of a choice, anyway.”

“No, you don’t.”

Surrendering, I crossed my arms over my chest and wondered, “When did you even get this cabin?”

“I got rid of my grandparents’ old trailer. I used the land to build this place last year.”

“I guess I have been away for a while, then.”

The truck rumbled. The road shifted from smooth asphalt to uneven gravel. Nick slowed to a crawling pace as we passed

through trees and caught glimpses of Christmas lights glowing in the night. At the far end, we rounded a patch of woods and came into a clearing where a log cabin sat with a green metal roof, a big stone chimney, and a carport on the side.

The little cabin looked like a haven in the dark, gray night. The winds whipped around us. I hated to open the truck door, but I told myself it was safer inside. Everything would be better if I just got inside the house, so in a rush, Nick grabbed my suitcase from the back and led me through the side door. The mudroom had hooks on the walls and a place for our boots. Passing by the washer and dryer, we stepped into the kitchen that felt undeniably warm.

It wasn't just the temperature. The place was just so *cozy*. I recognized half of the furniture from his grandparents' place, like the old kitchen table and the China hutch complete with blue Wedgwood plates. Even the olive-green cabinets had their charm, but I couldn't rest easily in the space.

Nick's hair still fell across his eyes. His cheeks were pink from the winter's icy cold. I had run all over the world, but I couldn't escape him, not here, not in this storm.

"I got a lasagna at the store," he declared while setting down his paper grocery bag. "I was planning to bake it for dinner. That okay?"

"I'm good with lasagna," I assured him.

"Good. You can take the bed upstairs. I'll sleep on the couch."

My shoulders slumped. I had to protest.

"No, Nick, I can't put you out."

"It's no big deal," he insisted while unpacking his groceries. "I fall asleep on the couch all the time watching television. Just go upstairs. You can put your stuff down and get comfortable."

"Okay, okay."

I didn't need many directions. There was only a loft over the back of the house. Walking past the bathroom and behind

the couch, I caught sight of the little Christmas tree covered in colorful lights and old ornaments sitting just beside the fireplace. The bedroom overlooked the living room with its large bed and simple furnishings. Nick had never been the kind of man to need much, but he did have a few things around from his past. I was pretty sure the patchwork quilt was something his Grandma Peggy had made.

Not dwelling on the man's bed, I got myself out of my cold jeans and sweater, trading them for leggings and my oversized Duke sweatshirt. It was big enough that it didn't matter if I wore a bra. My chest just looked like a heap of heathered gray cotton. With my wild thicket of dark hair pulled up into a bun, I decided there was nothing attractive about this outfit.

Nick Wallace would never want me anyway, cute pajamas or otherwise.

After calling Dad to explain, I followed my nose back downstairs to the kitchen. Nick might not have been trying, but I hated how good he looked with his flannel's sleeves rolled up to his elbows. I could see the tattoos scattered across his right arm, including the bright petals of a blooming red rose.

His backside in those jeans didn't help, either.

"Need any help?" I asked while forcing my voice not to crack.

He slid the lasagna into the oven, and the heavy metal door creaked shut. Nick set a timer.

"You could cut up some lettuce."

I tried to joke. "I didn't know you ate salad. I always took you for a meat and potatoes man."

Fortunately, he chuckled. "I don't mind eating a few green leaves every so often. Besides, I'm not a teenager anymore. I can't just eat crap and expect to fit in my pants."

"Yeah, I know that feeling."

Nick definitely wasn't a teenager. He was in his late thirties and about fourteen years too old for me, but that didn't

change how my heart fluttered when he got close. It didn't change how I leaned into the smell of the clean scents of aftershave and pine tar soap. I swallowed hard.

"You got anything to drink?" I asked while working hard to chop up the romaine.

"I, um, have some sweet tea and some beer."

"You got anything stronger?"

"Whiskey?"

"Sounds great," I replied with a forced smile. "Let's put a little tea in that and call it a cocktail."

"All right," Nick agreed. "What's botherin' you, then?"

