



A TOWNSENDS OF WILLIAMSPORT
HOLIDAY NOVELLA

Aaron's

Gift

TIFFANY PATTERSON

AARON'S GIFT



TIFFANY PATTERSON

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Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up Aaron's Gift. Please note that Aaron's Gift contains themes that discuss cancer recovery, some violence, strong language, and lots of steam. As always, there is a Happily Ever After.

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy!

Tiffany

CHAPTER 1



*S*ix weeks before Christmas
Patience

“Patience, I can’t tell you how delighted I was to receive your invite,” Rebecca Walsh said from across the white linen-covered table.

I forced myself to hold the brittle smile on my face. It took almost all my strength not to reach across the table and slap her. However, I’d told Aaron he needed to be on his best behavior at dinner, so I felt obligated to follow my own rule.

Instead of replying immediately, I sat back and inhaled deeply. I allowed the instrumental version of “O Holy Night” to wash over me, helping to quell some of my anger. Since looking at Rebecca would only piss me off even more, I turned to the head of the table. Aaron’s piercing hazel eyes were on me. His expression looked as if it were made of granite. A deep V sat between his brows while his lips were pressed into a thin line.

Those blazing, intense orbs perused my face, searching for any indication that I was uncomfortable.

The overhead lighting of the private dining room in Buona Sera highlighted the controlled anger in his gaze. He wanted to be as far away from these people as I did. The edges of his eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and that minute gesture told me what he was thinking. Though we’d just barely sat down to dinner with the Walshes, he was reaching his breaking point.

A clearing of the throat interrupted our silent communication. Aaron's face contorted into a full-on scowl as he glanced over at Harold Walsh, Rebecca's husband.

"Yes, I must say so as well," Harold agreed with his wife. "It has been too long since all of us got together." He glanced from me to Aaron. "However, with all of the great work Walsh Technologies is getting ready to do with Townsend Industries, I suppose we'll see a lot more of each other." Harold grinned a triumphant smile that reignited the burning in my stomach.

"I wouldn't bank on that," I replied.

Rebecca's eyelids rose, and her lips parted in surprise. She quickly stifled the look, throwing on that Miss America smile with a slight tilt of her head. "Well, we'll let the men take care of business." Laughing, she waved her hand in the general direction of her husband and mine. "Us ladies have more important matters to worry about. For instance, the Spring Fling—"

"My wife won't be participating," Aaron cut in.

I rolled my gaze over to him, lifting an eyebrow. He cocked his head sideways and glared at me as if to say *yeah, I know I said I'd be on my best behavior, but the sound of her voice is pissing me off.*

"What Aaron means is ..." I paused, trying to think of a gentler way to put things. But then I recalled the look of hurt and betrayal in Kyle's eyes as he told us about Dean's deception. Dean had been Kyle's good friend and was the son of Harold and Rebecca.

Dean was encouraged by his father to use his friendship with Kyle to gain information about Townsend Industries. Harold wanted a lucrative deal with our family's company to go through.

Unfortunately, Kyle found this out a week earlier when Dean came to our home to play video games. He'd excused himself to go to the bathroom. After a while, Kyle found him in Aaron's office, looking through his desk with Harold on the phone, telling him what to search for. He hadn't said anything

to Dean at the time, instead recording the scene with his cell phone for Aaron and me to see.

Devastated, Kyle told me first and then his father. I had to talk Aaron down from going over to the Walshes' home that night and not kicking Harold's ass. This dinner was the compromise I could get him to agree to.

"He's right," I declared. "I won't be participating in the Spring Fling, or any other event hosted by your charity."

"I-I don't understand," Rebecca claimed.

"I'm sure you don't," Aaron said, his voice sounding as cold as the deep freezer in Buona Sera's kitchen.

Harold's eyebrows spiked. "Aaron, I don't—"

"Stop fucking talking to me," Aaron demanded through gritted teeth. While he hadn't raised his voice, his tone sliced through the air like a machete, silencing everything else. "You owe my wife an immense amount of gratitude," he continued, glaring at Harold. "It's only due to her insistence that I haven't gutted you for what you did," he seethed.

My stomach rippled with the awareness that we were skating on the edge of Aaron's temper. I reached over and took his hand to calm him. He squeezed my hand back but never took his glare off of Harold.

"Corporate espionage is one thing," Aaron said. "Trying to have one of your employees hired at Townsend to get your hands on private information is pathetic as shit, but it happens. That alone would've gotten the deal with Walsh Technologies canceled. And put your company under investigation with the SEC."

Rebecca gasped, but Aaron kept going.

"But then, to send your fucking son into my home, to use his friendship with Kyle in an attempt to obtain information about my company. That ..." Aaron broke off as he shook his head slowly.

"I would never," Harold started. "I have no idea what you're—"

“Are you calling my son a liar?” There was a warning in the question that didn’t need to be said out loud.

Harold wasn’t as dumb as he looked because he replied, “Of course not, but you know how children misunderstand things.”

“He’s sixteen,” I interrupted, unable to listen to his blatant lies. “Kyle isn’t a child, incapable of understanding what’s right in front of his eyes.”

Aaron squeezed my hand.

“Patience, please,” Harold blurted, his voice escalating. “This is between— Oh, God!”

“Aaron!” I yelled.

Harold hadn’t had the chance to finish whatever he wanted to say to me because Aaron leapt out of his chair with a steak knife in his free hand. In the blink of an eye, my husband had stabbed the knife in his hand through the table, between Harold’s thumb and index finger.

Everything in the room stopped moving.

“There is no time or place on this planet or the next in which I’ll let a motherfucker talk to my wife like that.” He didn’t yell or shout the words. His voice remained eerily calm, which was worse than if he’d been yelling.

“Aaron,” I called, trying to get him to calm down.

“Apologize to her,” he continued, not answering me.

“I-I, uh,” Harold blubbered.

“Apologize!” my husband demanded.

“I’m sorry, Patience.”

Aaron continued to glare at him as if debating whether or not he was satisfied with the apology.

“Sweetness,” Aaron called, his eyes still on the man in front of him.

“Yes?” I responded.

“Do you accept?” He turned his head my way.

I gave him a slight nod. “But Dean is no longer allowed over to our home. Kyle wants nothing to do with your son.” I looked from Harold to Rebecca. “And this is the last time you and I will ever be in the same room.”

Her bottom lip trembled. Regardless, I could barely look at the woman because, in my heart of hearts, I knew she was aware of the deceit her husband had roped their son into. The spy from Walsh Technologies that’d tried to infiltrate Townsend Industries mentioned Rebecca being in on some of their meetings.

Aaron yanked the knife out of the table and stood to his full six-foot-two height. “There will be an announcement tomorrow morning that the merger of Walsh Technologies with Townsend Industries is off the table. You should also find an attorney before all of your accounts are frozen by the SEC,” he told Harold while smoothing his tie.

“I could’ve waited until after the holidays to have you prosecuted, but fuck you,” Aaron spat at him. “Now get the hell out of my restaurant.” He moved to the side of table, coming to stand by me.

I rose to my feet. “It’s time for you two to leave.”

Aaron slipped his arm around my back, pulling me into him. My eyelids drooped slightly when he brushed his lips against my temple.

“I’m gonna fuck the shit out of you tonight,” he murmured in my ear.

I sucked in my lower lip and hoped like hell he spoke the words low enough for only me to hear.

“As for you two, why the hell are you still here?” Aaron glared at our guests.

Behind me, the door opened.

“Bryant, see the Walshes out,” Aaron told the security guard who accompanied us for the evening.

As Bryant held out his arm for the couple, Aaron caught Harold by the arm.

I held my breath, hoping like hell my husband wouldn't assault him.

He squeezed Harold's arm to the point that the man grimaced.

"Aaron," I warned.

He gave me a brief look before directing his attention at Harold again. "Business betrayal is one thing. That would cost you to lose your livelihood. But if you ever speak to my wife or my son again, there isn't a person alive with the power to find where I'll bury your body," he said through gritted teeth. "Do I make myself clear?"

Harold's face was beet red as he bobbed his head. Only then did Aaron release him.

I didn't watch the couple disappear behind the door with our security. Their holiday season had just been ruined. It served them right, though I did feel for their son. It wasn't his fault his parents were pathetic, horrible people.

Aaron turned me to face him, his hands on my hips. He didn't say anything as he stared me in the eyes, searching.

"You know, technically, this is *my* restaurant," I finally said.

His lips turned up at the corners. "I misspoke."

I crawled my fingers up the white button-up that covered his chest. "You did." Aaron had bought Buona Sera and given the restaurant to me as a gift for our fifth wedding anniversary.

"And did you have to tell me what you're planning on doing to me later while we were in the middle of kicking them out?"

His lips twitched into one of the smiles he reserved for me. And just like it did every time he granted me that grin, my heart expanded in my chest.

"Who the hell said anything about later?" He buried his head into the crook of my neck.

A sigh slipped from my lips when his teeth grazed over the pulsing vein in my neck.

“A-Aaron, we are not having sex in this restaurant ... again.” I attempted to sound stern, but when he licked at the spot, his teeth brushed it again, and my resolve waned. How I still became weak in the knees after ten years of marriage and all we’d been through was beyond my comprehension.

“Why not?” he mumbled, pressing the bulge in his pants against my belly. “What are they going to do? Kick the owner out?” He snorted.

But I didn’t welcome the possibility of someone walking in on us in the middle of making love. We came too close to that happening a few months ago.

“You were sexy as shit glaring across the table at that woman,” he murmured into my neck before pressing another kiss into my skin.

My body hummed with the building need.

“I wanted to put my hands around her neck,” I admitted. “Around both of theirs, to be honest.”

Aaron smiled proudly. Only my crazy ass husband would find something like that worthy of pride.

“But, if it ever came to that, you wouldn’t be the one getting your hands dirty.” He slipped a finger under my chin, lifting my face to his. “That would fall on me.”

“Neither one of us will be getting our hands dirty,” I returned. “We’ve made our positions clear.”

“Let me make something clear to you,” he said before stealing my breath with a kiss.

For a moment, I dissolved into the passion of the kiss, forgetting time, space, and my role as a respectable housewife and mother.

But then I returned to myself right before Aaron could get his hand underneath my dress.

“No.” I slapped his hand away.

I laughed at the frown on his face and quickly side-stepped out of his hold before he could convince me otherwise.

“We can finish this up at home.”

* * *

AARON

Though I wasn't finished with Harold Walsh, my only thought as I entered our house, behind my wife, was how quickly I could get her bare ass bent over our dining room table.

As soon as the door closed behind us, I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck and spun her to face me. Her gasp was cut off by my lips on hers. Her body melted into mine while I devoured her with my kiss.

My hand floated up the base of her neck, my fingers curling into her scalp. I took a handful of her curly hair into my hand, holding her in place to allow me to plunder her mouth to my heart's desire. Though the truth was that I could kiss her forever, and that still wouldn't be enough.

“You're going to mess up my twist out,” she mumbled when I finally let her up for air.

I loosened my hold on her hair and ran my fingers over the coily, curly strands that were much shorter than the sister locks she wore when we first married.

“So?” I replied before slamming my lips over hers again.

She moaned into my mouth, and my cock, which was already throbbing, turned to concrete. We wouldn't make it upstairs.

Thank God the children were gone for the night. Kennedy was over Tyler's babysitting, Kyle and the youngest twins had plans with my parents, while Anastasia, the baby of the family, was over Joshua's spending time with her favorite cousin, Victoria.

Our home, which was usually full of chaos, was quiet. But I would fix that. I planned to have my wife's screams bouncing off every wall in this damn house.

I backed us to the dining room and lifted her to sit at the table. Flicking the light switch, I illuminated the entire space.

"Aaron, we can't," she protested when I started to unzip the back of her dress.

"Can't what?" I asked, but I was far more concerned with getting her out of every piece of clothing.

"We can't have sex here," she replied. "Our children eat at this table."

With a frown, I shook my head. "The only reason those children exist is because of what we're about to do. Right here at this fucking table," I said at the same time I yanked the dress apart.

"Dammit!"

My dick thumped against the zipper of my pants from the anger in her voice. "I'll buy you another one."

"This one was the replacement of the other dress you destroyed," she reminded me.

I grunted. "Yeah, it was."

The torn sides of the dress fell to her waist, and I helped her the rest of the way out of it. She was left in her bra and panties. While the panties were black lace, the bra was black cotton. Not the sexy kind she used to wear, but it was more practical and more comfortable than the sexier styles. Either way, it wasn't the bra I gave a shit about.

I kissed a trail down her neck as I unfastened the clasp and allowed the straps to slide off her shoulders. Patience reached up to stop the bra from falling off. I pulled back in time to see the hesitation on her face.

I narrowed my eyes, glaring at her until she released the bra, exposing all of herself to me underneath the fully lit dining room chandelier. I dove in and kissed her with all of the

passion I had in my body. The kiss was so deep it pressed her back against the table.

I stripped her out of the panties before sliding my hands up her waist to her belly, moving toward her breasts. Instinctively, she covered them with her hands before I could.

I firmed my hands around her waist. “You know better,” I growled. “Move your hands.” I gave the directive without an ounce of leeway in my tone.

The struggle that played out in her brown eyes tugged at my fucking soul. My entire body was heated with the desire to let her know how deeply alluring I still found her body.

Months after the reconstructive surgery to replace the breast she lost due to a mastectomy, my wife was still insecure about her body. Regretfully, I couldn’t take her place during her treatments and recovery. But I could show her that though her body changed after the breast cancer that tried to take her life, nothing about her wasn’t utterly flawless to me.

“Tonight, I’m going to fuck all that doubt out of you,” I growled. “Move your goddamn hands, Patience.”

Slowly, she released the hold on her breasts. I wasted no time licking over the scar that ran from her stomach to her reconstructed breast. I kissed over the soft tissue and around the surgically formed nipple. Her body relaxed beneath my lips as I showered her with affection.

Eventually, her hands moved to my head. Her legs widened around my waist. I stepped closer and felt the heat from her pussy against my abdomen. I groaned at how moist I knew she was. I placed one more kiss on her lips before lifting my head.

“Don’t move.”

I stepped away from her and went to the kitchen to retrieve a plate from the cabinet.

“What are you ...” She trailed off when I lifted her by the waist. I placed the plate beneath her ass. “Aaron, what are you doing?”

“Finishing my dinner,” I answered before using the plate to lift her pussy to meet my lips.

“You’re insane,” she gasped before breaking off in a moan as I ate her pussy the way I had planned all night. I spelled my full name, first and last, and the words I love you, with my tongue against the pussy that belonged to me. The body that has only ever belonged to me. I ate her like the ravenous motherfucker I was.

She exploded against my lips the third time I wrote my name.

I ditched the plate and finally released my throbbing cock. It pointed directly at her pussy. I cupped her ass cheeks, spreading them, and drove in as deeply as her body would allow me to go.

She shrieked and sat up, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “Fuck,” she cursed.

“You know how much I love when you drop the librarian act,” I said against her lips.

She grinned. “I am a librarian,” she panted. “Was,” she corrected.

“Not when I have you like this.” Another pump of my hips caused her to groan before she dropped her face into my neck. I lifted her from the table and spun our bodies to put her back against the wall.

I hooked one of my arms underneath her leg, hiking it higher to give me more room to drill into her. Just as I wanted, her cries of passion reverberated off the walls. They urged me to push harder and demand more from her body.

She tore at the shirt I still wore. Patience complained about how many pieces of clothing of hers I’d destroyed during the ten years of our marriage, but she’d also demolished her fair share of my clothing.

“Aaron, fuck ...” she panted. “I’m coming.”

“Damn right you are,” I growled while drilling into her at the angle I knew would send her to the stars.

Her body tightened around me; her muscles clamping down on my cock. Her head fell against the wall as her eyes rolled back into her head.

Fuck.

That sight never ceased to amaze me. Watching my wife orgasm would be satisfying enough, but her climax set off my own. Soon, I blew my load into her canal. I came so hard that my knees nearly gave out.

But I was far from finished. I carried her back to the dining table.

“We’re just getting started, sweetness,” I said.

Her response was to lift to her elbows and crook her finger, summoning my kiss. I greedily obliged, making my cock grow hard all over again.

Hours later, as I lay next to Patience, I stroked the mess of her dark brown, curly hair. She had been right. Her twist out was in utter disarray. But the dreamy, closed-eyed expression on her beautiful face spoke of her satisfaction.

As I watched her sleep, running my fingers over her hair, I thought back to the day two years ago when she had to say good-bye to the locks she’d spent years growing out.

CHAPTER 2



Two years earlier
Aaron

What the hell am I doing here? I thought to myself, staring out of the floor-to-ceiling window of the boardroom. The broad expanse of the Williamsport skyline stared back at me, but I didn't notice any of it.

"I should be home," I grumbled.

"What was that?"

I pivoted to face the three men and two women sitting at the ten-person board table in my office.

"What?" I asked Wren Walker, the head of my finance department, who'd formed the question.

She sat up a little straighter at my tone and blinked. "I thought you said something to us."

I glared at her, and then at the others in my office. None of them had done anything wrong, but I resented all five people staring back at me. Even if one of them was my younger brother, Joshua. I balled my fist in the pocket of my suit pants.

"Nothing," I said abruptly. "Keep talking," I instructed as I approached the leather chair at the head of the table. My intention was to take a seat and refocus on the quarterly meeting with the department heads.

I felt Joshua's eyes on me but ignored him.

Yet, instead of sitting down, a memory of Patience's face that morning flashed through my head. Her eyebrows were drawn low, and a frown played at her lips. The expression only lasted a heartbeat—it appeared and disappeared so quickly I wondered if I had imagined it.

I could've been projecting my fears onto her.

My throat constricted so tightly that I coughed, choking on the thought that I could lose my wife.

“Aaron,” Joshua called, snapping me out of my downward spiral.

I looked down to see my hand gripping the leather chair so tight that my knuckles turned white. My entire body grew shaky.

“I shouldn't be here,” I said. Without any apology or preamble, I started for the door.

“Aaron,” Joshua called.

I paused but didn't look back at him or anyone else in the office. They weren't my concern.

“I'm taking a leave of absence.” At that, I paused and glanced over my shoulder. “Effective immediately.”

With that, I strode out of that boardroom with intention. I didn't give a shit about Townsend Industries, the title of CEO, or that fucking weekly meeting. All that mattered was getting home to my wife.

She was home. She wasn't supposed to go into the community center that day. And Carter's wife, Michelle, would spend a few hours with her at home this morning. The idea that I might intrude on Patience and Michelle's time together passed through the back of my mind.

But fuck that.

I needed to see her.

Something was wrong. I could feel it just as I could feel the air enter my lungs when I inhaled.

“Home,” I grunted out to my driver while waving him off since I could open my own goddamn door. No formalities were needed.

Single-minded determination engulfed me as the driver pulled out of Townsend’s underground garage and onto the street. All I could hear was the ringing in my ears that something was wrong with my wife.

Something related to the breast cancer diagnosis she’d been given over a month earlier. That choking, constricted feeling started in my chest again, and I gripped my fists so tightly I knew I would draw blood.

Out of nowhere, an odd tingling started at the back of my neck. The hairs there stood on end, and a presence that I knew all too well enveloped me. Instantly, I pressed the button to raise the partition.

Then, after a deep inhale, I turned to my right to see my fucking nemesis. My top lip curled at the sight of the woman I still called a figment of my imagination.

Some might have called Emma a guardian angel or whatever.

“Aaron,” the woman dressed in a long, white dress, brunette hair that fell around her shoulders, and always wore a smile on her face called.

The tension in my body deepened. How the fuck could she smile when I felt like I was being tortured from the inside out? *My wife—my life—was sick and could ...*

I shook my head, refusing to even think about that last part.

“Fuck you,” I snarled in Emma’s direction.

“I expected that,” she said in that unsurprised yet compassionate tone of hers.

“If you were real ...”

“I am real, and you know this. Lest you wouldn’t be talking to me.”

“I fucking hate you and whatever it was that sent you,” I told her, meaning every word.

“You’re scared, frightened.”

“You fucking think?” I roared, uncaring if my driver heard me or not. “My wife is sick. She ... she ...” I shook my head. Yet, the words from all of her previous doctor’s appointment filled my head.

Words like fourth-stage cancer, surgery, chemo, radiation, and survival rates flooded my mind to the extent that my vision blurred.

“None of this is meant as a punishment,” Emma said, somehow breaking through the dark cloud forming over my head.

At that, however, I snorted and scoffed. “Fucking feels like it.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Do me a favor and stuff your apologies up your ass.”

She didn’t even blink.

“You lash out when you’re frightened,” she stated calmly.

“No shit.”

“She’ll need you to find a different kind of strength.”

“Don’t tell me what my wife needs,” I growled. Pointing a finger at her, I said. “What she needs is to not be sick. She needs to be here to live the life she wants, for herself, our children, and for ...” I trailed off.

“For you,” Emma finished.

I turned away from her. “Go the hell away.”

“I will,” she promised. “But you know I’m never far. Anything you need, I’m—”

“Can you take away her cancer? Can you end the months of suffering she’s going to go through? Right now? Can you end that?” I demanded to know through gritted teeth.

Her face sobered. She pinched her lips and shook her head.

“Then get the hell away from me.”

“But maybe there’s something more you can learn from this time,” she said.

When I blinked and turned in her direction, she was gone.

“Figment of my imagination,” I mumbled, knowing that wasn’t the truth.

But I didn’t have time to figure out what Emma was or wasn’t in my life. My driver had just pulled through the gate to my home, and my wife needed me.