"Bothering me?"

"You always get jittery when something's bothering you, and I've never known you to drink anything stronger than a shandy."

"Well, I'm not that girl anymore. I enjoy plenty of cocktails now, especially margaritas and palomas."

"That doesn't mean something's not botherin' you."

I grumbled to myself. Of course, Nick had to be the guy who gave me my first drink. Shaking my head, I forced away the unhelpful thought. I couldn't just melt into a puddle on his kitchen floor.

"I just feel bad about not getting home tonight," I lied.

"Don't worry too much," Nick tried to assure me. "I'm sure your Uncle Mickey and Aunt Erin are keepin' your dad company tonight."

"Yeah, they're probably playing card games and listening to Dad's old Christmas cassettes."

I could see it all in my mind's eye, letting my muscles and my worries ease themselves. Everything felt easier by the time we sat down to dinner. I was already working on my second spiked sweet tea, and Nick was nursing a beer. Our little salad and take-and-bake lasagna tasted pretty good.

“Merry Christmas Eve, Darcy,” he offered, clinking his bottle to my glass.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” I repeated before gulping back more of my tea.

“So, it’s only seven thirty. What do you want to do?”

I wanted to bury myself under his quilt and forget where I was.

“We could watch a movie,” I suggested instead. “Or . . . we could play a card game, or um, you got checkers?”

“I’ve got a deck of cards, no checkers.”

“Well then, I guess this night is ruined.”

Nick rolled his eyes and offered that wry grin. “Sure, it is, Black Sheep.”

I rolled my eyes at the old nickname but said nothing. He was letting me sleep in his bed for the night. He was feeding me dinner. I couldn’t complain. I just needed a third sweet tea to get over it.

With *It’s A Wonderful Life* playing in the background, Nick and I found ourselves playing our fourth game of Go Fish on the plush brown couch. We played by the light of the Christmas tree and the fire burning in the heavy stone fireplace while a red plaid blanket covered my lap. On the little screen in the corner, George and Mary were finally getting hitched.

“You got any threes?” I asked Nick.

“Go Fish.”

I reached over to the coffee table, a slab of heavy wood straight from the trunk. The bark still ran along the rough edges, but I didn’t focus on the piece of furniture. My tipsy head was too excited.

“I fished my wish!” I exclaimed too giddily, laying down a book of threes. “Now, do you have any queens?”

“Here,” Nick surrendered.

Handing over his two queens, it was only a matter of seconds before I was declared the winner, but we only could play the same game for so long before the fun faded.

“I think that’s enough Go Fish,” Nick declared, gathering the cards.

“What now, then?”

His head turned toward the television. “We could just watch the movie.”

As I settled myself down, George Bailey’s honeymoon began. Rain poured down outside his house like the snow falling down outside. I watched as his new wife smiled at him. My body curled tighter against the end of the couch.

“You know, I ran into Kevin Booth when I was at the grocery store,” Nick remarked. “He asked about you, wanted to know if I knew where you were.”

Kevin Booth took me to my senior prom. We were together for less than a month, and he was my only foray into dating in high school.

“Why would he ask about me?”

Nick shrugged. “Maybe he’s still into you. Why? You don’t like him anymore? I thought he was your first crush. I’ve certainly never heard of you dating anyone else.”

George and Mary were heading to bed. They looked so happy together.

“He wasn’t my first crush,” I blurted out.

“Then, who was?”

“Nobody you know.”

“I’ve served beer to just about everyone within fifty miles of here,” he remarked in disbelief. “I’m sure I know him.”

“No, you really don’t.”

He prodded my shoulder. “Come on, don’t lie to me.”

“*Nick.*”

“Is it really that big of a deal? It’s ancient history.”

No, it damn well wasn't.

"I thought we were gonna watch this movie."

"We will," he said with a chuckle, "right after you tell me who you liked instead of Kevin."

I knew exactly what I was doing, but I'd had too much whiskey to care.

"You, okay?" I huffed before taking a gulp of my drink.

There was no sense of shame as I turned to meet Nick's surprised eyes. It was the most serious I'd ever seen on him. His Southern lilt grew thicker with the rasp of his voice.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"I liked you, Nick. You were always the good-looking bartender at my dad's bar, and well, you were always nice to me. That didn't help. I was eighteen and foolish. Honestly, what did you expect?"

Apparently, whiskey was a truth serum for me. I used my last scrap of good sense to decide to never drink it again.

"You think I'm . . . *good-lookin*?"

God, Nick's baritone voice sounded like whiskey tasted—strong, dark, and damn intoxicating.

"Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"No," he said. "You're just Black Sheep."

"You also called me 'Darling Darcy Rose'."

"It's just a nickname," he insisted, quickly at a loss for words. "You were always hanging around the bar. You were Bill's daughter. It didn't mean . . . I never . . . I—I think you've had too much to drink."

"No, I haven't. I could touch my toes right now. I could do it and sing a whole song in French."

"Darcy, you don't—"

I cut him off by trying to stand, but I hadn't prepared for getting caught up in the blanket. I wasn't ready for anything. All too quickly, I stumbled and found myself falling into

Nick's capable arms. His face was inches from mine, and my hand managed to press into his strong thigh. My fingers were inches from the bulge in his dark jeans.

Was it always that big or is he just happy to see me?

"I really shouldn't be taking advantage of you," I mumbled. "You've had two beers tonight."

"Three," Nick amended.

"I'm not drunk, but you probably are. I should, uh, just go to bed."

"Yes, you should."

And yet, my whole body was frozen in place. The heat rising up my spine should have me thawed out, but I couldn't move away. I was trapped in the steely-blue cage that was Nick's gaze. I could see the chiseled lines of his face and smell the scent of aftershave looming on his neck.

Back in the kitchen, a cuckoo clock chimed midnight.

"Merry Christmas, Nick," I offered softly.

His chest rose and fell with labored breath. "Why did you say those things?"

"Because you asked."

"What, would you do anything I asked of you?"

"Maybe."

He exhaled heavily. "*Darcy . . .*"

Nick muttered my name like a curse, but he didn't push me away. Nothing could stop our lips from meeting. It felt as inevitable as the snowstorm outside. One kiss became two, and two turned into more. Growing dizzy and light, my head fell against the throw pillows. I could feel Nick's calloused hands sliding under my sweatshirt and cupping my breasts. I didn't stop myself from moaning into his mouth.

It was everything I'd always wanted. All those years of pining finally culminated in this.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he muttered, his kisses wandering down to my throat.

I could feel his bulge growing hard against my thigh. No matter what he said, I could feel how Nick wanted me, even if I didn’t totally believe it. It was right there in his hungry kiss and roving hands, but it still didn’t feel real.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

“Hell, Darcy.”

The scene became a mixture of golden, dim light and cold shadows. The fire began to die out as our clothes became a pile on the floor. Every time Nick exposed a new piece of me, his mouth devoured the skin. His broad frame consumed mine, and I was nothing but happily helpless under him.

I had found my haven in the snow. He was six-foot-four and smelled like winter and smoke. My fingers could run freely through his hair and down his tanned chest, and I didn’t think to hide. It was never like me to shy away. I could only let my legs spread wider as Nick’s hand began to feel me out. He found me dripping wet, ready, and willing. His two fingers traced my folds with slow intention.

“You shouldn’t be this beautiful,” Nick growled. “I shouldn’t want you like this.”

I pleaded in a whisper, “Let me have you this once. It’ll only be one time.”

His lips crashed against mine again, and our bodies connected. I felt every inch of him push into me. As I shut my eyes, my head fell back. My hips knew how to move. My hands knew to anchor themselves against his shoulders. Every piece of me began to move on instinct while pleasure built up inside me. It grew like a fire, sparking and flourishing into a raging swell of flames in my heart.

That’s what we were—shadows and skin, bone and smoke. Nick rocked me into the deepest climax I’d ever known, and he left nothing but the bones on my skin. Breathless and gasping, I inhaled the scent of the wood fire as my eyes opened. Shadows grew over us together.