* * *

AS SOON AS I saw the driveway empty of Michelle’s car, I cursed. I knew something wasn’t right. Patience was home, however. Her security tail remained at the house.

After telling the driver I’d be in for the rest of the day, I punched in the code to unlock the front door. My instinct told me to yell up the stairs for Patience, but I bit my tongue just in case she was in bed asleep. I didn’t want to disturb her.

However, I tossed my briefcase aside, kicked off my shoes, and took the stairs two at a time. My heart sank when I pushed through our bedroom door to find the bed empty.

I circled the room with my gaze. It, too, was vacant.

The house felt so still. With all five of our children at school, it was quiet in a way I wasn’t used to. The only thing I could hear was the wild pounding of my heartbeat.

But Patience was home. I could feel her.

That thought brought me to stare at the closed bathroom door. Clenching and unclenching my fists, I moved toward it.

The sight on the other end of the door almost crumpled me.

Patience, my wife of eight years, sat on the floor, her back against the free-standing bathtub, knees brought up to her chest and head bowed.

When she heard me enter, her head popped up. Her watery eyes met mine. Her bottom lip trembled, and she held up a pair of scissors.

“I-I couldn’t do it,” she said, her voice cracking.

At that, I did fall to my knees before her. I curled my hands around her knees and squeezed. Not hard, but enough to remind me that she was still here.

“I tried to cut it,” she continued. “But I just—” A sob punctuated her sentence.

I looked toward the sink and spotted a pair of hair clippers. My heart sank as I realized what she’d attempted to do.

Alone.

“Sweetness,” I whispered, peeling the scissors out of her hand. When I moved to engulf her in a hug, she pulled back.

“No, I need to do this,” she insisted, though her voice shook. “It’s already started.” She held up a loose strand of one of her sisterlocks in her hand. “This came out in the shower this morning.” She let out a laugh that was devoid of humor. “I knew it would happen. I shouldn’t be surprised, especially since I turned down the cold cap.”

She paused, and I took that as an opportunity to settle down in front of her, stretching my legs around hers so she sat between them. I rubbed my hands up and down the length of her thighs.

I cursed my weakness for not being able to take this from her. I had plenty of money at my disposal, the ability to get her the best doctors in the fucking world, and I did all of that. Hell, I’d flown a specialist from Norway to oversee her first surgery.

But this was a battle that, ultimately, her body would have to fight. That knowledge felt like someone skinned me alive.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked, again tightening my hold on her legs.

“I just ...” She pressed out a heavy breath. “I wanted to be brave throughout all of this. I wanted to be strong for Kyle and Kennedy and Thiers and Andreas, and Stasi, and ... you,” she whispered the last word.

My chest hurt so much that I almost doubled over from the pain.

“I had it all planned out. I bought a few wigs last week that arrived yesterday. I’d cut it all off and throw on a wig before everyone got home, and it wouldn’t be that big of a deal. I don’t want them to see me sick.”

She meant our kids.

“But I can’t,” she croaked and covered her face. “Cutting all of my hair off means I *am* sick. I really have cancer,” she cried. Her body became wracked by sobs.

That time when I wrapped her in my arms, she had no choice but to let it happen. She trembled in my arms, and I cursed everything above for doing this to my wife. She didn’t deserve to be hurt like this.

Me?

Hell yes. But not Patience.

I stroked her back and rocked her body as she cried. I kissed her temple and massaged the back of her neck, anything to comfort her.

When she quieted, I pulled back and said, “You’re mine.”

She blinked and stared.

“Anything you go through, I go through.” My voice was hoarse, which was when I realized tears had leaked from my eyes. “Nothing. Not a damn thing, do you have to walk through without me right there with you, Patience.”

I ran my hand down the side of her face, wiping away a few streaks of tears. Then, I held up the scissors she had when I first walked in and cut the first chunk out of my hair.

She gasped, her eyes widening.

I cut another handful, knowing it was uneven as hell. I didn't care as I cut a third and then a fourth strip of hair from my head.

"Aaron," Patience said, but her voice had a thread of humor. Her lips trembled but a slight smile crested.

That was all I needed. "I'll walk around looking like that damn cartoon child the boys used to watch on Youtube."

That won a laugh from Patience.

"Caillou. His name is Caillou."

"Whatever." I cut another chunk of hair.

When I couldn't cut anymore, I stood and moved to the sink to plug in the clippers. Patience was quiet as she watched me shave the rest of my hair off. She rose from the floor, and I turned to her.

"What do you think?"

Her smile broadened. Although there was some sadness in it, her expression was lighter.

"I think you're crazy." She ran a hand over my head. "You missed a few spots."

"I'll get it with the razor later."

She nodded and looked down into the sink. She stared at my strands of hair that littered our typically pristine marble vanity. "Will you do mine?" she whispered, not looking at me.

My answer was to position her in front of me with the scissors in my hand. Our gazes connected in the mirror, and she gave me a slight nod.

I cut one strand of her locks. She stiffened.

I held my hands up.

"Don't stop," she insisted. "It's okay."

I cut another and paused, awaiting her reaction despite what she'd said.

A single tear slipped from her eye. I turned her to face me, kissed the tear away, and then another. She shuddered as she inhaled.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

I cut more of her hair away.

I don’t know how long it took for me to cut off more than a decade’s worth of her hair. Every few minutes, I paused to kiss away another tear or press my lips against hers because I needed it as much as she did.

After I used the clippers to shave the rest, she fell into my chest and cried. I kissed every inch of her newly bald head.

“I took a leave of absence,” I told her. “I’m not going back to work.”

She pulled back. “You can’t.”

I silenced her with a kiss.

“It’s already done. I’m here with you throughout all of this. Every step of the way.”

I readied myself to put my foot down, to insist that I would not be assuming the role of CEO while she went to chemo treatments and other therapies alone.

Abso-fucking-lutely not!

Instead of pushing back, though, she just laid her head against my chest.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

That was like another stab to my heart. My wife thanked me for doing what felt like the bare minimum.

“Make it to the other side of this,” I said, my voice thickened with emotion. “That’s the only thank you I’ll accept from you.” Then I kissed her hard against her lips.

CHAPTER 3



*A*aron

“You can go into the second room, son,” I told Kyle as we entered The Fury Factory two days after dinner with the Walshes.

The Fury Factory was a stupid fucking name for the business owned by my brothers and me. Five years ago, Carter, Josh, Tyler, and I bought the company as an outlet for those who needed to break shit to vent their anger.

Back then, it had been named something else. In addition to changing the name, we expanded by purchasing the former shoe store next door in the strip mall. Now, The Fury Factory was a place where people came to break all types of shit, from glass vases, old printers, and television sets to furniture.

I’d spent my fair share of days here after Patience was first diagnosed. I needed it as an avenue to vent all the shit going on inside of me back then. I refused to let my wife or my children bear witness to my anger.

“You’re not coming in with me this time?” Kyle asked. He stood dressed in the bright yellow protective jumpsuit with a pair of goggles in one hand and an aluminum bat in the other. The outerwear would protect him from the flying debris.

As we stood underneath the low lighting made more illuminating by the neon paint on the walls, I shook my head. Kyle’s gaze darted to a closed door behind me. The sound of glass shattering caught his attention. One of our patrons let out a shrill yell of victory after breaking the glass.

I squeezed Kyle by the shoulder. “This is your time to vent,” I told him. “Let all of that shit about Dean out.” I jutted my head toward the opposite door. “I’ll be in the other one.”

Slowly, he looked me up and down, noting the suit. He didn’t say it, but the question in his eyes wanted to know why I wasn’t dressed in protective gear.

“Go,” I ordered.

He put on his goggles.

I nodded at one of our security personnel, who stood at the far end of the hallway. He’d keep an eye on my son while I handled business in the room next door.

Entering the room, I spotted Brutus, the family’s head of security, and so much more. He nodded, and I lowered my gaze to the bat that rested against the wall. Not even a beat after I picked it up did the door open on the opposite end of the room. A sardonic grin crossed my lips when Harold Walsh was shoved inside. The door slammed behind him.

“What the hell?” He peered around, confused and frightened. When his eyes landed on me, relief flooded them. But that emotion was short-lived.

“A-Aaron.” He stepped toward me, but then his attention dropped to the bat in my hands. He stopped moving altogether.

For a brief interlude, we stood there, him staring at the bat and me scowling at him.

The standoff was broken when a loud clanging sounded from the room next door, followed by glass shattering.

Walsh jumped, his eyes bulging. “Wh-What are you going to do with that?”

I moved closer, but he didn’t move back. Likely, because his body shook too violently for his legs to work.

I pounded the thick end of the bat in my open palm. From the corner of my eye, I could see movement around us, but I focused on Harold.

“I made promises to my wife,” I started, continuing to glare at him. “And I don’t break promises to her. Do you want to know what she made me promise?”

“D-Don’t hurt m-me,” he stuttered.

I shook my head. “No, that wasn’t it.” My voice was flat and even. “The promise was that you would live.” I turned toward the upside-down metal drum that sat at the center of the room. A large, glass vase sat on top. Moving behind the drum, putting it between Harold and me, I positioned my body like a damn batter stepping up to the plate.

Smash.

The sound of the bat cracking against the vase reverberated around the room. A thousand little pieces of glass flew, mostly in Harold Walsh’s direction.

He screamed and put his arms up to shield his face from the flying glass.

“I swore to her that I would let the justice system have its way with you,” I continued as Brutus placed another larger glass vase on the drum.

Brutus handed me a pair of goggles.

When Harold tried to back away, two of my security staff, dressed in protective gear, stood behind him. He had nowhere to run or protect himself.

Smash.

“Aaron, this is madness!” he yelled.

I lowered the bat when the drum was moved, replaced by a few old printers, and a couple of 1980’s style television sets were placed in a circle around Walsh.

“Madness is sending your sixteen-year-old son into my fucking home to betray my family!” I snarled before striking the screen of the first television with the bat.

Walsh cried out, but the noise around us muffled his yells. The surrounding rooms were all occupied by people breaking

shit. His screams were indistinguishable from the patrons who yelled in triumph at the destruction they caused.

“Madness is you using the trust of my son ... my son!” I seethed before bashing one of the printers.

A large piece of the printer flew in the air, ricocheted off the wall, and smacked Walsh directly across the face before landing on the ground.

I held the fat end of the bat up directly to his face, almost touching the tip of his nose. “And to make it worse, you had the fucking nerve to raise your voice to my wife.” I gritted my teeth before slamming the top of the bat against another printer, causing more pieces to splinter and hit Walsh.

“That should’ve cost you your fucking life alone.”

I struck another television set and another printer repeatedly until they were in pieces. All the while, Walsh cowered in the middle, trying to protect his face and body from the flying pieces of glass, plastic, and metal that flew his way.

For the most part, he was unsuccessful. He had a cut on the right side of his cheek and another above his left eyebrow. Seeing those abrasions on his face soothed the fire that burned in my gut to hurt him.

“As it stands,” I said, glaring at him while he held his arm up as if that would protect him, “life as you know it is over.”

I held the bat against the fleshy part of his abdomen and pushed. He heaved, the air forcefully shoved from his lungs.

“Your business is being torn apart by the feds as we speak. Federal prosecutors are building a case against you and Walsh Technologies. And, soon, you’ll get a nice little vacation in a six-by-nine cell for the next few years.”

I pressed the bat into his stomach again, making him stumble back a few feet. I surged forward until his back was against the wall.

“This will be your last Christmas with your family for a while.” I snorted. “But your wife has already taken your son to

her family in California, isn't that right?"

Of course his wife wouldn't stand by his side through any of this.

"The only real loser in all of this is Dean." I curled my upper lip into another snarl. "But with you for a father, he never had a chance to be much of anything any damn way."

"Th-This isn't r-right," he stuttered between shaky breaths.

"No." I shook my head. "It isn't. But this is what happens when you fuck with my family." I pushed the bat into his stomach again.

A pained moan fell from his mouth.

"And once you get out of jail ..." I paused, "*if* you make it out alive, you will never step foot in Williamsport again."

His eyes enlarged. "This is my home."

"Was," I hissed. "Was your home. You forfeited the right to call this city home when you decided it would be a good idea to fuck with anything with the last name Townsend."

My hand tightened around the end of the bat. Heat rose up the back of my neck, and I had to fight hard not to use the bat on him the way I'd done with the crap in the rest of the room.

I stepped back only to calm myself down.

I made a promise.

I had to remind myself of what I'd told Patience. She didn't want to hear of any accidental deaths about Walsh or anyone else in his family. I kept my promises to my wife.

I backed up some more, tossing the bat to the floor. The loud clang against the concrete floor made Walsh jump again.

"Get him out of my sight," I said while glaring at him.

The security moved to either side of him, taking him by the arms. If they hadn't, he would've toppled to the floor. I followed them as they had to almost carry his sorry ass out of the room.

We entered the hallway at the same time the door across the hallway opened.

“Mr. Walsh,” Kyle said, surprise appearing in his wide eyes. Next, my son stared up at me.

I’d had Harold Walsh dragged out of this door on purpose. Yes, I wanted Kyle to see this.

I stepped closer. “You owe my son an apology,” I said.

“I-I—” he stuttered, too low for my liking.

“Louder!”

“I’m s-sorry.”

“For what?” I demanded.

“F-For what I asked my son to do. I’m sorry, Kyle.”

I moved around to get in Harold’s face. “Don’t ever say my son’s name again.”

I waved my head for security to finish taking him to his car. Only Kyle, Brutus, and I remained in the hallway.

“Dad,” Kyle started cautiously. “What happened?”

I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck, noting he was almost as tall as my six-foot-two height. “No one fucks with us and walks away cleanly.” I squeezed his neck. “You understand that, don’t you?”

He glanced in the direction Walsh had been carted off, then back to me, and nodded.

“Good.”

I straightened my ruffled suit jacket, knowing I should’ve taken the damn thing off.

“Don’t trust anyone that isn’t family,” I said to him. “That is the most valuable and toughest lesson I can teach you.”

He visibly swallowed. “I thought Dean was my friend.”

I clenched my teeth, wanting to wring Walsh’s neck for the hurt look in his eyes.

“Maybe he was,” I said. “But even a so-called friend will turn on you when it comes to their family.”

Kyle glanced over my shoulder at Brutus.

“Uncle Brutus isn’t blood, but you trust him wholeheartedly.”

Brutus grunted, and a crack of a smile creased my lips.

“Brutus isn’t blood, but he’s family.”

Kyle smiled at the man who had worked as our head of security since even before my son came into my life when he was six years old. “Yeah.”

“His last name might as well be Townsend.”

“I like the name Prince just fine,” Brutus added.

I glared at him, but he glared right back.

“Sorry, Dad,” Kyle said. “I didn’t know—”

“Don’t.” I squeezed his shoulder. “We’re allowed to make a mistake once. It’s the second, and God forbid a third time that I can’t overlook.”

“Yes, sir.”

I pulled him in for a hug before letting him go.

“Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER 4



*P*atience

A few days after the confrontation with the Walshes, I hesitated and stood at the outer door of my therapist's office.

Maybe I don't need this anymore.

It'd been over two months since my last session with Dr. Tarver. Overall, I felt good. It was my favorite time of year, my children were doing well, and Aaron and I were great, especially after dinner with the Walshes. My body still hummed from how he kept me up half the night.

I was healthy and felt strong.

So, why did I feel like something was missing?

On a sigh, I shook my head and pushed through the glass door of my therapist's office. Dr. Tarver's office was on the fifth floor of the building where my plastic surgeon also was. His nurse aesthetician and wife, Grace Reynolds, had recommended Dr. Tarver.

"Mrs. Townsend," Judy, the receptionist, greeted as she sat behind her glass desk. "Great to see you today. I'll let Dr. Tarver know you're here."

I nodded and sat in the waiting room, but the wait wasn't long. Before I could get comfortable in my chair, Dr. Tarver's door opened, and she smiled at me.

"Patience, it's been a while," she noted. "Come in."

A few minutes later, I was settled on the black leather loveseat, sitting across from her. Dr. Tarver looked relaxed in her office chair against downtown Williamsport's backdrop, visible in the massive window behind her. I allowed my gaze to roam over her light brown complexion, heart-framed glasses, and short, tapered haircut.

Dr. Tarver was well into her sixties, but the ever-present youthful glow made her look almost two decades younger.

"It's great to see you again," she said. And while there was a welcoming note in her voice, I also ascertained the unspoken question.

Where have you been for the past two months?

I adjusted in my seat. "I'm sorry it took me so long to reschedule after several cancellations, but ..." I glanced from the window behind her, noticing the billboard advertising *The Nutcracker* playing at the downtown theater. "Life got busy," I answered.

"With five children and a husband who works the type of position yours does, I imagine you have a packed schedule." She leaned forward. "How are you feeling?"

My body tensed because of the sincerity in her voice. What used to be a harmless question now stirred up anxiousness in my body.

Over the past year, I still had to come to terms with the two parts of my life. The BC and AC. Before cancer and after cancer. I was living in the after, and for that, I was grateful.

However, for the past few months, there had been a growing discontentment I couldn't shake.

"I'm feeling great, physically," I said after clearing my throat. Thankfully, that was the truth.

"That's wonderful, but I think we both know I meant how are you *feeling* emotionally, mentally. How are you doing?" She gave me that disarming smile of hers. The one that initially made me feel safe opening up to her.

I started therapy with Dr. Tarver almost a year earlier, soon after receiving the news that I was in remission.

When I was first diagnosed, my oncologist recommended speaking with a therapist to help me handle the mental stress of treatment. I declined, deciding to focus on just getting through the multiple rounds of chemo followed by a lumpectomy that had to be upgraded to a total mastectomy.

She brought it up a second time after giving me the news that there was no longer evidence of cancer in my body. Again, I hesitated.

After hearing that I was in remission, I was on cloud nine for a while. Soon, though, I was unable to sleep during the night. I would wake up with my mind racing about all of the what-ifs. It wasn't until I spoke with Grace Reynolds during one of my initial appointments for my breast reconstructive surgery, and she recommended Dr. Tarver, that I finally made the call.

“A little anxious, to be honest,” I finally answered. “Christmas is less than six weeks away, and there's still so much that needs to get done. I'm waiting on Kyle and Aaron's gifts to arrive. I can't track down the people I need to get Kennedy's present. The special cooking set that we're getting Stasi is stuck over in China, I think.” I paused and scrunched my face. “Or was it Brazil?”

I shrugged.

“Andreas and Thiers will love their trip to FunWorld, but that doesn't feel like enough of a present to give them on Christmas Day.” I frowned as guilt wrapped around my chest, tightening around my heart.

Dr. Tarver cocked her head sideways. “I thought you said you and your husband don't get each other Christmas gifts.”

I rolled my eyes. “That's what we said years ago, but you know what he does? He always ends up getting me a gift every year.” I shook my head. “He always manages to get me the perfect gift. And after the past two Christmases ...” I broke up, my voice cracking from the guilt strangling my vocal cords.

“I’m certain even if none of the gifts arrive on time, everyone will have a wonderful Christmas.” She sounded so sure.

My frown deepened because I knew what Dr. Tarver said was true. Aaron would be happy enough if all I did was stick myself underneath the Christmas tree, wrapped in a red bow.

“But after the past few years, he deserves more. They all do,” I insisted. The memory of him cutting off all of his hair before cutting my locks for me flashed through my mind.

The man was my rock throughout the past two years.

“And what about you?”

Her question surprised me. I sat up taller in my seat, crossing my legs. “What do you mean?”

“What do you deserve, Patience?” Her voice held a hint of sternness. “You’ve told me about all the gifts you’re getting for your children and your husband, but what do you want this holiday season?”

An article that I read a few months back came to mind. It was about a couple who took their four children out of school to travel the world for a year. I would never ask for something so huge. Not after what my illness had put us all through over the past few years.

We finally had a year of normalcy, and I planned to make our holiday season even better by focusing on my family’s wants. Not my own.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” I answered. “I’m just grateful to be here.” Another shrug. “To be able to celebrate with them at all.”

Dr. Tarver paused in her writing and peered at me over the rim of those red-rimmed, heart-shaped lenses. She remained silent for a moment before slowly removing her glasses. She tucked one of the temple’s tips into her mouth and folded one arm under the other. All of these movements were made without her taking her contemplative gaze off me.

“Are you sure?” Her voice remained even, but it felt heavy.

I nodded quickly. Too quickly.

“Because, you know, there isn’t anything wrong with asking for something for yourself.”

I bit the inside of my cheek.

“What is it that you want, Patience?”

Swallowing, I looked down at my hands in my lap. If the same question had been asked of me a year and a half ago, I would’ve said that all I wanted was to survive. To make it through the sometimes torturous treatments and return to my life.

And I had. I’d gotten exactly what I wanted. It felt too indulgent to ask for anything more. Especially from my family, who endured my illness right alongside me.

“Patience?” Dr. Tarver’s voice pulled me from my ruminations.

“More time,” I confessed, finally.

She nodded and wrote something down on the notepad in her lap. “Tell me more.”

“I should be satisfied. I have my health back. I have my life. And life is back to normal. Aaron’s been back to work full-time since the beginning of this year, the kids are all doing well in school and their various activities.”

“And you’re busy,” Dr. Tarver added.

“Yes,” I answered. “Busy picking everyone up or dropping them off. But ...” I stopped because I hated that I feel this way. “I feel like the previous two years were stolen from me. By my diagnosis and the months and months of treatment, followed by the recovery. I know I can’t ever get that time back, I know it, but I want more.”

“Kyle and Kennedy are sixteen, and in less than two years, they’ll be away at college. It feels like I blinked, and we were

at Thiers and Andreas' nine-year-old birthday party. Stasi is seven going on seventeen."