I never made it to bed that night. In the morning, the sunrise woke me. Squinting my eyes, I took in a deep breath scented with pine soap, salt on skin, and the ashes of a cold hearth. The world outside looked white, and I was pinned between the back of the couch and Nick's naked frame. His tattooed arm fastened me against him over our blanket.

"Darcy?" I heard Nick grumble as he opened his eyes. "Dammit. Damn it all."

His swears sounded nothing like the night before. There was no wry smile on his face or touch of affection. In a rush, I felt him pull away from me before finding his boxers and jeans. The world quickly grew cold. I wrapped the blanket around me to keep warm, but it wasn't enough.

"I shouldn't've let this happen," he muttered in a rush. "We'd both been drinking. I should've known better. God, what would Bill think? After all he's done for me, I wouldn't blame him for shootin' me dead."

The fire had gone out. My heart froze over.

"You're right," I declared quickly, unable to listen to any more of Nick's muttering. "We had both been drinking. It was stupid, and nobody will ever know, especially Dad."

Buttoning his jeans, Nick looked at me with apologetic eyes. "Darcy . . ."

No warmth lingered in the sound.

"It's fine," I insisted, standing with the blanket. "I'm gonna get dressed so you can take me home."

Not waiting for more, I hurried upstairs and promised that nobody would know how my heart broke that Christmas morning, especially Nick Wallace.

CHAPTER ONE

NICK - TWO YEARS LATER

I felt it the moment the heat kicked off. With the bar quiet and still, there was no reason to leave it on for my sake. I could throw on my leather flight jacket and keep working alone in the back office. My fingers thumbed through the paper bills with the ease of doing it a million times before.

This was the order of my life. It's what I knew, and it's where I always expected to be.

"Nick?" a familiar voice called out. "I saw your truck parked out back!"

"I'm in the office!" I shouted.

Footsteps sounded on the concrete floor. Then, Bill Steward's dark eyes met mine with a small smile forming under his graying mustache. He scratched his nose while appraising the scene. Our two bodies took up most of the free space in the small office.

"What are you doin' here so late on a Friday night?" Bill wondered, watching me take down the cheap painting to put his cash in the safe. "It's nearly midnight."

"I could say the same about you. I see you're wearing your good flannel."

He chuckled low and deep like some kind of Southern Santa. "It was poker night over at my brother's. I figured the guys deserved a shirt without too many holes in it."

"So you dressed up for them," I joked. "How nice of you."

We laughed lightly together as the last of the money got tucked away. The safe door shut with a loud click, and like always, I hung the painting back up and straightened it twice. I could still remember the first night Bill let me do this as his new manager. Over a decade had passed, but in some ways, it only felt like last week.

"Was business good tonight?" Bill asked me then.

“Yeah, per usual,” I replied. “People seem to be liking this new fish fry special on Fridays. More faces are becoming weekly regulars, and our old regulars seem to like it too.”

“That’s thanks to your good thinkin’, you know. If you got any more bright ideas, feel free to give ’em to me, and speaking of dinners . . .”

“Yes?”

“Will you be coming to the house for Thanksgiving?”

Turning toward the desk, I tried to move like nothing was amiss. I logged out of the desktop computer and began to file the paid expense reports away in the tall filing cabinet.

“You aren’t going to Durham for the holiday?”

“Naw, Darcy’s coming here for the week this time. She talked about going to see her mother in Oregon, but it’s not gonna work out. She’s gonna drive over Sunday afternoon and stay until the next Sunday. Honestly, I can’t remember the last time she stayed so long, but I ain’t complaining.”

My heart clenched at the name. I spent a long time trying to get that name out of my head, but I could never escape it. Her eyes still reflected the firelight. The memory of her touch made me weak. It was such a stark contrast from the cold shoulder and icy looks she left me with the next day. Across from me at her father’s dinner table, Darcy spent that Christmas as if I didn’t exist, and honestly, it was for the best.