We both laughed at that.

"What more do you want? Tell me specifically," my therapist requested.

I opened my mouth, but the words stuck in my throat. If I said what had been rattling around in my mind for weeks, possibly months now, that would make it real. Speaking it would make my desire for it more palpable, and I wasn't ready for that.

"Just more time," I whispered more to myself than to Dr. Tarver.

"And you can't ask for that because everyone's busy?" she questioned, not letting me get away with that little bit of information.

I nodded.

"Have you brought this up with Aaron?"

I shook my head. "No."

"Why not?"

I bulged my eyes because the answer should have been obvious. "Aaron is the CEO of a Fortune 500 company."

"And?"

"And he took a long leave of absence to care for me when I was sick. There's no way I could ask him to take off more time."

She set her pad on the desk beside her. "Let me ask you something. Did you ask Aaron to take that leave of absence?"

"No." I wondered why this question was even relevant. "Of course not. He just did it."

"Why do you think he did it?"

"Because he wanted to be there for me," I replied without hesitation. Aaron never missed a doctor's appointment, a chemo session, or even a phone call from my doctor. He

waited in the lobby for hours during my surgeries. His was the first face I saw when I woke up in the hospital.

Then there were the countless times he held me when I felt so sick from the chemo that I came dangerously close to wishing for death.

“I could never repay him for everything he did for me.”

It was Dr. Tarver’s turn to shake her head. “My guess is he would never ask you to repay him. Besides, did he do anything that you wouldn’t have done for him?”

“No,” I answered honestly. “But it’s not the same,” I told her. “I’d left my librarian job years ago. Yes, I work at the community center we started, but it isn’t like there’s an entire company of people depending on me.”

“But you are the CEO of your family,” she said.

I gave her a faint smile. “I like that.”

“From everything you shared with me about your husband and your family, I would venture to guess that they want you to be happy and are more willing than you think to give you what you want.”

“I—” The buzzing from my purse interrupted my reply. “Sorry, Dr. Tarver.” I checked my phone. It was a text from Kennedy telling me she’d forgotten her riding boots at home.

“I have to cut our appointment short,” I told her. “I have to pick up Ken’s boots before I get her from school to take her to her lesson this afternoon.”

“That’s fine, but, Patience,” Dr. Tarver called, stopping me. “You know it’s okay to take time for yourself, right?”

My gut clenched. It was the delicate way she delivered the question that got to me. It cracked something inside of my chest that I didn’t want to be opened. I couldn’t demand more of my family than I already had.

Instead of telling my therapist that, I said, “Sure, I know, but with the holidays and everything coming up ...” I stopped and let my unfinished comment hang in the air.

However, Dr. Tarver wasn't one of the city's best therapists for nothing. She didn't let me completely off the hook as we both stood from our seats.

"I know you believe you have to be there for everyone in your family," she said, "but it's not selfish to ask for what you want. You experienced trauma. Going through a prolonged illness and the painful and uncomfortable treatments, the surgeries, and permanent changes to your body. Those are all life-altering events. You may think that all you want is to get things back to normal, but it's okay to reinvent a new normal. For you and your family."

I looked away from her because her words hit too close to what I'd been craving lately. On the one hand, all I wanted was to get back to how things were BC. But the tiny whispers echoed in my mind, asking for more. For more quality time with my kids and with my husband.

Yet it felt selfish.

"Thanks, Dr. Tarver." I gave her a weak smile.

"I know our sessions are usually monthly, but considering this hectic time of the year and you have missed the last few appointments, maybe you want to consider scheduling another session before the end of the month."

I intended to tell her that wouldn't be necessary, but what came out of my mouth was, "Sure. I'll make the appointment with your receptionist on the way out."

Her smile broadened. "Good."

I silently vowed to keep the appointment. That was probably all I needed to shake off this longing. A few more sessions with Dr. Tarver to work through these feelings and set them aside. It was nearing Christmas, and my focus needed to be on my kids and my husband. That was who mattered.

CHAPTER 5



*A*aron

I need to buy tickets to The Nutcracker.

That thought crowded my mind as I sat in yet another meeting in my office. *The Nutcracker* and, more importantly, what did my wife want for Christmas?

I had plans drawn up to put on an addition to the house that would be her private library. Months earlier, I considered presenting her with the plans on Christmas morning as her gift. However, something felt off.

Like she needed or wanted something else. Though, she hadn't asked or even hinted at anything. Usually, I was excellent at reading her, but all of this bullshit with Townsend Industries and the Walshes and the merger that was supposed to happen had me distracted.

"No one has been able to contact Müller for years. Not since that colossal failure with Rogers & Co.," Sean, the head of Townsend Industries' legal department, said, garnering my attention.

I turned my attention to him from my position by the window. Then I went to peer back at the billboard advertising *The Nutcracker*.

It was five days post the dinner with Walsh and his wife. We were discussing how to handle the fallout from the failed merger. I'd already considered that and brought up my intention to buy a German laboratory and pharmaceutical company with great potential.

“Aaron, are you listening to me?” Sean demanded.

I spun on my heels to face him, the frown on my face deepening. “Whose office are you in?” I barked at him.

His eyes widened. “Yours.” His tone was softer than a moment ago.

“Then who the hell do you think you’re talking to?”

“Son,” my father called out from his end of the table.

I continued to glare at Sean as I smoothed down my tie.

“Sorry,” Sean said into the silence. “I just wanted to ensure I had your attention.”

I slid my hands into my pockets to keep from balling them into fists at my sides. “Whose name is on the door?”

He glanced at my office door. “Yours.”

“Don’t ever forget it. If I’m in my office, then I’m always aware of what’s going on.”

Sean cleared his throat. “This Wynco Laboratories thing seems far-fetched.” He looked around the table as if trying to garner support from the two other men in the room. “Especially since you want to get it done before the end of the year.”

“I’ll get it done,” I told them. “Before Christmas.”

“How?” my father questioned.

I looked him in the eye when I answered, “The same way I get everything done.”

“The board will want to know what’s going on,” he replied. My father remained on the board of directors for Townsend Industries.

“Tell them that Müller’s Wynco Laboratories is poised to revolutionize certain treatments. And when they do, Townsend Industries will be its parent company.”

I had no proof to back up my words. Sean wasn’t incorrect when he’d stated that Müller himself had been MIA. However, his company still ran operations and was profitable.

“I’ll get it done,” I said again. “I have another meeting in twenty minutes,” I told them.

Both Sean and my father rose from their chairs. Sean nodded and started for the door. Once he exited, my father approached me. He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and pulled our foreheads together.

“Is your head in the game?”

“Where else would it be?”

“No one would blame you if you wanted to take more time off,” he continued. “You jumped right back into work full-time after Patience was declared cancer free.”

My stomach clenched. “She insisted,” I reminded him.

He nodded. “I know. Our women are a hell of a lot stronger than we are.”

The corners of my lips tipped upward. “They are.”

“I assume you have a plan.” He released me.

“I do.” But that was all I gave him because I always played my hand close to the vest, even with my father.

His eyes shimmered with pride.

“Then you better put it into motion. The board will want good news to report at the top of the year.”

After my father left, I removed an article my assistant had printed out a few months earlier from my drawer.

The headline read, ‘Does Karl Müller Have the Cure to What Ails Us?’

The article was short, but I came across it after listening to a ten-year-old interview with Karl Müller. He discussed an ongoing research study that had the potential to upend cancer treatment as we knew it. The article was just over five years old and mentioned more about Müller’s research dealing with stem cells, cell regeneration, and whatnot.

The problem was that I couldn’t find anything more recent on Müller’s research. I’d attempted to have my people get in

contact with his company, Wynco.

I dialed my assistant.

“James, have you heard anything from Müller’s people?” I demanded.

“No, Mr. Townsend. I would’ve told you immediately if I’d gotten word back.”

I gritted my teeth, knowing he would’ve. I’d been badgering him for weeks to get me on a line with Müller’s people.

“Reach out to them again. I want to find out what’s going on over at Wynco.” I hung up the phone, knowing James would do as requested. Even though it was well into the night over in Germany, where Müller lived, I wanted to light a fire under their asses. The interview and article intrigued me.

Once I disconnected the call with James, I started to check my emails, but the silver-framed picture on my desk caught my eye. It was of Patience. I had multiple pictures of my family on my desk. Most of them were of Patience and me with the kids, but I had one of just her.

It was a candid shot, taken at a 4th of July picnic a few years earlier. In it, Patience laughed, her head tossed backward, her long locks sailing through the air. It was one of my favorites.

My chest tightened. Without thought, I picked up my phone and dialed her number.

“Hey. Everything okay?” she answered after the second ring.

“I wanted to hear your voice,” I admitted.

“Mm,” she hummed. “That’s nice.”

“What?”

“Even after ten years of marriage, you still like the sound of my voice.” She laughed. At that moment, all thoughts about mergers and acquisitions, the board of directors, and even finding the perfect gift for her fell away.

“We could be married a hundred years, and your voice would still be my favorite sound. I’ll never grow tired of it.”

The line went silent for a beat. I envisioned her sucking her bottom lip between her teeth. I cursed myself for not making this a video call.

I groaned. “Pull your lip from between your teeth before I make this a short workday,” I growled, my cock stirred in my pants.

A small burst of air released as she laughed. “I love you.”

Someone in the background yelled out.

“Where are you?” I could’ve checked the locator I had on her phone, but that would’ve been creepy, according to my wife. So, I left the damn thing alone for the most part. Besides, the security with her would’ve alerted me if anything was the matter.

“I came to Walcott’s to pick up this cookware set for Stasi. You know, since you wouldn’t let me get her the dog she wanted,” she said, laughter filling her voice.

“No fucking dogs,” I grunted. Stasi, our youngest, had begged for a dog, but I had to put my foot down on that one. I didn’t like mutts and refused to have one in our house.

She sighed. “I think I’m going to be here all day. Five weeks before Christmas, and it’s packed in here,” she said of the high-end toy retailer in the center of town.

“You could’ve had the gifts wrapped and delivered to the house,” I reminded her. There wasn’t much that the Townsend name couldn’t get done, especially having a specialty gift delivered during the holiday season. “I don’t like you out among all of those people.”

“Aaron,” she warned. “Don’t start. I wanted to look at the set first to ensure it’s the exact thing Stasi wanted. Also, I wanted to browse some of the figurines for the boys.”

The boys were nine-year-old Thiers and Andreas. They were deep into their love of all things figurines, GI Joe’s types

of toys. They loved anything that could be thrown, blown up, or smashed and kept going.

“Oh, did you know Dre won the role of the Grinch in this year’s play?” she asked, referring to Andreas, whom we called Dre for short.

“Of course he did,” I replied. “He’s a Townsend.” Andreas was the performer of the family.

“He beat out a group of sixth graders who auditioned.” The pride in her voice mimicked my own emotion. The twins were only in the fourth grade. “I swear he’s going to be an actor. He loves putting on shows. I’ll have James put the play on your schedule.”

“Thanks, sweetness.”

She groaned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

I narrow my eyes. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“Bully.”

“Thank you. Now tell me what’s wrong.” *So I can fix it.* That last part went unsaid, but the sentiment stood.

“I just remembered that I’ve been struggling to get in contact with Audre Wilkins’ people.”

“Kennedy’s favorite author.”

“Right. I tried to buy those exclusive special editions of her very first Legend of Yemaya series for Kennedy. But they sold out in like twenty minutes. I wanted to get them signed for her Christmas present.” She paused. “Maybe, I can—”

“I’ll take care of it,” I cut in, already making a mental note of an errand I could run later in the day to take care of it.

“Aaron, you can’t.”

“Why the hell not?” I demanded to know.

“Because ...” She sighed. “You already have enough on your plate. I know, though you haven’t said it, the situation

with Walsh and his company is costing you a lot.”

I pressed my lips together because she was right. But she didn't need to worry about that.

“It's fine. We're moving on to a better venture.”

“So quickly?” Surprise laced her tone.

“Yes. So let me handle the situation with Kennedy's gift.” I knew how much my oldest daughter loved Audre Wilkins and that Legend of Yemaya series. She was still as voracious a reader as her mother.

“*The Nutcracker* is back in town,” I added before she could answer.

“I saw. It's going to be at the Sheraton Theater again.”

“I'll have my assistant get seven front-row tickets.”

“You know Kyle and Kennedy will complain. They'll play too cool to want to join us to see *The Nutcracker*.”

“Tough shit,” I grunted. “The joys of raising teenagers.”

Patience chuckled, and the sound clutched around my heart. It eased the tension that'd taken up residence in my body from my earlier meeting.

“That should work. Thanks, babe,” she said. “I have to go. The store manager just came out to greet me. I need to double-check on Stasi's present.”

The last thing I wanted was to hang up the phone. A frown creased my lips. Patience always wanted holidays to be memorable. This year she seemed to go overboard. I'd lost count of how many gifts she'd gotten for each of the children.

Add to that we were having not one but four Christmas trees delivered to the house the day before Thanksgiving to decorate the day after.

“I love you,” she said

I repeated those three words to her before hanging up. I stared at the phone for a few beats wondering what was behind her drive that Christmas.

Before my thoughts consumed me, my phone buzzed.

“Yeah,” I answered.

“Anita and Colin just arrived for your next meeting. Also, we got a response from Müller’s assistant. She says he’s willing to do a video call this Friday.”

“That’s the day after Thanksgiving. Make it for Monday.”

“I told her that, but she insisted her boss wouldn’t be available any other day.”

My impatience doubled. “Is this motherfucker trying to play hardball with me?”

“Uh, um, I don’t know,” James muttered.

“Get her back on the line and tell her that it’s a short week here in America. If he’s available on Friday, he can be available on Monday morning. Aside from that, I need you to buy seven front-row tickets to *The Nutcracker* here in town. Send in Anita and Colin,” I instructed.

“Right away, Mr. Townsend.”

I disconnected the call and texted my youngest brother, Tyler.

Me: I need to stop by after work. Make sure you’re home.

As soon as I hit send, a knock on my door sounded for my next meeting.

* * *

IT WAS WELL after seven p.m. when my driver pulled into Tyler’s driveway. As usual, work kept me later than I anticipated. My youngest brother only lived a two-minute drive from my house, so I could be home after this stop before Patience put the youngest ones to bed.

I’d promised Stasi I would read to her before she went to sleep that night.

Though I knew the code to Tyler and Destiny's door, I knocked. All of my brothers and I still lived in the Cedarwoods community where we had our homes built. We each had a spare key or code to one another's houses, but that was only for emergencies.

Soon, the heavy, wooden door opened. Eight-year-old Tristan grinned up at me. His light greenish-hazel eyes mirrored his father's.

"Hey, Uncle Aaron."

"Tristan," I greeted with a nod.

He held out his hand, and I smirked, holding mine so we could high-five twice.

"Dad! Uncle Aaron's here," he called after we did our customary handshake.

I shut the door behind me just as Tyler rounded the corner.

"Shhh," my brother scolded. "Your sister's upstairs sleeping, and if that little terror wakes up, your mother is kicking all of us out of the house."

I bit down on my tongue, stifling my laughter. He referred to his three-year-old daughter, Chloe. She was their youngest of four, after the pair's triplets, Tristan, Annalise, and Travis.

Tristan shrugged before he raced up the stairs.

"What's up?" Ty asked, pulling me into a hug. This was one of the things that'd changed over the years. I'd become more affectionate with all of my brothers.

Destiny's muffled chuckle sounded from down the hall.

"Hold that thought." Tyler spun on his heels and motioned for me to follow.

We proceeded down the hall, stopping at the semi-closed door. Tyler stood as close to the door as possible without touching it. From his position, he could see inside of the room, but he didn't do anything. He just stood there with his arms folded and a simple grin.

I huffed impatiently. "What the hell are you doing?"

He didn't even look at me. "Watching my wife. She's got one of her introductory seminars tonight on Zoom. She's still sexy as hell when she's teaching about index funds and roth IRAs and shit," the fool said with a massive grin on his face.

"Watching her through a damn crack in the door like a fucking creep," I commented.

"Takes one to know one." He side-eyed me.

My frown deepened. "True." I'd watch my wife, too, if she worked from home. Hell, I did watch her. All the fucking time around the house. "As entertaining as it is to watch you ogle your wife, I need a favor," I told him.

Finally, he broke out of his trance and looked at me. "*The Aaron Townsend*, begging for a favor? My, my, my." He clucked his tongue. "Do tell."

"I swear Mother and Father should've let me smother you with the pillow like I wanted to."

Tyler puffed out his chest. "What would you all have done without me?" He answered his own question when he said, "Withered away into nothing. This family needs me."

I rolled my eyes. "Asshole. Look, Patience has been busting her ass to get this gift for Kennedy, and she's having trouble."

Tyler's auburn eyebrows drew together. "What is it?"

"A signed special edition of that series by Audre Wilkins."

Slowly nodding his head, my brother folded his arm. "Ah, you think I have an in."

"I *know* you have an in," I replied while narrowing my eyes on him. "You interviewed her last month, and she raved about the experience on her social media." I knew that because Kennedy was bummed for weeks that her uncle interviewed her favorite author and she didn't get the chance to meet her.

After achieving his second Super Bowl win and retiring from the NFL, Tyler chose not to go into the coaching field as he'd once planned. Coaching required a huge travel

commitment, and with three kids at the time and the love of his wife, he wasn't willing to do it.

Oddly, most people found my brother's personality endearing. The Sports Network recruited him to become a sports broadcaster for them. He did well there for two years, and a national station poached him for their morning show. Tyler went from talking about sports and interviewing athletes to discussing news and popular events and interviewing people from all backgrounds.

My kid brother turned into one of the most popular hosts the channel has ever had. He even convinced the network to give Destiny and her cousin, Resha, a monthly segment to talk about money and fashion after their popular podcast.

I snorted. He'd done well for himself.

Tyler nodded. "Yeah, Ken called me and begged me to fly her out to LA so she could sit in the front row for that interview."

"Patience wouldn't allow that," I replied. "They had midterms that week."

"Damn school," Tyler grunted.

"Back to the point," I continued. "You're still in contact with her people, and all special editions are sold out."

He wrinkled his brow. "Can't you have your assistant make a call and get the damn books in less than a day?"

"Can you do it or not?"

"Answer me first," he replied like the pain in the ass little brother he still was.

"I'm going to fucking strangle the life out of you one day."

He let out a hearty laugh. "You could try, but we both know how that'll end."

"With you bitching to Mother and Father about how I knocked you out."

It was Tyler's turn to frown.

“Are you threatening my husband again?” Destiny asked, emerging from her office. Her dark brown eyes shifted between Tyler and me with a slight grin on her face.

“He sure was. In my own house,” Tyler instigated before wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her to him.

I growled with a roll of my eyes. “I’m asking your pain in the ass husband for a favor, and, per usual, he’s being a nuisance.” I glared at Tyler.

His smile widened, but he wasn’t looking at me. “Are you finished with work?” he asked Destiny like I wasn’t standing there.

She sighed. “Yep, and I was just about to—”

A loud wailing from upstairs cut her off.

We all groaned, familiar with the sound of a waking toddler.

“If one of those boys woke her up, I’m kicking them out of the house,” Destiny grumbled, heading for the stairs.

“I’ll pack their stuff,” Tyler added. “Let me get her,” he said, catching his wife by the arm.

Destiny waved him off. “Finish your conversation with your brother. Good to see you, Aaron. But the tiny terrorist calls,” she chimed over her shoulder as she went to take care of their youngest daughter.

“That girl swears she’s the star of this family,” Tyler chided with a shake of his head. “Doesn’t she know that my good looks hold this whole thing together?”

“Get the hell over yourself. It’s your wife with the award-winning podcast,” I humbled him.

He grinned. “You’re right. Plus, Chloe looks just like her. I bet Destiny was a little terror when she was a toddler.” He smiled wistfully. “I should’ve asked her mom about that before ...” He trailed off.

Destiny’s mother passed away three years earlier, a month after Chloe was born.

He shook his head again. “Such a contrast from Ana,” he referred to the most mild-mannered out of their four kids and, strangely enough, the one who looked the most like him. She even inherited his auburn hair coloring.

His words reminded me that I was in a rush to get home to my family. “When are you going to reach out to Audre Wilkins?” I asked, impatient because I knew he would do this for me.

“And you came to me rather than use your resources because?”

I huffed and glared at him. “Because any other means I’d use would take too long. You and I know Audre has a thing for your producer, Cynthia. If you have Cynthia call her and ask her for the favor, it’ll get done faster.”

“You seriously want me to manipulate her feelings like that?”

I looked him in the eyes and answered with a straight face, “To take the stress off my wife and give my eldest daughter the most important gift she wants this Christmas? Absolutely.”

He let out a dry chuckle. “I probably would, too.”

Another wail ripped through the air from above. “I better get up there before World War III starts.”

“Thanks. I’ll see myself out.”

He threw up the peace sign before taking the stairs two at a time. “Okay, you little ruffians, it’s time to start your baths and put on your pjs.”

The last thing I heard was the sound of Travis, Tristan, and Analise groaning in protest.

CHAPTER 6



*F*our weeks before Christmas
Aaron

“Daddy, can I put the star on this one?” Stasi asked, peering up at me with her dark brown eyes.

“Of course,” I answered immediately because how the hell could I say no to this little girl? Especially when those eyes mirrored her mother’s.

It was the day after Thanksgiving and the day we spent as a family decorating the entire house from top to bottom. For the past two years, I had taken it upon myself to hire decorators to do most of the decorating and deliver the trees. However, this year Patience insisted we get back to our family tradition.