I wasn’t sure I could trust myself around her anymore. Once I had her my grasp, it felt impossible to let go, but I did. I did it for Darcy’s sake and for the man standing in the doorway, not that he even knew it. I never gave her a second glance when she was younger. Darcy Rose Steward was just the plucky young girl who would sip sodas and do her calculus homework in one of the back booths of the bar. Things changed after she left for college. Bit by bit, she became someone else, someone Darcy was always meant to be, and certainly too good for the likes of this little mountain town.

She was especially too good for the likes of me.

“Are you sure you’ll have room?” I remarked, trying to keep my voice light.

“You know I always do for you, Nick.”

I smiled. Bill had always been generous to me. Scratching the back of my head, I knew there was no reason I could give to refuse. I didn’t have anyone waiting at home for me. Ten years had passed since I’d had anyone else at home, and if I didn’t agree, the only Thanksgiving dinner awaiting me would be some takeout or a frozen meal. Bill knew it too.

He would never be harsh and point out my lack of family. With his hands in his coat pockets, Bill patiently waited for an answer. He wasn’t going to pressure or belittle me. Still, the truth lingered in the brief silence. Darcy would just have to suffer through another dinner with me, and once dessert was eaten, I’d quickly get out of her thick curls for as many years as I possibly could.

“Sure, I’ll be there. Thanks, Bill.”

He flashed a friendly grin. “Of course. Now, come on. Let’s get this place locked up and get ourselves home. My armchair’s callin’ my name.”

As Bill offered a hand turning out the lights and double-checking his bar, a dozen different thoughts raced through my mind. What was I going to tell Darcy when I finally faced her again? Would she be happy to see me? If she gave me *that look* again, staring into my soul and stripping me bare, would I be able to survive it?

I was so wrapped up in myself that I almost ran into Bill. The emergency light glowed over us as he opened the back door just as I absently reached for the handle.

“I’ve got it,” he told me. “Brace yourself, though. The wind’s pickin’ up.”

He wasn’t kidding. The cold November air smelled of ice and damp leaves settling in the woods around us. I pulled my knit cap from my back pocket and handed Bill my set of keys. Out in the gravel lot, there wasn’t much to see but our two vehicles parked side by side and the dumpster under the

streetlight, yet the wincing expression on Bill's face was new. He rubbed his chest as he handed me back the keys.

"You okay, Bill?"

Quickly, he nodded, dropping his hand back to his side.

"I'm fine," he said. "Mickey made some enchiladas for dinner tonight, and I think he got a little heavy-handed with his canned jalapeños. Washing it down with a can of beer probably didn't help me either. It's just indigestion."

"I figured you'd have a stomach of steel after all these years."

"No part of me is as good as it used to be. Each mornin', I've got a new surprise of what's gonna be sore next."

"Sounds like something to look forward to."

Bill shook his head. "Don't go wishin' your life away, boy. I'd kill to be forty-one again."

"You make it sound like I'm still twenty-one."

"To me, Nick, you are."

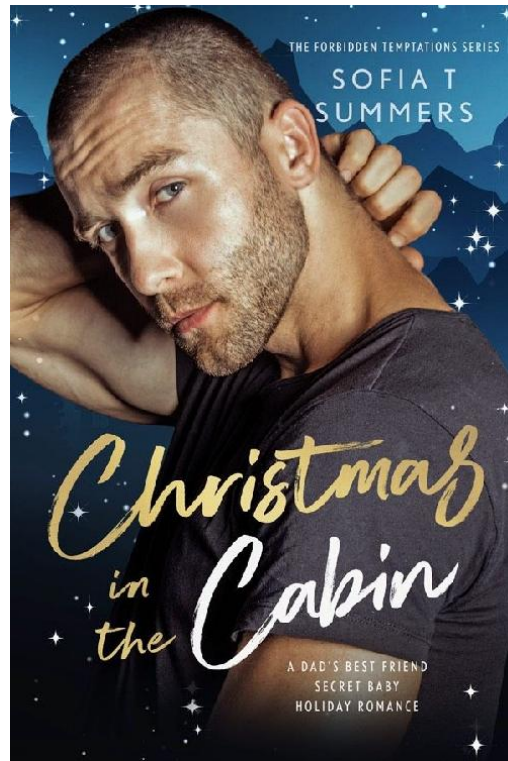
Was I really still so young in his eyes? When Bill looked at me, did he see the teenager he met doing court-appointed community service or the young bar back, frantic on his first Saturday night? These days, I only saw the silver hairs hiding among the fading blond and the fine lines settling around my face. I never considered myself a vain man, but each morning, I saw every reminder in the mirror that I wasn't young anymore.