So, as Christmas music blared through the wall’s speakers, Stasi, Andreas, and even Thiers danced around and shouted over which one of their homemade ornaments would get displayed most prominently on the ten-foot Christmas tree.

“Aww, man,” Dre whined. “Why does she get to put it on?”

I stared down at him, my face going hard.

He immediately straightened.

“Because you got to put the star on the tree in the living room,” I reminded him.

Frowning, he folded his arms. When he lifted an eyebrow, I knew he had it in mind to challenge me, but he thought better of it.

Smart kid.

“Besides, if Stasi doesn’t get to do it, she’s going to cry about it all day,” Thiers added casually.

“No, I won’t,” Stasi whined, lending credence more to Thiers’ claim than her own.

“Thiers, leave your sister alone,” Patience said, coming up behind me.

“Don’t tease your sister,” I added. “She waited patiently for you two to put the stars on the other trees, didn’t she?” I looked between them.

This was the third tree we decorated for the day and the largest. The other two trees sat in our living room and the upstairs den. This tree was in the downstairs family room and would be the tree where the presents would be placed for Christmas morning.

“Yes,” Thiers mumbled.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You can help, Mom and I put the popcorn string on the tree,” Stasi offered, holding out the popcorn string she and Kennedy had spent much of the morning creating.

“We’ll all do it,” Kennedy agreed, taking Stasi’s free hand. “C’mon, Dre. You too, Thiers.”

I watched, a smile on my face as all four strung homemade decorations around the tree.

“How long do you think that’ll last?” Patience asked, her arms folded, looking happily at our children.

I moved behind her to wrap my arms around her waist. Leaning into the crook of her neck, I inhaled deeply, taking in her scent. A powerful sensation rushed through my veins. I tugged her body tighter to me, nuzzling her neck.

“Long enough for them not to notice we’re gone?” I growled.

She laughed.

A deep groan behind me let us both know Kyle overheard me.

“You two need to get a room or something,” he grumbled.

Patience laughed louder.

“I pay for the room *you* sleep in every night,” I threw at him as he passed us.

He rolled his eyes over his shoulder before he grabbed a handful of the leftover popcorn and stuffed it into his mouth.

“If you get crumbs on my floor, you will clean it up,” Patience said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I bent my head to look down at my wife. She had a sparkle in her eyes as she grinned in the direction of our kids.

“You look happy,” I commented.

She twisted her head to look up at me. “I am. Happy that I have the energy to do this type of stuff this year.”

I squeezed her hand before bringing it to my lips. “Me too.” I spun her by the hips to face me. “But you still haven’t told me what you want for Christmas.”

She rolled her eyes. “I told you I don’t want anything, but you don’t listen.” She shrugged. “It’s not like I’m getting you anything.”

Even if it weren’t for the way she quickly glanced down at the floor after saying that, I would’ve known she was lying her ass off.

I leaned in just to make sure none of the kids heard me. “That lie is going to have your ass sore for the next two days.”

Her body shuddered in my arms.

“Tell me what you want.”

Her eyes met mine. The laughter of the children around us and the Christmas music playing receded to the background.

“All I want is you, this, us,” she said, sweeping her arm around to indicate our family.

I wanted to believe her. That we ... I was enough for her.

But there was hesitance in her response.

“If—”

“Dad, your phone’s ringing,” Kyle interjected. He thrust my work cell in my face.

I forgot I’d even brought it into the family room.

Frowning, I took the phone. It was James. “This better be important.”

“Mr. Townsend, Karl Müller’s secretary just called me and said that he wanted to have that meeting with you right away.”

“We scheduled the damn thing for Monday,” I reminded him. “Tell him—”

“I did, sir. But she’s insisting that the meeting has to be today or he won’t show up at all.”

I gritted my teeth and had half a mind to tell my assistant to tell Müller and his secretary to fuck off. Hell, I’d call the bastard and do it myself.

But then I looked down into my wife’s eyes—the same pair of orbs and the woman behind them that I couldn’t imagine my life without. With my arm wrapped around her waist, I pulled her into me and brushed a kiss against her forehead.

The reminder of why this fucking deal was so important flooded my mind. Müller’s research had the capacity to prevent my wife from ever experiencing what she had over the past two years. And many other people’s loved ones.

“I’ll give him ten minutes,” I told James through a tightly clenched jaw.

I removed the phone from my ear. “Sweetness, I have to take this.”

“Of course,” she said, stepping back.

After another kiss on her forehead, I let her go. “Ten minutes,” I told her, but that was more for my benefit than hers.

“Are you going to work, Dad?” Andreas asked.

I squeezed his shoulder. “Just taking a call downstairs.” I ruffled his curls a little before exiting the room. “Take care of your mother and little sister while I’m gone.”

“I will,” he agreed, puffing his chest out.

Pride swelled in my chest.

Two minutes later, I was downstairs in my home office, powering up the large, mounted screen. Seconds later, two people seated in what appeared to be a small conference room peered back at me.

I recognized Karl Müller as he sat on the left side of a circular table. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties to early sixties, and his grey hair was all over his head as if he’d just rolled out of bed and didn’t give a damn how he looked. The wrinkled button-down top and oversized lab coat completed the disheveled appearance.

I would’ve been insulted if I hadn’t seen Karl Müller in previous interviews with the same messy look. As it stood, however, there was a withdrawn look on the scientist’s face. In past interviews, while his appearance read *I dressed myself in the dark*, there had been a light in his eyes that spoke to his passion.

“Mr. Townsend,” the woman sitting across from Müller started. “I’m Anna Hoffman. The director of sales for Wynco Laboratories,” she introduced but didn’t need to. I already knew who she was.

“This meeting was scheduled for Monday morning, my time.” I folded my arms across my chest and glared between Hoffman and Müller.

“Yes, my apologies for the change in—” She stopped when I held up my hand.

“Save the apologies. We all know you don’t mean it.” I glared at Müller. “Does she?” I questioned.

Heat started to infuse my body, and I grew more pissed at the idea of Müller’s power play. And that was what this bullshit was.

He wanted to catch me off-guard. That, or to have me cancel on him so he could say he gave it a fair shot at the deal, but it was me who was the flake.

Fuck that.

What he had on his hands was too lucrative. Not in terms of monetary gain. But in terms of the lives it could save.

“Why don’t we just cut to it, and you tell me what your number is.”

Müller’s grey eyebrows spiked and then dipped. “A number?” he questioned in thickly accented English.

“How much do you want Townsend Industries to pay for Wynco Laboratories and its past and current research and development?”

Müller sputtered, showing his first real emotion other than boredom.

Bastard.

I would’ve given the asshole a harder time, but my family was upstairs. The opened door of my office allowed their laughter and off-key singing to filter into the room. I wanted to be up there with them rather than on that damn call.

“Name. Your. Price,” I restated through gritted teeth.

“We cannot be bought,” he said, indignation winding its way around his words.

“Everyone and every business has a price tag.” I stared him in the eyes. “Name it.”

His mouth opened and closed, but then he looked at the woman across from him. Something in rapid-fire German came flying out of his mouth. Though I couldn't understand what he was saying, it wasn't too difficult to recognize that he was pissed.

Too bad.

They argued back and forth in their home language for another minute before I cut in.

“What the hell is the problem?”

They both turned their attention back to me.

“Wynco Laboratories was doing well up until five years ago. Then the deal with Rogers and Co. failed miserably, and you haven't garnered much attention. You need me more than Townsend needs you,” I bluffed.

Müller said something in German, but I gathered that it was a curse by his inflection. He looked at Anna and jutted his hand in my direction. Again, an exchange I couldn't make out was had, but inwardly, I smiled.

This motherfucker had called this meeting on this day because he wanted to play hardball with me. It was satisfactory to see him become the one to get all riled up.

“It appears you have failed to come to a number on your own,” I finally said, growing more irritated by the second, despite my taking pleasure in getting a rise out of Müller. “Lucky for you, my team has come up with a number.” I walked over to my desk and pressed the button to light up my computer's screen.

“I'm sending you an email of a figure with the preliminary terms right now.” After hitting send, I turned back to the screen.

Anna pressed the screen of her tablet. Her eyes met mine before she turned the screen to Müller, who hadn't bothered to check his tablet.

He looked at the screen and huffed. “Men like you think you can buy everything.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my neck, cracking it to diffuse my growing impatience. “Spare me the holier than thou act. And ...” I added, “if you keep talking like that, I have no problem with replacing you as the president of Wynco once my company purchases it.”

“Ha!” He held up his fist, his anger flaring yet again. “There is no Wynco without me. I am the soul of this company.”

“You’re an employee, and employees can be replaced,” I said casually, almost bored.

“Every research project and treatment protocol that Wynco has developed has my name all over it.”

Inwardly, I cursed. He was right.

Outwardly, I kept my ice-cold expression in place.

“There are other scientists, and Townsend pays top dollar for all of our talents.”

It was a bluff because no one had developed what Müller and his team had on their hands. My team hadn’t been able to find any past research studies that had nearly the success rate as Müller’s research.

“But it’s in your best interest to stay on as president once we acquire your company.” I stared him straight in the eye. “And make no mistake, Townsend Industries will have Wynco. I’m as tenacious about business as you are about your research.”

I dipped my head toward the tablet in Anna’s hand.

“Review the terms again. Go over it with your team. I assure you, it’s a fair deal. I look forward to you signing off on it within the next fourteen days. Good day, Müller.”

The screen went black when I disconnected the call.

“Was that Karl Müller’s voice?”

Kyle stood at the door, his hazel gaze shifting between me and the screen on the wall. I already knew he’d overheard much of the call. Speaking of tenacity.

My son was as vested in Townsend Industries as I was some days.

“What did I tell you about asking questions you already know the answer to?” I asked him.

He entered my office. “Only do it when trying to figure out if someone’s lying.”

“So, you’re testing whether or not I would lie to you?”

He dropped his head. “Nah,” he answered. “I know you wouldn’t.”

His voice was low as a withdrawn expression overcame his face.

“Not like Dean,” he added.

I nodded. “I’m sorry your friend hurt you, son.” I wrapped my hand around his neck and squeezed a little.

“It’s cool. Like you said, I just know not to trust anyone outside of the family from now on.”

I stared at him for a moment. A part of me wanted to take back my own words. Because I wanted to tell him that wasn’t the case, that it was okay to trust other people, but I knew it was bullshit. And I refused to have my son entering the world with a fucking bullseye on his back because he was too trusting.

Even if it meant seeing the remaining vestiges of his childhood innocence leaving his eyes.

“We’ll always be here for you.” I shook him a little by the neck, making him look me in the eye. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

I pulled him in and kissed the top of his head. He was only a couple of inches shorter than me. Another growth spurt and the damn kid might become taller than me.

“When the hell did you grow so tall?” I teased.

He chuckled, his deep voice reminding me of my own.

“Do you think Müller will sign?” he asked, seeming worried.

“He will,” I answered with confidence. He’d sign if he knew what was good for him and Wynco Laboratories. “Let’s go. Business has taken up too much of our holiday weekend,” I said, following him out of the office.

CHAPTER 7



*P*atience

“I can’t believe this,” I muttered as I hung up the phone on my desk. It was the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, and I was working half a day at the community center that my mother and sisters-in-law had founded more than seven years earlier.

“What’s got you so flustered?”

I turned to see my closest friend and sister-in-law Michelle, Carter’s wife, coming in and setting her bag on her desk across from mine. I stood to hug her. Five years earlier, Michelle went down to working part-time at the community center to have more time for her and Carter’s three kids, Diego, Samuel, and Taylor.

“The mountain bikes haven’t come in yet,” I explained with slumped shoulders.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry, Patience. Hopefully, they’ll have ’em in soon.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I’m being impatient, and even if they don’t arrive on time, it’s not like Aaron and Kyle won’t understand.”

“Right,” she agreed.

I threw my hands out at my sides. “It’s not like Christmas will be ruined or anything, right?”

“Yes,” she answered, giving me a tentative look.

“No.” I blinked, trying to clear my eyes of the mounting water in them. “I can’t let this mess up their Christmas. Maybe I should get them something else.” I started for my desk to do some research on my computer, but Michelle stepped in front of me.

She raised an eyebrow. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean? I just told you.” I moved to step around her, but again, she got in the way.

“This isn’t you. Typically, you have more composure than this. You’re often the one keeping all the other women and me together when something goes wrong.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and tilted my head toward the ceiling. “I know,” I groaned at Michelle’s reminder of how ridiculous I was acting.

“What’s going on?” Michelle asked in that sincere voice that made anyone want to open up to her.

I pressed back against the edge of my desk for support. “You know what I was thinking this morning?”

She lifted a brow.

“No one ever talks about the adjustment you have to make when your kids go from calling you ‘Mommy’ to ‘Mama’ to ‘Ma,’” I said, that last one in the mimic of a bored teen with a deep voice. In other words, I imitated my oldest son. “Or, ‘Ma,’” I drew out the second ‘ma’ in a more high-pitched and irritated teen tone, aka Kennedy.

Michele laughed. “Tell me about it. When Diego went from ‘Mama’ to ‘Ma’, I wanted to fight him. Then his voice deepened, and I swore a second grown man was in my house.”

We both snickered.

“I think he grew a few inches while at school,” I told her.

Her eyes grew wide. “Tell me about it. Carter and I picked him up from school for Thanksgiving, and I was like, who the hell is this? He even had the damn nerve to try to grow out his beard. You should’ve seen the girls that waved to him as we pulled off. *Heeey, Diego.*”

We laughed some more.

Diego was Michelle and Carter's oldest and was on the verge of finishing up his first semester of college. Of course, he had to go to an out-of-state school. Kyle was already talking about wanting to attend the same college as his cousin and best friend. Despite being a couple of years apart and separated by college now, the two remained close. Something I was incredibly grateful for.

As an only child whose mother died at birth and an emotionally distant father, I craved a large, loving family for my kids. That was precisely what I got.

"They grow up so damn fast," I said once I sobered up.

Michelle hummed in agreement.

"Next year will be their last Christmas before they're off to college. Thiers and Andreas will be ten quicker than I can blink, and Stasi is seven going on thirty-five. I just ..."

Michelle stepped closer, taking one of my hands into hers.

"I don't know how many Christmases we have together." I could barely get the words out because of my fear.

"You're afraid of the cancer coming back."

I shook my head and wiped a stray tear. "Honestly, not really. I mean, I think about it, but that's not the main issue. They'll have lives of their own," I explained. "How long before they're too busy to even come home for Christmas? Half of the time, Kyle and Kennedy find their friends more interesting than hanging out with their parents. And I know it's just normal adolescence. I get it. They're not doing anything wrong, but after the last two Christmases ..."

She tightened her hold on my hand.

"I just feel like it was stolen from them, from Aaron. I don't want to let them down this year, too."

Michelle pulled me into a firm hug. "You know, no one thinks that." She pulled back and looked me in the eye. "Tell me you understand that not one single person in this family believes what you went through caused *us* to miss a damn

thing?” Her tone was forceful, as if she could push the words through my psyche.

“Logically, I get that. I understand it from a completely rational point of view. And I know Aaron’s head would explode if I said this out loud to him.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what would happen,” she agreed.

“Yeah, but try explaining that to my emotional side. I can’t shake the guilt. It’s a liar, and I know this, but it keeps telling me that my illness ruined the past two holiday seasons for my husband and my kids, and now I need to fight like hell to make it up to them.”

“You know, even if that were true, buying them the most expensive, decadent gifts you can find wouldn’t be the answer, right? What Aaron, your kids, and the rest of us want is more time with you. That’s it.”

I granted her a smile through my tears. “That’s all I ever wanted, too.”

“I love you.” She pulled me into another embrace.

Michelle had become my best friend over the years. We hadn’t known one another before we married our husbands, but getting to know her was like finding a long-lost sister or something. The four of us—Destiny, Kayla, Michelle, and I—were all close, but there was a special bond between Michelle and me. Maybe because, for a time, we both had been single mothers.

“I love you, too,” I murmured into her shoulder.

As soon as we pulled away from one another, the phone on my desk rang. It was the bike shop I just got off the phone with. While my conversation with Michelle helped, I still wanted those damn bikes.

I answered on the second ring.

“Mrs. Townsend,” Lissette, the employee I had just spoken with, greeted, “the owner just told me he can make it in early

to speak with you. He thinks he may be able to work something out.”

“Ah, perfect,” I squealed. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Good news?” Michelle asked.

“I hope so. I’m going to work for another twenty minutes on this grant and then head over to the bike shop.”

She nodded. “Cool. I’m going to go set up for the afternoon sessions.”

I squeezed her hand before she could walk away. “Thank you.”

While the guilt was still there, the burden of it felt lighter after our conversation.

* * *

“MR. DAMASCUS, I appreciate you coming in early to speak with me,” I said to the Damascus & Co. Specialty Bike Shop owner.

He nodded and gave me a pleasant smile. His white beard, matching hair, pudgy middle, and overall affable demeanor made me think of Santa Claus. I tried to shake the thought loose, but then he let out a belly laugh. I believed I was face to face with Kris Kringle in the flesh for the slightest instant.

“It was nothing. The elves were getting ready to call it a day.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to figure out if this man was serious or not. We couldn’t both be losing our minds in that shop.

He grinned. “I’m kidding. I like to get the Santa Claus jokes out of the way.” He gestured up and down the length of his body. “You know ’cause of the resemblance thing.”

Chuckling, I nodded. “Right.”

“Well, let’s see here ...” He rounded his desk and rummaged through the files on it. A few tools he had strewn

on top slipped over the side.

I quickly caught them before they hit the ground.

“Great reflexes,” he said, looking impressed.

“Thank you.” I stared at the mess on his desk, wondering if he would find whatever he searched for.

“Here it is.” He held a form up and flicked at it with his free hand, satisfied with himself. “Yes, yes. You ordered two of our most expensive mountain bikes.” He checked the form, peering over the square spectacles on his face. Seriously, this man looked like he was born to play the role of Santa at the local mall.

“Oh, no, no, no.” He clucked his tongue.

I wrung my hands around the strap of my bag. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh.” He looked over at me as if just remembering that I stood there. “Nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about.”

Those words coming out of anyone else’s mouth would’ve seemed condescending and a bit sexist, but not from Kris—I meant Mr. Damascus.

“There’s good news.” His eyes expanded, excitement swimming in their brown depths. “Great news, even. It seems my employee was incorrect. Your bikes were delivered yesterday. A day early,” he finished, lifting his chin and running his free hand down his red suspenders.

“That’s wonderful. Can I see them?” I asked

“Yes, right this way.” He opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a massive ring with at least twenty keys.

While I stared at the keychain, wondering how he knew which key matched what lock, Mr. Damascus started telling me about the history of his bike shop. We left his office and passed through the main store to a door labeled ‘Workshop.’

“This store has been in my family for over ninety years. My grandfather started this shop,” he said proudly as we

entered a large open room that housed all types of bikes and equipment to repair them. There were rows upon rows of metal shelving, either holding bikes or tires, loose handlebars, air pumps, helmets, and more.

“That’s quite an accomplishment for your family,” I said, regarding the shop’s time in existence. “My husband works for the company that’s been in his family for three generations as well.”

He paused to grin at me over his shoulder. “Townsend Industries.” He winked at my lifted brows. “It’s hard not to know the name Townsend in a city like Williamsport,” he explained.

“I suppose that’s true.”

I followed him to the middle aisle of the third row of shelves. “Here we are.” He held out his arm in the direction of the shiny black mountain bikes perched side by side.

“These are amazing,” I gushed and ran my hand over the leather seats and the sleek body of each bike. “They’re so light.”

“That’s the carbon frame. It is what you requested, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes, it is. Sometimes it’s still a little surprising how sleek these things are.” My stomach clenched as I recalled what my husband and son would use these bikes for.

“I’ve seen that worried expression before,” Mr. Damascus said.

“I’m sorry?”

He dipped his head toward the bikes, which I stood in between. “You’re frightened for their safety.”

“How did you know that?”

He chuckled. “You’re not the first concerned mother or wife I’ve had come in here with second thoughts about the gift they’ve gotten for the daredevil in their life.”

I shook my head. “Aaron’s hardly a daredevil ...” I petered off because that wasn’t entirely true. He wasn’t an adrenaline junkie in the way that, say, Evil Knievel was, but he obviously got a rush from the deals he made at work. He thrived off of that type of energy. That was what mountain biking was like for him, too, he once told me.

Which was why I wouldn’t dream of asking him to step away from his work. Not again for the second time in as many years. And especially not for something like, say, an around-the-world trip with our family.

I’d spent hours the night before re-reading that article about the family doing that and studying pictures on their blog and other social media sites. The yearning I thought I’d suppressed after my last appointment with Dr. Tarver started to emerge.

“But he and Kyle love to mountain bike,” I said to Mr. Damascus, pushing my errant thoughts aside. “I’m pretty sure my youngest two will love it as well. I’m not ready to buy these bikes for them just yet, though.”

His smile was full of empathy. “Let me assure you, there’s nothing to worry about. All of our bikes come with a one hundred percent guarantee that nothing bad will ever happen to one of our riders.”

I scrunched my face. “How can you make that sort of promise?” They couldn’t possibly have existed this long with a guarantee like that. The number of lawsuits alone ...

Mr. Damascus let out a full belly laugh. I’m talking bent over at the waist, side-splitting laughter.

“I’m pulling your chain.” He uprighted himself. “Get it? Chain, ’cause ...” He lifted his hand to one of the bike chains hanging on the opposite shelf.

“I get it.”