That's what made it so easy for Darcy to sweep me under her rug. When she was sober with her eyes wide open, she could see how much more life had in store for her. She was traveling the world and building a life all on her own. I wasn't going to stake her to these rocky grounds, and just like Bill's wincing expression, Thanksgiving dinner would probably be nothing.

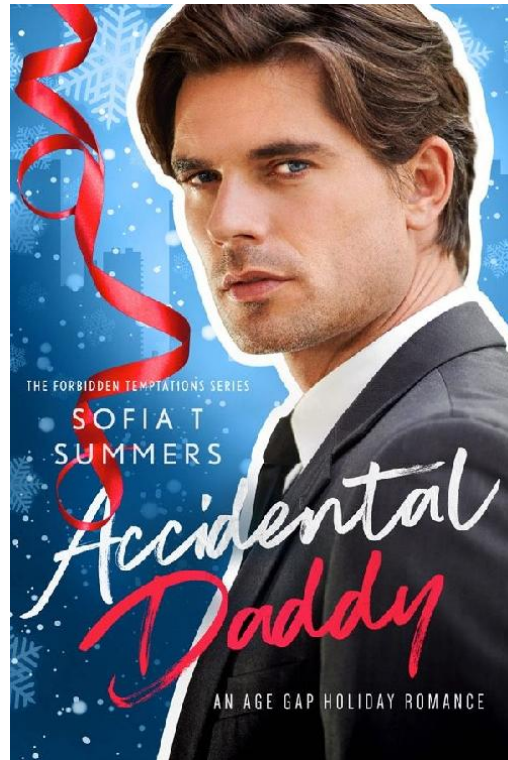
Saying goodbye to Bill, I hopped into the cab of my old Scottsdale and steeled myself for what was coming for me. Darcy would be in town for seven days. She would be gone

before I knew it, and nothing would pass between us beyond a few minutes of conversation and some dinner rolls. Even if it put me in an early grave, I refused to make the same mistake twice.

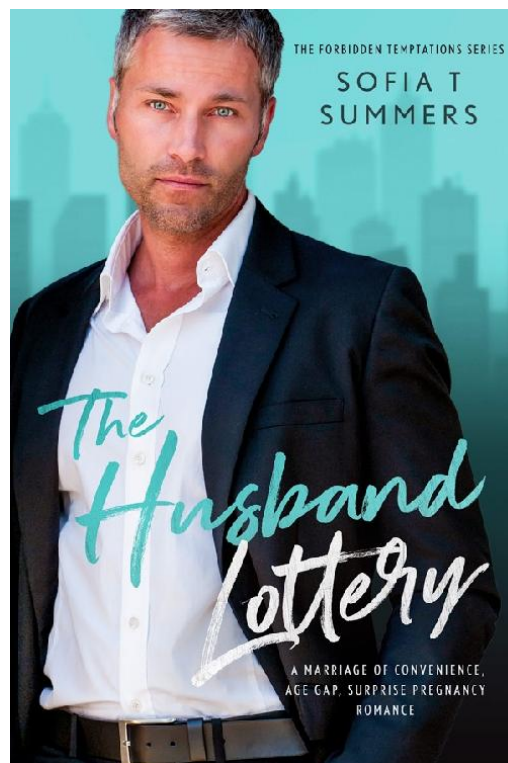
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