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t have time for my jokes. A busy woman like you has places to go.” He pulled himself together. “What I meant was that there are no guarantees in life. You’ve purchased the highest quality bikes for your

family and the top-notch safety equipment. And something tells me that your husband would never take unnecessary risks when he knows his son is watching his every move, and they both come home to you.”

My smile turned genuine.

“This is a fine gift and will look even better once I complete the engravings. Their names will shine like the stars at night. But you remember that each bike has its national number.”

“That’s like the bike’s serial number, correct?”

He nodded. “So that even if someone should steal either of them, it’s virtually impossible to resell them.”

I nodded.

“But with the personalized locks you purchased for each bike, stealing these babies will be extremely difficult.”

“Great. I can’t wait to see them when they’re finished.” I frowned. “I’m a little sad I won’t be able to see the officially finished bikes until Aaron and Kyle can bring them in themselves to get properly fitted, but ...” I shrugged.

“They’re going to love these bikes,” Mr. Damascus told me. “I know it.”

“Thank you again.” Relief filled me. I was terrified when I didn’t think they’d arrive on time.

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you.”

I thanked him once more and followed him toward the exit.

He paused and turned to me right before we reached the main part of the store. “And what do you want for Christmas?”

“Excuse me?”

“A woman who goes out of her way to get such wonderful gifts for her family must have an idea of what she wants for herself?”

Again, I found myself thinking about African safaris, watching my children practice a foreign language, or Aaron leading us around some ancient street in Europe because he just had to take control of our travel venture.

I shook my head.

“I just want my family to be happy.”

Mr. Damascus’ smile faded like a dimmer switch turning the Christmas lights off for the night.

“That’s not an answer.”

I bristled, ready to defend my response, when he said, “Everyone wants something.” He leaned in. “And it’s okay to be a little selfish during this time of year. Just a little.” He pinched his thumb and forefinger, holding them up in front of me.

I looked away, reminding myself that I didn’t know this man, and as friendly as he seemed, he was likely trying to upsell me on something.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Damascus.”

He pinched his lips and dropped his chin before pulling the door open to allow me to exit.

Even as I headed toward my awaiting driver and car, his question played on a loop in my head. A whisper of a question accompanied Mr. Damascus’.

Is my family’s happiness truly the only thing I want this Christmas?

CHAPTER 8



*A*aron

Two weeks before Christmas

“We’ll be here all night if you don’t give me the answers I’m looking for,” I told the Townsend legal team members. There were ten people in my office working to figure out how to make the purchase of Wynco happen. In case Müller didn’t sign.

The fourteen days I’d given Müller was approaching, and the bastard still hadn’t signed. He had become unreachable all of a sudden as well.

Bastard.

“Aaron, there’s only so much we can do,” Denny, one of the attorneys on Townsend’s staff, said.

“Right now may not be the best time to attempt a hostile takeover,” Rich, Townsend’s CFO, commented. “What with the stock price being down and all. Spring may be better to—”

“Fuck spring,” I ground out, silencing everyone else in the room. “Townsend will own Wynco before the end of the year. Müller and anyone else who doesn’t like it will have to get on board or find themselves out on their ass!”

Total silence around the room.

“I will have that company.”

“Everyone,” Joshua called out, “why don’t you all allow Aaron and me to have the room?”

Everyone cleared the room within seconds, leaving my middle brother and me alone.

I glared at my brother as he came to stand before me. “Who the hell told you to dismiss my meeting?”

Unbothered, he smirked. “You’re being a pain in the ass to your staff, and they needed a break.” I started to remind him who the CEO of this company was when he said, “Besides, I met up with Ty and Carter for lunch, and our baby brother gave me this to give to you.” He handed me a large package that I hadn’t noticed before.

I opened the box to find a stack of hardback books. The beautiful gold and purple colors of the edges of the pages caught my attention. I placed the box on my desk and lifted one of the books out, opening it.

“To Kennedy, thank you for being a devoted reader. Please accept this special edition of the *Legend of Yemaya Series* as my token of appreciation ...” I read the words from author Audre Wilkins.

“She even threw in an extra memorable gift.” Joshua inclined his head toward the box.

I glanced down to see three tickets to a signing of hers happening in the summer of the following year. “Baby brother’s good for something,” I commented.

Josh chuckled. “He said you’d say that. Right after, he reminded me to tell you that he’s going to kick your ass for missing our monthly lunch date.”

I grunted. “The only person I *date* is my wife. Not you three.”

Almost two years earlier, Carter had come to me with an idea to ensure the four of us remained close. He proposed that we meet at least once a month for lunch and maybe a round of golf. He insisted when I told him I didn’t have time for that shit.

Patience had recently been diagnosed with breast cancer, and it felt like all my energy went to keeping my immediate

family intact. Then I started getting calls from Tyler and visits to the office from Joshua to get me to agree.

Even with the pressure from those three, it took the insistence from Patience that I make time to join them. She guilted me with her speech about wishing she had siblings growing up. The cherry on top was her reminding me that we were examples for our children.

“Yeah, whatever you want to call it, this is the second month in a row you’ve skipped out on it.”

“I didn’t skip out on a damn thing. I’ve been working. This fucking Wynco deal must be done before the year ends.” I stared at him through narrowed eyes. “Have you noticed we’re less than three weeks away from the end of the damn year?”

Josh took a seat in the chair across from me. “I’ve noticed.” He paused to look at me. “What’s the big deal about making this happen before the end of the year? Why can’t it wait until spring?”

Because I won’t be here, I thought but didn’t say it out loud.

“You know the board wants to hear good news about the stock price at the top of the year,” I told him. “Buying Wynco will start next year’s price off on a high note.”

Joshua frowned. “Since when do you care about the stock price?” He huffed out a laugh. “Or the feelings of the board—other than Father’s opinion—for that matter?”

“I don’t,” I quickly replied. “But this is important.” I met Joshua’s gaze.

One of his dark eyebrows lifted. “It’s Müller’s cancer research, isn’t it? That’s what this is about,” he concluded.

“Yes,” I answered honestly because what the fuck did I have to lie about?

He looked at me for a long while, not saying anything. I glared at him, but he stood right when I was about to ask him what the hell he was looking at.

He lifted one of the picture frames from my desk. He studied the photo of Patience and me with all of our children. Stasi was only about a year old in the image. She was cradled in my arms, leaning against my chest, half asleep. It was taken at the end of a summer day at our family's lake house.

"Do you know why we started these monthly lunches with each other?"

"Don't you have work to do?" I asked. As the head of the real estate division, I knew his ass had something he could be doing instead of wasting my time.

"Nope," he answered. "It's after five-thirty. As soon as I'm done here, I'm going home to Kay, Victoria, Cole, and Alec," he said, mentioning his wife and their three kids with the same pride I had whenever I mentioned my family.

My gaze cut over to the clock on the far wall, and I realized it was later than expected. I had plans to do a series of work items before heading out of the office. Again, I looked toward the pictures on my desk.

"Then why are you still here?" I asked my brother.

"When Carter came to you about the lunches, he emphasized the importance of not losing touch with one another, right?" Joshua continued as if I hadn't asked him a question.

"Yeah," I grumbled, half paying attention as I typed out an email.

"Because even though we all live so close, it becomes easy to lose contact with the rigamarole of raising kids, keeping our marriages intact, and working. But we know the necessity of family. That's the foundation for everything."

"What the hell are you going on about?" I gritted through clenched teeth.

"Guess I need to bring this point home."

"Please do before I knock you on your ass."

He shook his head. "And some people think you've mellowed out over the years."

“Should be evidenced by the fact that you’re still standing.”

“Threats. Anyway, Carter didn’t come up with the idea by himself.” He paused and stared down at me.

“So?”

“So? Aren’t you curious who put the idea in his head?”

“Not re—”

“Your wife.”

Those two short words grabbed my full attention. The idea of someone else knowing even a morsel of information about my wife that I didn’t know pissed me off.

“Calm down,” he said, laughing as I stood from my chair. “I figured she wouldn’t have told you about that.”

“About what?” I asked slowly, deliberately.

“She came to us,” he replied.

“When?”

His gaze dropped, and all joking manner fell away from his face. “A few weeks after she was diagnosed.”

That would’ve been just over two years ago. Right around the time we started with those damn lunches.

“She called us to meet in my office; Carter, me, and Ty.”

“What did she say?”

His green eyes met mine. “She promised us she would fight with everything she had to beat the cancer.” He blew out a breath. “But she said that if she didn’t, if the worst happened ...” He swallowed, and I looked away from him, my fists tightening.

“That we had to promise her not to let you fall apart. She made all of us agree that we wouldn’t let you fall into that darkness you lived in before she came into your life, for your children. She looked all of us in the eye and made us swear never to let that happen because the only thing worse she could think of besides not surviving the cancer was to leave

her children with a father who couldn't love them through his broken heart."

My throat constricted, mimicking the tightening in my chest. I always knew that in her darkest moments, when she was in the most pain, her first thoughts were of the kids and me. I knew then that I couldn't possibly love my wife more than I already did. I'd move heaven, Earth, and hell to make her life all she wanted.

"That day, Patience asked us to do whatever we needed to be there for you. And we agreed because ... well, there is no because. You're our brother. Hardheaded, stubborn, and a pain in the ass, but you're one of us just as we're a part of you. And though you're a shitty brother sometimes, you're still a great uncle." He shrugged. "Anyway, I just thought you might want to know that."

He started for the door.

"Josh," I called.

He looked back at me.

"I love you."

He grinned. "I know."

"I'll be at next month's lunch."

"You better." He nods. "It's probably time you call it a day. Don't you think?" He didn't wait for my answer as he made his exit.

For the first time in a long time, I listened to my younger brother and packed up to get home to my wife and kids.

CHAPTER 9



*P*atience

“I cannot believe you!” Kennedy shouted as soon as she entered the house.

I whirled around from my position in the dining area to find my oldest daughter glaring at her twin brother.

For his part, Kyle remained unmoved. His hazel eyes, however, narrowed on his sister. He didn’t say anything.

“Why would you embarrass me like that?” Kennedy demanded, her typically light complexion reddening in anger.

“Ken, what’s the matter?” I interjected.

Huffing, she looked over at me. “Mom, Kyle embarrassed me in front of our entire class.”

Kyle sucked his teeth. “She’s acting like I ruined her life,” he replied, condescension lacing his tone.

“What is she referring to?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest.

I had hoped for a relatively calm evening with the entire family. That hadn’t happened.

Aaron had come in about thirty minutes earlier and kissed the hell out of me before I made him sit down to have dinner. Unfortunately, he barely made it through his meal before he was inundated with work calls. Something regarding that merger he was working on. He was downstairs in his home office taking them.

I had one irate teenager and her twin brother who'd embarrassed her on my hands.

"Go on," Kennedy insisted. "Tell Mom what you did."

Kyle pursed his lips, scowling. Not for the first time, I noted how much he looked like his father.

"Kyle Townsend, what is your sister talking about?"

His face softened a smidge. He sighed, but kept his mouth shut.

My heart tightened at the center of my chest. Kyle had grown up so much in the past couple of years. He had a hard edge that hadn't been there when he was younger. And the betrayal of his close friend only served to firm up that hardness.

"He told Jeffrey that he better stay away from me or he'd kick his ass," Kennedy supplied.

"Watch your mouth," I told her. "Kyle, is that true? Did you threaten that boy?" Jeffrey was a boy in Kennedy's debate club whom she had a little crush on.

"Yes, it's true," she answered for her brother. "Jeffrey wouldn't even look at me during our debate meeting. And afterward, he left with Sheila Weston." My daughter's voice had grown high-pitched.

Kyle rolled his eyes.

"Why would you threaten him?" I asked.

"Because he's a jerk," Kennedy shouted.

"Do not speak to your brother like that," Aaron's voice boomed from behind us.

Silence filled the air as all three of us swiveled to face him. Aaron's expression remained hard while he glared at Kennedy. "What is this about?"

"Nothing," Kennedy answered. "You'll just take his side anyway." She folded her arms across her chest and went to storm off. Aaron caught her by the elbow, shaking it a little until she dropped her arms.

His face softened, and he planted a kiss on her forehead. “You know you’re my favorite. I would never take anyone’s side over you.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Kyle griped.

A chuckle spilled from Aaron’s lips. He always teased the kids about who was his favorite. However, they all knew he didn’t play favorites.

“It’s nothing,” Kennedy said in a softer voice than she’d taken with her brother.

“Just some loser she liked who wasn’t good enough for her.” Kyle stood from his chair. “I did you a favor, sis. He was making out with Sheila Weston a few days ago. Right after she tried to hook up with me.”

Aaron’s eyes widened as he looked at Kennedy. “A boy?”

The stark wrinkle in his forehead told me where this was going. Kennedy grimaced.

“I’m going upstairs to finish my homework and to study. Test in the morning,” she said all in one breath. “Bye, Daddy.”

In the blink of an eye, she bolted up the stairs. Aaron stared after her as if he wanted to follow her to demand she tell him what this was all about.

I went to him. “How about you go take a shower?” I told him, shaking his arms a little to bring his attention back to me. His eyes narrowed on me. “Go. I’ll tuck in the rest of the crew.”

As I convinced him to leave our eldest daughter alone and go wash the day off, Kyle skirted behind us and headed up the stairs for the night as well.

Aaron took one final look up the stairs before turning his gaze on me. His lids dropped as his eyes found my lips. My body warmed at the heated gleam in those hazel pupils.

“Go shower.” My voice came out huskier than I’d intended.

“Come with me.”

Smirking, I shook my head. “No.” I stepped out of his reach and made my way to the staircase. “Shower. I’ll look in on the kiddos.”

He cursed low, and I stifled my laughter as I headed up to Stasi’s bedroom. She was already changed into her nightgown and ready for me to read her bedtime story.

Thiers and Andreas were next. After threatening them with the removal of their gaming system for a month if I found them playing while they should’ve been asleep, I kissed them goodnight and headed for Kennedy’s room.

I tried to remind her that Kyle only had her best interest in mind when he did what he did.

“I know, but he didn’t even let me figure it out for myself. He just threatened him without talking to me about it.”

“I’ll speak with your brother.”

She snorted. “Like that’ll do any good. He’s like a mini Dad or something.”

I bit my tongue to keep from laughing. “Your brother’s not that bad.” I took a seat on her bed. “Did you like Jeffery?”

She shrugged. “I thought so. But if he’s into Sheila, he wasn’t all that into me.”

I squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry, baby. You know it’s his loss, right?”

She nodded.

“And—”

“Mom, I don’t want to talk about this.” She held up her tablet. “I have a lot of studying to do for tomorrow.”

I knew we’d reached the precipice of that conversation. She wasn’t ready to delve more into it with me. It was moments like that when I wished I had a mother growing up. What would she have said to me? Would she have forced the conversation?

Thinking better of it, I stood. “Make sure you’re not studying too late, all right?”

She nodded as I placed a kiss on the top of her head. At least she still let me do that.

Next, I went over to Kyle's room.

"Would you like to talk about what happened between you and your sister?" I asked as I entered.

He gave a one-shoulder shrug before swiveling in his chair back to his desk. "Not really."

"Too bad," I said, taking a seat on his bed. "Spill."

There were a few beats of silence before he sighed and turned to face me. "The guy's a loser. I heard he was talking to a couple of girls, including Kennedy. So, I told him to stay away from my sister with his lying a—" He paused and looked over at me.

I lifted an eyebrow.

"... self," he completed. "Kennedy's better than that."

My heart swelled. Even though I may disagree with how he went about it, Kyle only wanted to protect his sister.

"You know you could've gone to Kennedy with what you found out about him," I retorted. "She could've made her own decision."

Kyle frowned. "He would've lied." He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice dropped lower, a hint of anger tinting the words as he said, "And she would've believed him."

He looked me right in the eyes. "She doesn't know you can't trust anyone. Not anyone outside of our family. They want to be close to us because of our last name."

His voice was so dark and heavy that I had to shake off the shudder that threatened to course through me.

"Kyle." I stood and went over to him, placing my hand on his shoulder. "That's not true. I know what your friend did—"

"He's not my friend," he said, his voice slicing through my comment. "Not anymore." He clamped his mouth shut so hard that his jaw went rigid.

My heart ached to have back the innocence he had when he was six years old.

“Dad was right.”

I blinked. “Your dad was right about what?”

“You can’t trust anyone. Everyone just wants to take something from you, to gain something by being next to us. I won’t make that same mistake again.”

“Kyle.” I pinched the bridge of my nose as he turned away from me. “That’s not true at all.”

He snorted. “Yeah, okay.”

I could’ve stood there and argued with him, but words wouldn’t work in this situation. His friend’s betrayal had hurt Kyle; worse still, Aaron had reinforced that hurt with his teachings.

I leaned down, planting a kiss on his cheek. “I love you. Don’t stay up too late, okay?”

He nodded. “Love you, too, Mom.” He squeezed my hand before I released his shoulder.

With red in my vision, I turned away from Kyle and stormed out of the room. My husband was about to get an earful from me.

* * *

AARON

I let the warm spray from the shower wash the remaining shampoo out of my hair. With a grunt, I reached for the conditioner that smelled like strawberries. It wasn’t my conditioner. Patience had recently purchased some specially formulated shampoo and conditioner once her hair started growing back after chemo. She raved about it. I just loved anything that smelled like my wife, so I used it.

I took a whiff of the fruity conditioner and inhaled deeply. My cock began to grow hard just from the reminder of my

wife. I was tempted to wrap my hand around my dick and ease the tension that started to course through me, but I thought better of it.

I'd intended to come home early, have dinner with the family, help put the kids to bed, and stay up half the night fucking my wife. All I wanted since having that conversation with Joshua was to be inside of her and near her.

But fucking work got in the way.

More to the point, the deal with Wynco. That's what the calls had been about. One of my lawyers found a possible loophole in international law that would allow Townsend to purchase Wynco without Müller's signature. It was a long shot, and there was still the possibility that if the deal went through, Müller would walk. I didn't like the risk.

"Fuck," I growled.

I quickly shook my head and forgot about Wynco and Townsend Industries. I had more important matters to worry about. Like, getting out of this shower and taking my wife to bed.

Right when I started to turn the shower off, to find Patience to put her underneath me in our huge ass bed, she burst through the bathroom door. The steam emanating from the shower prevented me from seeing her face clearly, but I could tell by the way she moved that she was pissed.

That and the way she ripped the shower door open.

My cock jumped because fuck, she was beautiful when she was angry.

"Did you tell our son that he can't trust anyone?"

I frowned as I dragged my gaze up and down the length of her body. She wore a pair of jeans and a dark turtleneck top. I paused at her neck, loving how the top encased her throat but also regretting that it wasn't my hand around that part of her anatomy.

She loved it when I wrapped my hand around her neck, threatening to cut off her air supply.

“Aaron, are you listening to me?” she demanded, drawing my attention back to that mouth of hers.

On instinct, I reached for her. “Come here,” I growled.

“No.” She swatted my hands away and took a step back. “Don’t you dare.” Pointing, she glared at me when I moved in her direction. “Why would you tell Kyle that he can’t trust anyone?”

I scowled and narrowed my eyes. “Because that’s the damn truth.” The sooner he learned it, the better.

“How can you tell him something like that? You know he takes anything you say to heart.”

“Which is why I said it.”

She folded her arms across her breasts. “So, your intention is for our son to go through life bitter and not to trust people? What kind of life is that going to be for him?”

“A life in which he doesn’t have to worry about being stabbed in the back.”

She sucked her teeth and threw her hands in the air. “Are you kidding me?”

“No,” I said evenly. I reached for her again. “Get in the shower with me.” That was all I was going to say on the matter. The time for words was over with, as far as I was concerned.

“Stop it.” She pushed my hand away again. “You don’t even like shower sex.”

“But when have I ever turned down an opportunity to see you naked?”

She rolled her eyes like our sixteen-year-old daughter did whenever I said something she thought was absurd.

“Get in the shower, Patience,” I ordered.

“No.” She stepped back again and pointed at me. “And you need to tell Kyle that not everyone is out to stab him in the back.” With that, she turned and started to walk away.

I cut the water off and ripped my towel from the rung it hung on by before following her out of the bathroom.

“I’ll do no such thing,” I insisted. “And you know why.”

“Why, Aaron?” She placed her hands on her hips.

“Because that boy’s going to be CEO of Townsend Industries one day. He can’t go through life being unaware. Ninety-nine percent of the motherfuckers in this world will try to use him and spit him out. Just like the Walshes tried to do.”

I got in Patience’s face, taking her chin in my hand. “It’s better he learn this lesson now than later when he’s at the helm of a multi-billion dollar business.”

She clucked her teeth and snatched her face from my hold. “Everything is about business? Is that it?”

I gritted my teeth. “Of course not.”

“How the hell is he ever going to have any real relationships in his life if he doesn’t learn to trust anyone?” she asked.

“He has plenty of people he can trust.”

She pursed her lips. “And they all just happen to have the last name Townsend, right?”

“Right,” I agreed. “Who else does he need outside of the family?” No one. That was who.

“What about friends? And God forbid if he ever wanted to, you know, marry, have a wife, and start a family of his own.”

“He’ll know when and if it’s the right one.”

“How?” she persisted. “With you telling him that no one can be trusted? He hangs on your every word.” She glared at me.

“I’m not wrong on this,” I told her. “He needs to be wary of people. This was a hard lesson, but I’m glad he learned it early.”

“How can you say that?” she retorted. “Next to Diego, Dean was his best friend.”

Grinding the back of my teeth, I clenched my fists. I wanted to beat Walsh Sr.'s ass for the position he put his son in. To betray Kyle like that. Still ...

“He’ll get over it,” I reiterated. “Betrayal is a part of life; the sooner he learns and accepts it, the better off he’ll be.”

She snorted. “The better he’ll be to run Townsend Industries?”

“That, among other things.” I glared at her the same way she stared at me. “Don’t think I forgot that you knew our Kennedy was seeing some boy, and you neglected to tell me about it.”

Groaning, she dropped her head to peer up at the ceiling. “She wasn’t seeing him.”

“Damn straight she wasn’t,” I replied. “She’s too young to date.”

“Aaron, she’s sixteen. I went on my first date when I was fifteen.”

My eyes bugged so wide for a split second that I thought they’d pop out of my head.

“What’s. His. Name?” I demanded through gritted teeth.

“You cannot be serious.”

Yeah, I was. I was crazy as fuck, too. And she knew it. So why she would ever mention going on a date with another guy was beyond me.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Kennedy will date. Stasi too,” she added. “You don’t ever have a problem with the idea of Kyle or the twins dating, but mention it for one of the girls, and you’re ready to start World War III.”

“They don’t need any other men in their lives. They have their grandfather, me, uncles, cousins, and brothers.”

“None of whom they can date.”

“Even better. Because my daughters aren’t dating.”

She groaned and ran her fingers across her forehead, clearly frustrated.

I removed the towel wrapped around my waist and dropped it to the floor. My cock pointed directly at her. I wanted my wife any time of the day, but my erection often made a special appearance when we argued. I couldn't help it.

“Don't you dare come near me with that thing.” She pointed at my dick.

A slow, lascivious grin split my lips as she backed into the wall behind her.

“I'm pissed off with you,” she added.

“Yeah?” I brushed up against her. Anger flared through my body at the intrusion of her clothing, preventing me from getting skin to skin with her. “Show me,” I growled before burying my face into her neck.

“Fuck you, Aaron,” she murmured. There was heat and anger in her voice. But it was accompanied by a huskiness that shot straight to my cock.

“That's what you're about to do.” I unbuttoned her jeans and shoved them down her legs. When my hand slipped in between her folds, I hummed in satisfaction. “Already wet for me.”

She pulled her head back and glared up at me. “I'm not wrong. Kyle can't go through life not trusting people, and our daughters will be free to date whomever they choose. You cannot stunt their growth by keeping them underneath your wings forever.”

I stared down at her. “Fine. I'll make a deal.”

She squinted.

“Any man that wants to date and, God forbid, marry ...” I gritted that word out, “one of my daughters, I'll break his leg in three places. *If* he doesn't bitch and moan about it, he might be able to gain my approval.”

“And what if they end up falling in love with a woman? Are you going to break their leg, too?”

I shook my head. “I’ll have someone else do it.”

“You’re such an ass.”

I shrugged and thrust my hips against her belly. I groaned in need. “We’re done talking about this.”

When she opened her mouth to protest, I cut her off with a hard kiss on her lips. She resisted at first, which made my cock even harder. I pressed her against the wall, giving her no room until I felt her fingers trail up my abdomen.

The muscles in my stomach tightened. “Fuck,” I grunted when she pinched and twisted my nipple. A dark chuckle spilled from my lips at her cute little payback.

“You’re going to pay for that,” I said against her lips.

My cock throbbed to be inside of her—my favorite fucking place to be—but my dick had to wait.

“How?” Patience asked, and then gasped when I spun her around and stripped her of her jeans and panties. I parted the globes of her ass with my hands and dove in face first.

She hummed in delight. She pressed her ass back into my face, demanding more of my mouth as I ate her from the back. I delivered, always hungry for more of her.

“Aaron,” she panted in a whisper, keeping her voice low since our children were right down the hall.

Soon she was coming. Her body seized up, and her thigh muscles tensed as her orgasm took hold of her body. It was a silent release. I wanted to hear her screams but knew she wouldn’t give them to me. Not while we weren’t alone in the house.

“You set my whole world on fire,” I murmured in her ear as I rose to stand. I bit her earlobe from behind, making her inhale deeply.

Slowly and deliberately, I eased into her wetness from behind. My cock sank into her body as it welcomed me home. I took her against the wall, careful not to thrust her too hard. But I did sink my teeth into the back of her neck. She came in a rush.

Her pussy walls clenched down and around my cock, pulling my orgasm from me.

“Love you,” I panted. “So fucking much.”

“You ...” she heaved, working to catch her breath. “Get on ... my nerves.”

A feral grin crested on my lips. “I know,” I said before pressing a kiss to the nape of her neck.

CHAPTER 10



*O*ne week before Christmas

Patience

“Did you enjoy the show?” I asked Andreas as we applauded the ballet dancers on stage.

The children, Aaron, and I just finished watching the live production of *The Nutcracker*. It took much planning and even a few threats to get everyone on the same page for tonight’s show, especially after we all went out the night before to see Andreas’ performance at the children’s school holiday play.

He was phenomenal, and both Aaron and I beamed with pride as he took his final bow on stage. Now, he stood enraptured at the dancers on stage, clapping loudly.

“So awesome!” Andreas cheered.

The Nutcracker was our holiday tradition, save for the past two Christmases, and I was determined we wouldn’t miss it again this year.

“I loved it, Mommy,” Stasi gushed. “I’m going to be a ballerina when I grow up.” And for good measure, she held her hands up high and did a twirl in the middle of the aisle. Her long, curly ringlets flew wildly about her shoulders as she spun. The red dress she wore flared at her sides.

“Is that right?” Aaron asked, lifting her hand high and spinning her around even more.

Stasi tossed her head back, arms wide, and giggled. All of this took place in the aisle, making a few other audience

members detour down the opposite end of the row.

Aaron didn't even blink at the minor disturbance we caused.

"I thought you wanted to be a chef," Kennedy reminded her sister once Aaron put Stasi down.

Pausing, Stasi tapped her chin. "I can do both." She stopped again and nodded as if she's solved the riddle. "I can be a ballerina and a chef."

"No, you—" Kyle's rebuttal was cut off when Aaron gave him a look. The roll of Kyle's eyes showed his disbelief even if he didn't finish his comment.

"My daughter can do or be anything she damn well pleases," Aaron affirmed.

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind him not to curse in front of the kids, but he was on a roll.

"Because what?" he asked, staring into the eyes of each of our five children.

And in unison, they all muttered, "Because we're Townsends."

"Damn right," he grunted.

"Can you let up on the *damns*?" I whispered in his ear. "The last thing I need is Thiers' teacher calling again about him cursing in class."

"If that teacher has a problem with the way my son—"

"Aaron," I scolded, exasperated.

He frowned. "Fine. For you, sweetness," he said before bending down and pecking my lips.

"Gross," Kyle groaned.

"In public?" Kennedy whined.

Aaron's reply to our embarrassed teens was to wrap his arm around my waist, pulling me in closer and deepening the kiss.

“You knew he would do that.” That reply came from nine-year-old Thiers in that slightly wry way of his.

When Aaron pulled back, that familiar glint was in his eyes.

“Daddy, can we get hot chocolate?” Stasi asked.

“Yeah, can we?” Andreas added on as we exited the theater.

A shiver ran through me from the chill in the air, but it wasn’t blistering cold. Just chilly enough to let you know that Christmas was in the air.

“Oh, cool,” Kennedy chirped, peering down at her phone. “Vanessa is over at the ice rink.”

I rolled my gaze over toward Aaron. “I know where this is going.”

He grinned. “Looks like we’re going to get hot chocolate by the ice rink.”

Stasi and Andreas cheered. Thiers nodded in approval while Kennedy and Kyle shrugged as if they were being forced to go—even though I could see in their eyes that it was something they wanted to do.

Teenagers. I chuckled to myself.

I watched as Aaron informed our security that we would walk over to the ice rink. It was only a couple of blocks away from the theater.

“You have to walk on the inside,” Thiers reminded me when I tried to step out of line and walk on the side of the sidewalk closest to the street.

With Stasi’s hand in his, Aaron glanced over his shoulder to give Thiers his nod of approval.

“Thanks, son. Did you enjoy the ballet?” I asked when Andreas came up to take my hand on the right. The twins flanked me while Kyle and Kennedy walked behind us, texting on their cell phones.

“It was okay.” Thiers shrugged, his voice even.

“I’m going to be a performer when I grow up,” Andreas said. “Not the ballet, though. I’m going to be an actor.”

“Ms. Waters said you’re one of her favorite students to work with,” I told him, talking about his drama teacher at Excelor Academy, where the children went to school.

“She told me, too.” Andreas went on and on about moving to Hollywood when he got old enough and breaking into the movies.

“Not before you finish college,” Aaron threw over his shoulder, his voice stern, not leaving room for an argument.

“I know.” Andreas pouted, but then he smirked. “I can study acting in college, right, Mom?”

I nodded. “Sure can. A lot of great actors have acting degrees.”

“Perfect.”

We made it to the ice rink, and the first thing we spotted was the almost fifty-foot Christmas tree at the front of the rink. The colorful lights on the tree peppered the rink with an array of red, green, and yellow. Families and young children skated in circles or browsed the downtown area, peering at the lights and beautiful decorations adorning the storefronts.

I inhaled deeply, taking in all sights, sounds, and smells. Out of nowhere, I felt Aaron slip his arm around my waist. I leaned into his side and laid my head against his shoulder.

“C’mon, Stasi,” Kyle said, taking her by the hand. “I’ll take you to get the hot chocolate. Mom, do you want one?”

“Yes. Thank you, baby.”

Aaron handed Kyle his card, and I watched Stasi, Kyle, and the younger twins head toward the hot chocolate stand.

“Mom, can I go hang out with Vanessa?” Kennedy asked.

“Is she with any boys?” Aaron scowled down at her.

“Dad,” she whined with a roll of her eyes.

“Answer the question.” He folded his arms.

I squeezed his elbow. “What he means is, Vanessa and who else?”

“She’s here with her little sister, Angela. That’s it.”

“Sure, you can invite her to have hot chocolate with us if she wants.”

Kennedy kissed my cheek. “Thanks, Mom.”

As she rushed off to meet her friend, Aaron nodded at one of the discreet security guards, tasking him with the responsibility of watching after her.

“And how about you?” I asked Aaron as he placed his hands on my hips. “Did you enjoy the ballet?”

“Always,” he replied before kissing my forehead. “Look up.”

I did, and sure enough, as if he planned it, we were standing under a wooden archway that led to the ice rink, with mistletoe hanging from it.

He cupped my face and kissed me.

I moaned, but pulled back before I let myself get carried away. “Our kids might stone us if we keep this up.”

The scowl on his face made me laugh. “Those damn kids.”

I glowered at him. “You were the one who wanted so many.”

“Yeah, but no one told me they’d get in the way when I wanted to fuc—”

“We got hot chocolate,” Stasi yelled, interrupting Aaron.

“See what I mean?” His scowl deepened.

I laughed and took the cup of hot chocolate from Kyle.

“Dark chocolate for you, milk chocolate for Dad, and peppermint chocolate for the twins,” he announced.

Cupping his cheek, I smiled. “Thank you.”

We watched the ice skaters for a while, and then Kennedy, her friend Vanessa, and her little sister joined us.

“Skate with me, Daddy,” Stasi insisted, pulling Aaron’s hand. And despite his feigned annoyance with the children, he couldn’t say no to our youngest daughter. He gave me another one of his wry looks that reminded me of Thiers’ before he agreed to skate with Stasi.

“Just don’t step on my little girl’s toes,” I teased. Aaron was a better ice skater than a dancer, but only by a little.

“You’re going to pay for that later,” he growled in my ear before nipping my earlobe. He made the move so quickly that none of the children even noticed. But the chill that ran through my body didn’t go unnoticed.

“Are you cold, Mom?” Andreas asked.

I turned from the rink to him. “No, baby.”

“Okay, good. Will you skate with me?”

I held out my hand. “I sure will.”

It took some cajoling, but I got Thiers to join us in a pair of ice skates. The three of us did a couple of spins around the entire rink before Andreas started doing some dance moves that looked pretty good. That boy was a natural performer.

“Showoff,” Thiers yelled at his twin.

Andreas remained unbothered. “You’re just mad ’cause you dance like Dad.”

I covered my mouth with my hand, but it was too late. Thiers side-eyed me as I barely contained my laugh at his brother’s joke. It was true, however. Thiers inherited his father’s two left feet and his grumpy demeanor.

“I’m sorry, baby.”

Thiers pouted with his arms folded. I tickled him under the chin until he eventually came around and smiled. We all continued skating; Aaron and Stasi came up from behind to join us.

Aaron’s and my gazes connected, and my heart smiled. Everything about that moment was perfect. That was what I

missed the past two holiday seasons and was so desperate to get back to.

I clamped down on the desire to ask for more of this. I tried to remind myself that the children would have almost two weeks off from school, and Aaron planned to take that time off from work. The entire family, including his parents, brothers, and their families, were going to California the day after the Townsend annual holiday party on New Years' Eve.

That should be enough time with family and away from work to satisfy whatever this longing that I felt was.

Amid my thinking about how perfect this moment was, Aaron's cell phone rang. We both frowned.

He pulled out his phone and glared at the screen. Then he threw me an apologetic look.

"It's work." The scowl on his face intensified. "I wouldn't take the call now, but it's about this damn deal."

"Don't worry." I shook my head. "Take it. C'mere, Stasi." I took her by the hand and continued skating with her and the twins.

"What the hell do you mean there's a problem?" Aaron barked, drawing a few looks his way.

My heart sank because I knew something had gone wrong with the deal he'd been working so hard to get done before Christmas.

CHAPTER 11



*F*ive days before Christmas
Patience

“Absolutely not,” I told Aaron and Kyle, standing in the middle of Aaron’s home office. “That is not happening,” I reiterated to Kyle over his ludicrous request.

“Mom,” he said simply before looking over at his father.

“Did you put him up to this?” I asked Aaron.

The only change in Aaron’s expression was slightly lifting his eyebrows. “Of course not,” he replied. “I told him no at first.”

I snorted. “At first,” I mocked. “You should’ve told him hell no. It’s bad enough that *you’re* going,” I gritted out, uncaring of the guilt trip I laid on him. It was less than a week before Christmas, and Aaron informed me the day before that he had to fly to freaking Germany if he wanted to get this deal done before the New Year.

He stepped closer and palmed my hips. “Sweetness—”

“Don’t sweetness me,” I insisted, pushing out of his arms.

He scowled.

“Remind me why you just have to have this deal done before the New Year. Why can’t it wait? You’re going to miss Christmas.” I clamped my lips, biting the bottom one to will myself not to get too emotional.

He pulled me into his hold again, more firmly that time. “There is no fucking way on this Earth that I will miss Christmas with you and our children.”

“You say that like you’re not about to fly halfway around the world.” I scowled at him. I hate, hate, utterly *hated* that he was taking a trip right before the holiday.

“I will be in Germany for less than twenty-four hours. You know there’s no fucking way I would make this trip if I didn’t have to. The only way to get this damn thing done the right way is to get that motherfuck—” He paused and glanced at Kyle. “Man to sign the deal in person. I will look him in the face and make sure he signs that company over to Townsend. And I’ll be back before Christmas Eve.”

His eyes glittered with intensity. Aaron was passionate about Townsend Industries and the deals he made but never had I seen such a profoundly acute look regarding the business as I did right then.

This deal wasn’t like the others. It meant more than any other venture I’d seen him take on, which had been plenty over the years. I knew Aaron well enough that buying this company was more than business.

“Why is this company so special?” I demanded to know.

“Müller’s letting his company rot for some dumbass reason I haven’t figured out yet. And what he discovered is too goddamn important to let go to waste. It could save your—people’s lives,” my husband answered with such conviction that it became difficult to fathom standing in his way.

“I hate when you’re so damn passionate. It makes it too hard to say no.”

“If you tell me not to take this trip, I won’t.”

I searched his eyes as they burrowed into mine. He was serious. I knew he was. One simple utterance of a two-letter word and he’d cancel the entire trip. But that would mean this deal would go down the drain, and Aaron wanted this business.

And how could I not be entirely in love with this man? Because though I could feel how much he wanted this company, he would one hundred percent cancel the trip if I asked him to.

That was when I remembered the sacrifices he made while I was sick. The way he resigned as CEO without me ever hinting that I wanted him to do that. He was present for every appointment, right by my side, holding my hand.

I couldn't begrudge him this opportunity.

"You'll be back before Christmas Eve?" I asked.

"One hundred percent. There's no way in hell I'm missing even a minute of Christmas Eve or Day with you and our kids." The promise in his voice weakened my already depleted resolve.

I pushed out a deep breath and tugged on the collar of his shirt with both hands. "Aaron Townsend, if you miss even one minute of Christmas this year, I will fly my ass to Germany and bury my foot in your ass. Do you understand me?"

He grinned. "God, I fucking love it when you threaten me, sweetness."

Kyle groaned. "I'm still here, remember?"

"Of course you are," I said with my arms folded. "I suppose you think this means I'm letting you go, too."

He looked between his dad and me. "Please, Mom. This is a great chance to see Dad in action. It's not like I'll be missing any school. Please."

With a sigh, I faced Aaron. Pride shone in his eyes as he looked over at Kyle. I gave in on the off chance that Aaron didn't make it back home by Christmas. Because while it would hurt like hell to have both of them miss the holiday with us, I would feel terrible if Aaron were all alone on Christmas. In letting Kyle go, at least I knew that wouldn't happen.

"You'll listen to everything your father says." I pointed at Kyle.

He gave me a sideways grin and nodded. "Always."

“Both of you better be here on Christmas Eve. If it’s even one minute past midnight on the twenty-fourth, I’m going to break my foot off—” Of course, my threat was cut off by Aaron’s lips on mine. The man truly did have a thing for me threatening him. Sick bastard.

That’s part of why you love him so deeply.

Kyle cleared his throat. Aaron pulled back with a dark smirk playing on his lips. His gaze held a promise he wouldn’t say out loud to spare Kyle’s ears.

I pressed another quick kiss to his cheek before turning to our son. With his face cupped between my hands, I told him, “I love you. Learn everything you can.”

“I’ll make you proud,” he promised.

“You already have.”

His hazel eyes, a replica of his father’s, lit up even though his expression remained neutral. He learned that stoic thing from his father well.

Though I was bummed about them not being around for the next few days, I knew my husband well enough that they would be back before Christmas Eve. I’d hold onto that assurance until they returned.

CHAPTER 12



*A*aron

I paced back and forth in the enclosed office of Wynco Laboratories. The office couldn't have been more than ten to twelve feet wide by nine feet. A small, wooden desk sat in the middle of the room with papers scattered all over the top. There wasn't a window in sight, and the overhead fluorescent lighting gave me a damn headache.

"Where is he?" I demanded again from his assistant.

"Mr. Townsend, he is on his way. I assure you," she answered. "Mr. Müller is a very busy man, and this close to the holiday, I'm sure—"

"He knew I was coming, and I'd be here first thing in the morning. Where is he?" I demanded, cutting her off.

Her mouth clamped shut.

I held my temper, not only for her sake but because Kyle was in the room, seated in one of those god-awful wooden chairs in the corner. I hadn't explained to Kyle why I wanted Wynco Laboratories under the direction of Townsend Industries.

"How about you do us all a favor and get on the phone with Mr. Müller and let him know that if he doesn't—" My words came to an abrupt halt when the door swung open.

A beat later, Karl Müller shuffled in. He didn't look more put together in person than during our video conferences. But I

could give a shit about the man's looks. It was his discoveries and brain that I was interested in.

My face settled into my usual scowl. "Mr. Müller." I folded my arms across my chest. By the frown on his face, I figured there was no need for the fake pleasantries. It was abundantly clear that neither of us wanted to be in this room.

"The Aaron Townsend in the flesh," he said, borderline mockingly. "By chance, did you come all this way to hear Christmas music sung in German?"

I snorted. "Aren't you a regular comedian?"

He let out a wry laugh. "Hardly."

"We both know why I'm here." I followed him with my gaze as he went over to his desk.

A few papers on his desk fell to the floor as he took his seat. The place was a mess. Müller was the type who was more interested in being in a lab somewhere than running a business. This was why his signing on with Townsend would be mutually beneficial.

"I'll make this easy on you," I started, approaching his desk. I handed him the folder with the contract inside. "These are the same terms I had my legal department send your lawyers. Your people looked over the terms of the contract and agreed that it's a fair deal."

I glanced back at her, and she stiffly nodded. "He is correct. That was my overall assessment."

At this, Müller scoffed and ran his hand in the air. "Fair," he muttered. "What do men like you know about fairness?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Wynco will benefit greatly from this merger. All you have to do is pick up the pen and sign the damn thing." I smiled as I said the last part, but I knew it was more of a grimace than anything friendly.

He slowly looked me up and down. As I had a mind to drop the folder on his desk and push his face into the contract, he took it from my hand.

Slowly, he circled the room with his gaze. His eyes landed on Kyle and stopped. His bushy eyebrows lifted briefly before he turned back to me.

“You hire ’em young, huh, Townsend?”

“My son. He wanted to taste authentic schnitzel for his Christmas present,” I said dryly.

“Don’t forget the beer. There’s no better beer than German beer, young man.”

“We don’t drink,” I affirmed, glaring at Müller. He was the first to look away with a nod before clearing his throat.

“Sign the papers, and we’ll leave you to celebrate the holiday however you choose.” My tone was flat, bordering on bored.

He opened the folder, reading over the words of the contract that stated Townsend Industries would become the owner of Wynco Laboratories. Yet, as closely as he looked them over, I could tell he was bullshitting, essentially wasting my damn time.

“No.” He slammed the folder closed. “This deal will not happen. Men like you can’t be trusted.”

“Karl,” the woman behind me spoke up. Her voice was surprised, as if she expected him to sign.

“We’re not paying more,” I told him calmly. “We’re already paying twenty percent more than the estimated worth.”

His face went red. “It is not about the money,” he said tersely.

“It’s always about the money,” I replied. “Set your pride aside and take the damn offer.” I started to get pissed off. “Give yourself a Merry Christmas.”

He frowned as he stared at the folder. Then he punched the folder with his free hand.

“No.” He tossed it on his desk. “You don’t respect what this laboratory is all about. You only see dollar signs. You

“speak about offer amounts and stock prices, but you rarely talk about value.” His accent grew thicker with each word spoken.

I scoffed, unfazed by his little rant.

“Wynco is more than just Euros and dollar signs. You’re only interested in Wynco to gain more ground in Europe, no?” he asked.

Shaking my head, I let out a laugh devoid of humor. “Obviously, you haven’t done your research.”

His gaze moved from me to the woman behind me.

“Townsend Industries has multiple subsidiary companies throughout the EU. And we have for over two decades,” I finished. “Not to mention our businesses in Asia and South America. We hardly need Wynco to establish an international footing.”

Müller tucked in his lips, frowning. However, the wrinkle in his forehead said he remained determined to make up some excuse as to why he wouldn’t go through with this deal.

“We won’t be a part of your agenda. I know how big businesses like yours work. You buy companies and fire the staff or make it impossible for them to do their job effectively.”

“This is effective?” I motioned at his desk with my hand. “How effective is it that Wynco hasn’t launched a new product in over three years?”

“If we’re doing things so poorly, why do you want to buy us?”

“Because I can do them better,” I gritted out.

His eyes ballooned.

“Wynco currently lacks the leadership it needs to carry the business and its innovations into the next decade. Townsend has the resources and the human capital to overcome your shortfalls.”

He scoffed. “Nein!”

I knew ‘no’ when I heard it. But I also didn’t give a shit. Something—his ego, his pride ... hell, his fear—was getting in the damn way.

“I didn’t come all of this way, three days before Christmas, not to get this merger completed. Sign the papers and do better for your company and the staff you supposedly care so much about.”

He narrowed his gaze at me. “You came all of this way for nothing.”

I balled my hands into fists before planting them on his desk. “You’re making a grave mistake, Müller. Sign the damn papers.”

For a fleeting moment, a whisper of doubt crossed his face. His eyebrows dipped, and his eyes landed on the folder with my contract inside. But a beat later, the look was gone, and he shook his head. His eyes refused to meet mine.

Stubborn prick.

“I will not,” he exclaimed.

I gritted my teeth so hard that my jaw ached. The bastard had proven more steadfast than I’d given him credit for. I could respect it, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t take what the fuck I wanted.

“That’s a damn shame.” I stepped away from his desk. “Because this certainly will be the last holiday season you’ll be the owner and CEO of Wynco Laboratories. That’s not a threat, Mr. Müller. It’s a guarantee. And since you’ve pissed me off three days before Christmas and spoiled my son’s first experience of authentic schnitzel, the offer you tossed aside is no longer on the table. This will be a hostile takeover.”

I buttoned my suit blazer as I spoke.

“I’ve already positioned my finance and legal teams to begin the process of buying up your stock, thereby strangling Wynco into submission, whether you like it or not.”

His face turned as red as the tinsel on our Christmas tree. I could almost see the smoke coming out of the top of his head.

In a past life, seeing his anger would've granted me a sick type of satisfaction.

And yeah, it still did, to be honest. Because fuck what he wanted. I planned on acquiring his business because he wasn't doing shit with it. Under the direction of Townsend Industries, Wynco would have the opportunity to develop the products and innovations that could bring so much promise to the world.

So, yes, fuck Müller and his lack of foresight.

"You could've made out a hell of a lot better if you had just signed your name. Either way, the company belongs to Townsend." I turned to Kyle. "Let's go, son."

"Get out," Müller barked, thrusting his finger in my direction. As he did so, he knocked over a picture frame that sat on a stack of papers.

A loud clanking sounded against the linoleum floor. I looked at the cracked frame to see a picture of a younger Karl with his arm around a blonde woman. There was nothing special or out of the ordinary about the image. A couple smiling into the camera. But the photo I had on my desk of Patience came to mind.

"That's mine," Müller said.

My hand tightened when I blinked and realized I'd bent down and picked up the damn thing. Instead of handing Müller the framed image, I lowered it to his desk.

I gave him one final glare before circling the room with my gaze. "Be prepared to move your shit out of this office."

I turned to my son.

"Let's go, Kyle."

"What happens now?" Kyle asked as we exited the building.

"Now, I'll make good on what I told him in his office." I stopped Kyle with a hand on his shoulder.

He turned to me.

“Never make an idle threat.” I stared him in the eye. “If ... no, *when*,” I corrected, “you have to threaten someone always, always make sure you’re willing to follow through on it. Never make an idle threat or promise. It shows weakness, and your enemies will capitalize on it. And worse than that,” I paused, squeezing his shoulder for emphasis, “the people who love you will stop believing in you.”

I released my hold on him and stood up straight. Pride swelled in my chest when he kept his gaze trained on me, soaking up everything I’d just said.

“Let’s go.” I needed to get back to the hotel to make some calls to get the ball rolling before we left Germany. “We have a flight first thing in the morning to make it back home before Christmas Eve.”

CHAPTER 13



*A*aron

“I want the paperwork filed and ready to go by the second of January,” I said to my assistant over the phone even though it was close to ten o’clock at night in Williamsport.

Müller wasted my fucking time. But in actuality, it was my damn fault for not just going ahead with the hostile takeover from the beginning.

See what being nice gets you?

I grunted and shook my head at my foolishness. Trying to be in the Christmas spirit and all that bullshit got me halfway around the world from my wife and kids three days before Christmas. Fuck that.

“Have it on my desk for the second.” I accepted that the takeover wouldn’t get handled before the New Year. This would have to suffice.

“I can have it on your desk by tomorrow,” he countered.

I opened my mouth to tell him yes, do that. However, I hesitated. This job had already taken enough time away from my family.

“No. It’ll wait until after the New Year,” I replied. “I’ll leave you to spend your holidays as you see fit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Townsend. Have a Merry Christmas.”

I grunted out a reply before hanging up.

“You’re going about this all wrong,” that familiar ghostly voice said behind me.

My skin prickled, and the hairs on my arms stood on end. Same response that always overcame me when she was near.

Though I was loathe to turn around and face Emma, I wasn’t a coward. I glowered at the woman across the room, who looked all too real, but I knew no one else could see her.

“Say whatever you have to say.” I moved over to the files on my desk and began thumbing through them. I paid her no attention, hoping she would up and leave as quickly as she appeared. Even though, after all of these years, I knew that never worked.

“Haven’t I taught you to look deeper, Aaron?” she asked, her voice sounding more delighted than it should.

“I’m *deeply* looking into doing this hostile takeover,” I snarked, still looking through the files. “Müller is doing jack shit with his laboratory, and that needs to end.”

Because what he discovered had the potential to save too many lives. One could be my wife—who was the life I cared about the most.

“What if there’s more than meets the eye?”

I growled, annoyed at this conversation. “Why don’t you just tell me what the hell you want me to know, so we don’t have to further this conversation?” I snarled, even though I knew it wouldn’t work out that way.

Anytime Emma showed up, she came with riddles and obscure messages, never direct.

“You already know,” she commented, her voice remaining pleasant despite the ire in my tone. “Recall back to today’s meeting, the expression on Müller’s face. Did that appear to be a man who was simply being lazy?”

A muscle in my jaw ticked. At the same time, a lump formed in my throat. The image of Müller from earlier in that office came to mind. While I’d looked him in the eyes during that meeting, there was such a dearth of life that peered back at

me. And there was that photo of him and the woman. The gleam in his eyes in that picture was the opposite of what it'd been that afternoon.

I hadn't wanted to acknowledge that earlier. It reminded me of ...

"What are you thinking, Aaron?" Emma requested.

I felt her presence grow closer behind me as I remained with my back to her. It was right there in front of me, and my impatience caused me to overlook it.

"That look in his eyes ..." I paused, gathering my thoughts. Finally, I turned to Emma.

"What was it?"

I clamped my jaw so tight that it cracked. "It reminded me of me," I admitted. "When Patience was sick."

Emma tilted her head to the side, her brunette hair falling in waves around her shoulder. She didn't speak, waiting for me to continue.

"He had the same look in his eyes. Haunted and ... full of fear." Swallowing, I turned away from Emma. My hands tightened and flexed as reality hit me.

Müller was more than just a stubborn bastard who didn't want to sell to a larger multi-billion-dollar corporation. He lost something or someone to this dreadful fucking disease.

As soon as that thought penetrated my mind, I spun around to face Emma again.

She was gone.

Without thinking, I went to the phone that rested on the nightstand by my bed. I dialed one number to reach the room down the hall.

"Aaron," Brutus answered after the first ring.

"I need to find more information on Karl Müller. Not about his company, but his personal life," I told him.

“Anything specific we’re looking for?” he asked while I heard keyboard keys clicking in the background. He was already on it.

“Yes,” I answered, and then told him what I suspected.

I needed to be specific because if what I believed was true, this would change everything.

* * *

Kyle

“Son, wake up.”

My dad’s deep voice snatched me out of the comfortable sleep I’d been in.

“Wh-What’s going on?” I asked through half-closed lids. Vision still blurry from sleep, my father looked like a giant, looming shadow standing over my bed. But I always recognized his voice.

“You need to get dressed. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

Blinking wildly, I peered over at the clock on the hotel’s nightstand. It read just before five-thirty in the morning.

“I thought our plane didn’t leave until nine,” I murmured, rubbing my eyes.

“It doesn’t.”

“Then why—”

“We have somewhere we need to be. Get up,” he commanded with very little remorse that he’d just interrupted my very contented sleep.

But there was no give in his voice, and I knew that meant he wasn’t bending, nor would he tell me where we were going until he was good and ready.

“Yes, sir,” I mumbled as I peeled myself from underneath the blanket and sheets.

I yawned and stretched my long arms overhead before standing.

“I need to shower,” I said while starting for the bathroom.

“No,” my father’s response cut through the air, freezing me in place. “There’s no time.” He nodded toward the chair in front of the room’s desk. “Put those on, and let’s go.” After that, he strode out of the room.

Staring at his back, I realized he was fully dressed in one of his tailor-made suits. I wondered how long he had been up, but then I went and did as he instructed.

Eleven minutes later, my father, Uncle Brutus, and I strolled off the elevator into the underground garage, directly to an awaiting vehicle.

“Are you hungry?” my dad asked me.

My stomach lurched at the thought of food this early in the morning. “No, sir.”

He nodded.

“Where’re we going?” I finally asked once we headed out of the hotel’s gate, with Uncle Brutus behind the wheel.

“To Müller’s,” he replied. He lifted a large envelope from his side that I hadn’t noticed before.

“This early?” I questioned. I didn’t think Müller’s office would be open this early. And besides, after yesterday, I thought he’d made it clear of his refusal to sell to Townsend Industries. Which meant my dad was going the route of a hostile takeover.

He turned my way, looking me directly in the eye. “We’re not going to his office.”

I furrowed my brows. “Then where?”

“He has a home in the countryside where he spends most of his time. It’s about ninety minutes away.”

It was too freaking early, and my dad wasn’t making much sense. I hated when he spoke like this—giving as few details as possible.

“Why?” I asked, my frustration brushing away the remaining cobwebs of sleep.

“Because I was wrong,” he admitted.

I sat up straighter and gawked at him.

“About Müller. And I need to make it right.”

I was stunned into silence. He didn’t elaborate on his comments. I knew he wouldn’t. He preferred showing rather than telling.

As we drove through some unknown to me part of Germany, I wondered what all of this was about. What had my father been wrong about? How would it impact this deal? Would whatever it was change Müller’s mind?

My father thumbed through the papers in the envelope he carried as we drove.

“We’re here,” he said sometime later.

I realized then that I’d gotten lost in my thoughts.

As I gazed out of the window, I bulged my eyes and peered at the structure at the head of the small driveway. It was a thatched roof home with brick siding. It reminded me of one of those cottage core houses that Kennedy liked to pin on her social media accounts. The house wasn’t huge compared to our home back in Williamsport.

What was most noticeable about the home was how unkempt it was. There was a build-up of greenish mold along the sides, and a layer of dinginess across what should’ve been a white wooden balcony that surrounded a second-floor glass door.

I guessed that the massive rolling hill yard that fenced the home had also seen better days. Pots and shrubbery lining the driveway were either brown and wilted or covered in snow. The death of the plants probably had less to do with winter weather and everything to do with neglect.

“He lives here?” I turned to my father.

He didn't answer, instead jutting his head, summoning me to follow him out of the car.

I walked behind him down the cracked brick walkway toward the door. Even before we reached the entrance, it opened.

"I cannot believe you!" Karl Müller bellowed.

I started to shrink back at the anger in his voice, but then I remembered my last name, whose son I was. Instead, I stood straighter, meeting Müller's glare. My father never flinched or backed down.

"We need to talk," my dad said. "Invite us in."

If Müller had any weapon in his hold, I knew he would've used it on my father. As it were, he said something in German. From the harsh tone, I guessed that it was a curse.

"Get off of my property!" he demanded.

"That's not going to happen," my dad replied, but the hard edge usually in his tone wasn't there. However, determination was.

Müller's eyebrows dipped, and I suspected he also recognized the difference in my father's voice.

"We need to talk, and it's damn cold out here."

I held my breath, waiting to see how Müller would respond. After a while, he took a begrudging step back, allowing all three of us—my father, me, and Brutus—to enter.

"We go no farther than this," he insisted.

We stood just inside of the door.

Behind Müller, I could see a small, wooden table in what looked like a dining area and stairs that led up to the second floor. The inside of the home mirrored the unkempt appearance of the outside. And there was an old smell inside—not dirty, just like the house hadn't been aired out in years.

"What is this about?"

“New deal,” my father said without hesitation. He held up his hand when Müller opened his mouth. “You’ll retain forty-nine percent controlling share in Wynco Laboratories and fifty-one percent control over any new product releases within the next ten years. Additionally, you have the freedom to hire, retain, or fire any employees or staff in your lab.”

Müller’s mouth closed, and his eyelids dropped, shuttering his gaze. Though I couldn’t read his thoughts, I could tell he was second-guessing his initial reply. This was something.

The man who’d been adamant through months of negotiations with Townsend Industries faltered in his stubbornness.

But I found even more interesting the deal that my father presented. Under the agreement, Townsend would have a majority stake in Wynco Laboratories, but Müller would still have a hell of a say in any changes or additions at the company. He could easily hold up production or halt sales and distribution under these terms.

Why would my father allow that?

“And we’ll throw in an additional bonus for you and all of your top executives,” my father added.

My eyes ballooned.

He wasn’t a man who relented. Not when he wanted something.

But for his part, Müller wasn’t coming across as someone who caved in easily, either.

“Why?” Müller asked, with a wrinkle between his brows.

My father hesitated for a beat before he answered. “We have something in common.” He glanced around the space we stood in before his eyes landed on Müller again.

“We are nothing alike,” Müller spat out.

My dad smiled, but it wasn’t friendly. It caused a chill to run down my spine.

“No, we’re not,” he admitted. “I didn’t lose the one person who is my entire world.”

Müller inhaled sharply. He sputtered but, in the end, chose to close his mouth.

“Wynco,” my father started, “is named after Winifred, correct?”

Right in front of me, it looked like someone had stuck a pin into Müller’s anger and bravado. His shoulders deflated and his head dipped, his eyes meeting the creaky wooden floor instead of my dad’s eyes.

“Your wife,” he continued. “She helped you start Wynco Laboratories.”

Müller’s head lifted. His eyes sparkled from the moisture in them. “I had to name it after her. She believed in me when no one else did.”

My father nodded. “My wife,” he said.

My heart hammered at the softness in his voice when he started talking about my mom.

“She is my everything.”

Müller’s lips spread into what was supposed to be a smile, but nothing was endearing or happy about it.

“That’s the first thing you’ve said to me that I believe.” Müller glanced over at me. Again, that smile appeared.

He glanced around his home as if taking it in for the first time in a long time.

“She loved this cottage.” He peered up the stairs longingly. “She insisted her last days be here. Winnie wanted to die in our bed, with the door open, the spring breeze blowing on her. And so she did.” He turned back to look at my father. “I did that for her.”

My dad nodded. “Cancer is a bitch,” he said gruffly.

Müller snorted. “Lung cancer,” he murmured.

My chest ached as my eyes volleyed between these two men, whom I was seeing for what felt like the first time.

“I wanted to save her ... I tried to save her,” he continued. “Your wife?” he asked my dad.

“Is in remission,” he answered.

I rubbed my hands up and down the sides of my pants at the same time I blinked away tears. I pushed the memories of my mother’s sickness to the back of my mind and focused on what my dad had just said. She was in remission.

My mother was healthy.

But Müller, his wife, hadn’t been as lucky.

“And I plan for it to remain that way,” my dad continued. “The treatment you’ve founded has the potential to obliterate cancer cells.”

Müller shook his head. “It hasn’t been tested in years. There is much more to be learned and—”

“You’ll have the freedom to do all of that. You will have all of the money, time, and human capital at your resources at Townsend Industries. We won’t stop until a cure is found. That’s what you wanted for your wife, isn’t it?”

A silence hung in the air. Müller didn’t answer, but at that point, he didn’t need to. Everyone in the room knew his truth. He’d tried to save his wife through the efforts at his laboratory.

“Rogers and Co. ...” He trailed off. “They tried to gut my entire facility. They didn’t care about what I was attempting to do. They just wanted to get their hands on the other treatments we’d developed over the years. They weren’t interested in the time and resources it would take to develop this new treatment fully. They are the cause of years wasted,” he said bitterly.

My dad stepped closer, towering over the man, but not in a threatening way. “I can’t bring your wife back. But I can give you this. You can make this happen under the direction of Townsend Industries.”

“Under your direction, you mean,” Müller replied, mistrust again making its way into his voice.

My father shook his head, surprising me. “No,” he replied. “I won’t be at the helm.”

“What?” I blurted out, but snapped my mouth shut when he narrowed his eyes at me over his shoulder.

“I’m stepping down as CEO from Townsend. I’ve already spoken to the person taking over my role, and they’ve agreed to the terms of this deal. They have just as much motivation as I do in ensuring this is seen through to the end.”

“I want that in writing,” Müller replied.

Dad handed him the large envelope he’d been holding onto. “Part three section B.” He tapped the envelope with his finger.

Müller took it and pulled out the papers. Everyone remained silent as he looked through the documents of what I surmised was the revised deal.

Eventually, he peered back up at my father. He stared into his eyes for a long moment. Neither spoke, but there was a silent communication going on.

Two men on opposite sides of the same shitty cancer coin.

One a widower.

The other was the husband of a survivor but determined to do everything in his power to save the love of his life.

I had to turn away as the enormity and depth of my father’s love for my mother washed over me. I knew at that moment that I would never have that.

I could never allow myself to love someone that deeply because that kind of commitment required trust. And too many people had already proven to me that trust wasn’t something I could dole out freely. Not anyone I wasn’t already related to.

“Do you have a pen?” Müller suddenly asked.

I held my breath as Uncle Brutus provided a pen for him to sign on the dotted line.

Müller paused. “My lab and this house ...” his eyes circled the room, “are the only things I have of my Winnie.”

“Noted,” my father said.

That satisfied something for Müller because he nodded and signed the contract.

“Merry Christmas,” he said to my father, Brutus, and me, in his accented English as we left.

Confusion warred with relief as I walked behind my father to the car. The deal was done. Townsend now owned Wynco Laboratories and its treatment that could save millions of lives one day shortly.

But my father admitted to stepping down as CEO. “What was that about?”

“That,” my father started as we pulled off, “was about fulfilling an obligation.”

I blinked and shook my head. I hadn’t realized that I’d asked the question out loud.

“You’re quitting,” I blurted out. “As CEO.”

“For now,” he answered casually. “The time may come when I return, but for now, I’m focusing on what’s important.”

I didn’t need to ask what that was. The message was received as he looked into my eyes.

Mom. His family. We were what was important.

“I brought you with me this morning because you’re going to be CEO of Townsend Industries one day.” He said it like it was already in the bag.

But it wasn’t nepotism on his part.

My father would ensure I’d earn my seat at the reins of our family’s enterprise. And there was no way that I would let him down.

“When you are,” he continued, “you’re going to have to know when to play hard and when to read between the lines.

When to dig a little deeper to see more than what meets the eye.” His larger hand clasped my shoulder and squeezed. “Understand?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

But that was a lie. I didn’t fully get it.

Mom was okay, and our family was back to normal, like how things were before she got sick. Why would he choose now to resign from the company—our family’s company?

I rarely questioned my father. He was the most intelligent man I knew, but I didn’t get it.

I hated when adults said stupid things like ‘you’ll understand when you’re older.’ It was condescending as fuck. As if I was too young to know my own feelings.

But hell, maybe this was one of those rare cases of understanding when I got older.

I knew that if it took the kind of love my mom and dad had to comprehend fully, then I’d never get it. Because that type of love just wasn’t in the cards for me.

CHAPTER 14



*P*atience

“Thiers and Andreas, stop running!” I called behind the twins as they raced down the hallway to our home’s family room. They were anxious to start our family’s pre-Christmas Eve tradition of watching holiday movies on the big screen with huge bowls of various types of popcorn.

Though there were a few hours before Christmas Eve, I decided to do a Christmas movie night with the four kids that were home.

“I got it,” Kennedy said, coming up behind me and taking the bowl filled with cheddar popcorn.

“Thanks.” I sighed in relief as I gripped a firmer hold on the other serving bowl, that one filled with chocolate-drizzled popcorn—my favorite.

“Come on, Mama,” Andreas urged as soon as I stepped inside of the family theater room. “What’s taking so long?” he whined.

I glared at him. “You have the patience of your father.”

His face scrunched up as if trying to figure out what that meant.

“Mommy, can we watch that old movie first?” Stasi begged.

“Which one?”

“The one with the little boy.”

I nodded. “*Home Alone. One or Two?*”

“First the house, and then the one with him in New York,” Andreas answered for his sister.

Kennedy handed Thiers the bowl of popcorn. He sat in one of the leather theater chairs.

“Yeah, yeah,” Stasi agreed. “Then we can watch Grinch.”

I laughed at her excitement, knowing Stasi would be the first one to fall asleep. “Let’s do it,” I agreed with only the slightest pang of sadness. Though we were in good spirits, I couldn’t help but miss my two oldest guys. The last I heard from Aaron was a few hours earlier. Their flight from Germany to New York landed on time, but their second flight had gotten delayed.

I reminded him about his promise not to miss even one minute of Christmas Eve with us. He had a few hours left, but it was getting down to the wire.

“Maybe Dad and Kyle will be here by the time we’re finished with the first movie,” Andreas said as if reading my thoughts.

Stasi inhaled sharply, sitting on her knees in the theater chair next to me. “What if they don’t come in tonight or tomorrow??” Her eyes widened. “They’ll miss Christmas!”

I shook my head. “That won’t happen,” I assured her.

“Dad won’t miss Christmas,” Kennedy said from my other side, looking over at her sister.

“How do you know?” Stasi’s face screwed up into a look of cynicism. “He said they would be back by Christmas Eve, and it’s almost Christmas Eve.”

“It isn’t yet,” I reminded her. “The day’s not over. And your father promised.” I cupped her little face in between my hands. “In all the years I’ve known your father, he has never broken a promise to me yet.” I kissed her forehead.

She pulled back and folded her arms, her facial expression remaining skeptical. “How long have you known him?”

I couldn't help the laughter that burst through my lips. "Longer than you've been alive, little girl." I tugged on her arm for her to sit facing the screen. "Watch the movie."

Minutes after the movie started, Kennedy reached over and grabbed a handful of popcorn. She moved closer to lay her head on my shoulder. On instinct, I leaned in and kissed the top of her head. Memories of her when she was younger, curled in my lap, watching movies assaulted me.

I could hardly concentrate on the antics of Kevin McCallister because another round of sadness panged in my chest. The remainder of just how little time I had left with all of my kids under one roof before the oldest two were off to college danced through my mind. I barely managed to stuff down the bitterness of not being able to celebrate the past two holidays the way I wanted.

And now Aaron and Kyle aren't here.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and handed the popcorn to Kennedy while wrapping my arm around her. It was far and few in between that she let me snuggle with her like that anymore.

Teenagers.

Somehow, I managed to push the melancholy aside and focus on all I was grateful for. I had my health, four of my five children were under my roof, happy, healthy, and giggling at Kevin McCallister outsmarting two criminals on screen.

And two of the men that I loved more than life were on their way home to us. I had the utmost confidence in my husband that he wouldn't break his promise.

"That was funny," Stasi said once the movie ended.

"I have to pee." Thiers jumped up and ran out of the room before the lights turned on. Andreas soon followed

"Aww, Thiers ate all the cheddar." Stasi pouted.

"There's more in the kitchen."

Her eyes widened, and before I knew it, she was out of the door, too. Kennedy and I both chuckled at her.

“She’s going to be a chef when she gets older.” Kennedy remained in her position under my arm. Neither one of us moved.

“You think so?”

She looked up at me. “Don’t you?”

I laughed. “Probably, but you know she changes her mind a lot, too.” Stasi had been in everything from gymnastics to ballet to swim lessons, riding lessons, tap dancing, and cooking classes.

“She’s stuck with cooking the longest.”

I nodded, agreeing. “What about you?” I shook her shoulder a little. “What are your future plans?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. So many say I need to study English because I’m a good writer and am always reading, but I don’t know.”

“You love the debate team, too. Do you think you’ll want to be a lawyer?”

Frowning, she glanced up. “Maybe. I just like learning new things, you know? That’s why I like reading so much.”

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant.

She pushed out a breath. “You won’t make me become a librarian just because that’s what you do?”

Even after I stopped working at the library a few years back, Kennedy still considered me a librarian.

“No,” I replied. “Your job is to find out whatever your heart wants you to do and do that.”

She nodded before sitting up and pressing a kiss to my cheek. “I’m happy you’re my mom.”

My entire heart melted. I had to blink away the tears before I could respond.

“I’m ecstatic that you’re my daughter.”

She smiled. Not one of those fake teenage smiles filled with sarcasm or cynicism, but a genuine, teeth-revealing smile.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” I ask, confused.

She looked down and away before her gaze met mine again. “For not dying,” she whispered.

I wasn’t the only one with tears in their eyes.

The ability to form words left me entirely. Instead, I pulled her into a tight hug. We remained like that for I didn’t know how long. It wasn’t until Stasi yelled from the kitchen that she needed help that we pulled apart.

“Coming,” I called while wiping my eyes.

I squeezed Kennedy’s chin before standing and following her out of the room. The boys had made their way up the hall, too.

“Mommy, I can’t find the extra bowls,” Stasi said as I entered the kitchen. “And we need to prepare all the ingredients to bake the cookies tomorrow for Santa.”

“We can do that in the morning. I promise, we have all of the ingredients,” I explained when she turned those wide, puppy dog eyes on me.

“Mama, the next movie,” Andreas whined.

“I’ll start it for them,” Kennedy volunteered.

They went off while I helped Stasi put more of the chocolate-covered popcorn in another bowl. While doing so, my watch buzzed. I brought up the security camera images, and my lips spread into an instant smile.

Kyle entered the front door a minute later, followed by his father.

“Daddy!” Stasi was the first one in his arms. “Mommy said you would be home before Christmas Eve, but I didn’t know if I should believe her.”

“Excuse you?” I poked Stasi in her side, making her giggle.

Aaron chuckled and held Stasi high in the air. “Always believe in whatever your mother says,” he told her before kissing her forehead and putting her back down.

“Hey, Ma—” Kyle’s greeting was cut off when Aaron held up his arm, stopping him.

“Me first,” Aaron declared, his voice going deeper than usual. He pulled me into his arms. “Hi, sweetness.”

Those two words whispered in my ear pushed out my sadness at the thought that they wouldn’t be home for Christmas Eve.

“Hi, baby,” I replied.

The kiss he pressed against my lips was filled with deep, abiding emotion.

“Merry Christmas,” he crooned.

“Merry Christmas,” Kyle said impatiently, on a half groan.

Laughing, I pulled free from my husband’s hold and hugged my oldest son. “I missed you.”

He dropped his head, attempting to hide his smirk. “Me too.”

“We’re starting the next movie!” Stasi declared. “Daddy, you already missed the first *Home Alone*,” she tutted, pulling Aaron by the sleeve of his suit jacket. “And we were making more popcorn.”

Aaron grunted but followed her without any hesitation or argument. I had to laugh at how he let our seven year old boss him around. As he slipped past me, he squeezed my hand and peered over his shoulder, that telltale look in his eyes. My body shivered, but that was all the reaction I was able to have when one of the younger twins took my free hand.

“Did you guys make any of the parmesan ranch popcorn?” Kyle asked.

“I’ll grab it from the kitchen,” I called to him. It was his favorite flavor, and even though he wasn’t home when we

made the popcorn, I'd hoped they would be in before the night was over.

"Hey," I called to Aaron as we entered the entertainment room. "How did it go? Did he sign?"

He nodded and snorted. "Müller and I came to an understanding," he said, sounding almost cryptic. He glanced over at Kyle who nodded at him as he entered the entertainment room behind his brothers.

"He signed." Aaron's voice thickened with emotion.

"Everything okay?" I asked, lowering my voice for only him to hear.

"It is now." He leaned over and kissed me. He pulled me down onto his lap in one of the plush leather seats. "You'll watch the movie from here."

"Get a room," Kyle grumbled behind us.

I tossed a handful of popcorn his way, laughing. As we settled in to watch another Christmas film I'd seen at least a few dozen times, I couldn't help but wish for more moments like that. With all of us together, carefree and content.

CHAPTER 15



*P*atience

Christmas

Two days after Aaron and Kyle returned, I awakened, smiling. It was Christmas morning, and I could feel Aaron's presence around me. His scent was everywhere in the bed. I inhaled deeply before prying my eyes open.

It was early.

On Christmas, we were usually yanked out of our sleep by the children pounding on our door, demanding we get up. I moved to sit up but couldn't. I tugged my arm to find it locked to the damn headboard. Gasping, I lifted my gaze and realized a handcuff was around my right wrist. When I tried to pull my other arm across to remove it, I discovered that arm, too, was shackled to our headboard.

"What the hell?"

Movement directly above me caught my attention. Finally, looking up, I glared at Aaron as he hovered over me in all his naked glory. His arms were folded across his broad chest as he scowled down at me.

"No. You. Didn't," I gritted out between clenched teeth. "Aaron Townsend, untie me right now," I hissed, keeping my voice low.

"It's been too long since you've woken up like this." His voice was so damn calm but unbending, as if he had no intention of letting me go anytime soon.

“Not long enough.” I kicked at him, my foot barely missing him.

His lips twitched into one of those evil ass smiles as he stepped closer to my side of the bed.

“You’re only going to make yourself tired. You know how this goes, sweetness.”

“I’m going to murder you.” I tried to lunge for him, but the binds around my wrist stopped me. His frown deepened.

“Be careful before you hurt yourself.”

“I wouldn’t hurt myself if my damn wrists weren’t tied,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “This is your fault.”

“What? You sound crazy. Untie me right now before the children wake up.”

A slight shake of his head. “They won’t bother us.”

My eyes bulged. “You better not have sent them over to one of your brothers on Christmas morning.”

He lifted his chin. “Not this time.”

I pushed out a sigh of relief.

“But Kyle knows to keep the younger ones from bothering us.” He glanced over at the clock on my nightstand. “At least until seven.”

I lifted my head to see that the time on the clock read a little after five-thirty.

“I can’t believe you,” I whisper-yelled but plopped my head back against the silk pillowcase.

“Believe it, sweetie.” He lifted his knee to the side of the bed. “As I said, this is your fault.”

I wanted to ignore him yet couldn’t help but demand, “How the hell is you tying me up in my sleep my fault?”

His lips bent upward. Another devious smirk. Yet, my pussy clenched at the sight of it.

“You’ve been holding back.”

I shook my head, but before verbalizing my denial, he asked, “What do you want for Christmas?”

“What the hell?” I blurted. “You tied me up to ask—”

“What do you want for Christmas?” he demanded again, an underlying growl in his voice, while also climbing on top of me, straddling my legs with his thighs.

I saw him lift something from behind his back in my peripheral vision. A pair of scissors. He leaned in slowly but quickly cut the spaghetti strap of the silk nightie I got up to put on in the middle of the night.

“I’m sick of you destroying my clothes.”

He didn’t even pause before cutting the second strap. “What do you want for Christmas?” He pointed the scissors and started cutting down the length of my nightgown.

“Dammit! You’re a pain in my ass.”

“Not yet. But I’m about to be,” he growled.

Ugh. Again, my pussy spasmed at the promise in his words and the bass in his voice.

“I told you what I want. For all of us to be together, which we are.” I paused to glare at him. “For now, since I plan on knocking you out cold once these damn cuffs are removed.” I tugged at the binds once again.

They didn’t budge.

Aaron snorted and then let out an ominous chuckle.

“You want more.”

I shook my head. “I want you to untie me.”

“No,” he said fervently. Then his gaze met mine. Those hazel eyes looked hard as nails, but they had a softness. “Do you know why I went all the way to fucking Germany just days before Christmas?”

“To finish the deal with Müller, but what does this have to do with—”

“You don’t think if it was as simple as getting a deal done, it couldn’t have waited?” He stared me deep into my eyes. “There’s nothing, not a goddamn thing that would’ve kept me from you and our children so close to the holiday.”

I blinked and shook my head. “But you went.”

“For you,” he replied.

“That doesn’t make sense.”

The muscles around his jaw tightened, and his eyes darkened slightly. It was the look he got whenever he was about to reveal something close to his heart.

“Wynco Laboratories wasn’t just a replacement for the failed Walsh merger. I’ve been looking at Wynco for almost a year. Ever since I came across an article that discussed Müller’s experiments and testing new treatments that had the possibility of eradicating cancer cells.”

I inhaled a deep breath.

Aaron continued, “In his last study, all ten patients he’d tested on went into remission. I had my research team look into where they are now. Nine out of ten are still alive and healthy. One died in a car accident two years after the test, but they also remained cancer free up until the time of their death.”

“Wh-What are you saying?” I had to ask.

He leaned down, his hand trailing down one side of my face. “I bought Wynco Lab for Townsend to further the treatment and testing he started.” His hand moved down my throat, lower to my chest, and then he cupped my breast, running a finger along the scar from the corrective surgery. He leaned in and kissed the tip of my imperfect mound.

Heat spread throughout my entire body.

“Because his treatment has unbound potential.” He lifted so that his eyes met mine again. “But most importantly, I did it so that in the event the unthinkable happened ...” His eyes flickered down to my breast. “I could do more than sit on the

fucking sidelines while you suffered.” His voice was so thick and heavy.

I started to reach up to cup his face, but the damn handcuffs prevented it. “You did more than sit on the sidelines. You were my rock,” I reassured.

He gave a slight nod. “And I always will be, which was why I had to buy that lab for Townsend. Father will ensure Müller gets all the money he needs to further his research and see the treatment through to completion.”

“Why?” I asked.

For the first time, his scowl dropped. He appeared so vulnerable, his handsome face filled with tenderness as he said, “It was never about business or deal-making. It was always about you. Because, for me, all roads lead me back to you.”

My vision blurred with unshed tears.

“Now,” he said, his voice hardening again. “Tell me what the fuck you want for Christmas.”

“I already told you.”

“Your internet browsing history says otherwise.”

My eyes ballooned. “You have not been snooping into my damn internet history.”

“I have.” There wasn’t an ounce of shame in his answer. “As well as your reading history and videos you watched on YouTube. Many travel videos on there.” His eyes narrowed.

“You’re a stalker. How do you even stalk someone who lives with you.” I glared at him.

He snorted. “If my wife would just be honest about what the hell she wanted for Christmas, I wouldn’t have to do all of that.”

I sucked my teeth. “I’m surprised you didn’t try to break into Dr. Tarver’s office somehow and read over our session notes.”

He paused and stared.

“You. Did. Not,” I snarled.

That damn half-smirk came out. “No.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“But it did cross my mind.”

“Of course it did, you psycho,” I mumbled.

He chuckled as if I told a joke. Then he lowered and wrapped his hand around my throat. “Look at me,” he ordered, squeezing my throat just enough to hold my attention. He didn’t loosen his grip. “What do you want?”

“A trip.”

He shook his head. “More,” he urged. The hand he had on my throat tightened.

Sticky wetness started to coat my thighs. To make matters worse, Aaron moved his free hand between my legs, pushing them apart.

I gasped when his fingers made contact with my clit. “Tell me.” His voice was deep, gravelly, as if hanging on to his control by a thread, even though his face was set in stone.

“You’re a son of a bitch.” It was supposed to come out harsh, but I couldn’t disguise the moan in my voice.

His hand on my neck squeezed slightly while his fingers picked up speed, making circles around my distended button.

“Fuck, don’t stop,” I groaned.

“Answer me, sweetness. Or it’s going to get a lot worse before I make it better.” With that thinly veiled threat, he decreased the pressure on my clit and my throat, sending my orgasm out of my reach.

“I want ...” I panted, trying to remember what the hell he was even asking.

Oh yeah, what did I want for Christmas?

“I want all of us to go on a trip ...” He sped up again with his fingers, allowing the pressure in my core to rebuild itself.

“Keep talking.”

“Around the world. All of us.”

“More,” he insisted while adjusting himself so that his knee was between my legs, and he used it to spread me open for him.

“For a year ... at least,” I said right before I arched my back. “Please,” I whimpered, shameless by that point.

He leaned in and kissed me. “Very well.”

He crooked one of my legs over his shoulder and impaled me. It felt like a sweet victory after his tortuous denial.

“Was that so fucking hard to ask?” he demanded while also pounding into me.

“Shut up,” I barked at him. “Don’t stop,” I panted in a whisper, remembering we were not alone in the house. Soon, my orgasm built to its breaking point. A wall of pleasure washed over me, forcing me to surrender to it.

Everything in my body tingled with a euphoria I was familiar with but never not in awe of nonetheless.

When the orgasm finally set me free, I dropped my head back to my pillows and moaned, a satisfied smile playing on my lips.

Aaron pulled out of me, which made me look up at him. I knew he hadn’t finished. He moved up the length of my body, his legs straddling my shoulders.

“Since you took so long to open your mouth and tell me what you really wanted, I have something for you to fill it with. Open,” he commanded, his cock at my lips.

He pushed inside of my mouth as soon as I parted my lips. I moaned around his dick, licking my juices from him.

“Just like that,” he growled, pistoning his hips forward. When he hit the back of my throat, he lost the little self-control he was holding onto.

He fucked my face while digging his hand into my hair, holding me in place. I inhaled through my nose and opened my throat like I was used to, making room for his massive rod.

I went to wrap my hands around his waist, but then I remembered they were still tied to the headboard.

Bastard.

He did it on purpose.

Aaron didn't show mercy as he made my mouth, throat, and the rest of my body his.

I felt the moment he was about to come. His hip thrusts faltered, and his entire body tightened. He withdrew from my mouth and used his free hand to give himself a couple of strokes before he placed his cock against my lips.

I opened, ready to receive his cum like it was the fountain of life.

“Swallow every last drop,” he ordered as if he needed to.

We had a rhythm to how this worked.

Not until I swallowed every ounce of his cum did he finally untie my wrists. My arms fell to the bed, but Aaron's hands were there to massage my wrists.

He inspected them to make sure there weren't any marks. There never were. He was careful to use the correct type of binds not to leave bruises.

He leaned over me, staring down at me for a brief moment. “It's done.”

After catching my breath, I asked, “What?”

He gestured to his side of the bed—the nightstand. A letter with Townsend Industries letterhead was laid on top.

“That is my resignation as CEO. If you want a trip around the world with us and all of the kids? Then it's done.”

“Bullshit.” I sat up and pushed him onto his back. It was my turn to straddle him.

He laid flat and folded his arms behind his head, sitting like a king on his throne.

I snatched the paper from his nightstand and read it over. Sure enough, it was his resignation. Effective immediately.

“Aaron, you can’t ...” I dropped the paper to look at him.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want. Father has already agreed to step back in as CEO of Townsend.”

“Deborah is going to be pissed,” I blurted.

“She’s already given him the green light to return to work.”

I blinked. “She knew?”

He smirked, this one less devious, and nodded.

“You want to make memories with all of us before Kennedy and Kyle go away to college, right?”

I slowly nodded. “But your job.”

“Will be there when we get back. *If* I want it.” He placed the letter back on the nightstand. Looking me in the eyes, he lifted my hands to his lips and kissed each of my fingers before placing my palm over the tattoo on his chest of my name. Right over his heart.

“Marrying you was the best thing I ever did in my life,” he said.

I blinked away the tears in my eyes. “You *forced* me to marry you if I remember correctly.”

He gave an unapologetic shrug. “Making you mine in any way I could was the best business deal I ever made.”

I leaned down and kissed his tattoo before pulling my arms free to slide down his body. I lifted my hips to hover above his semi-hard cock. Taking his shaft in my hand, I gave it a few strokes and purred, “It hasn’t been so bad for me either.”

I turned around and presented him with my backside before sliding down, seating him fully inside of me.

He grabbed ahold of each of my cheeks in his hand. I gasped when he inserted a thumb into my puckered hole. I went rigid as he rimmed me with his thumb.

“I’m fucking you in all three holes once we get back from Christmas at my parents. You scream too loud every time I

take you back here.” He pressed farther inside of me with his thumb as if he needed to explain.

The children were spending the night at Townsend Manor with their grandparents. Another one of our family’s traditions. All of the Townsend grandchildren spent Christmas night with their grandparents and cousins.

“Ride me.” He slapped one of my cheeks with his free hand for emphasis. “Do it exactly how I taught you to,” he commanded.

I did precisely that, bringing us both to another satisfying climax.

Aaron sat up and pressed a kiss to the back of my shoulder. “I love you.”

“Best Christmas ever,” I murmured.

CHAPTER 16



*P*atience

“I knew you would get the Christmas gift you deserve,” Michelle said as we stood in the living room area at Townsend Manor.

The entire family finished eating Christmas dinner about an hour earlier. Aaron had announced his resignation over dinner, although it seemed his brothers and parents already knew.

“Where do you think you’ll take them first?” Michelle asked.

“Oh, I’ve seen pictures of Namibia. You guys *have* to go there. It’s on me and Ty’s tenth-anniversary short-list,” Destiny, Tyler’s wife, interjected.

“Namibia is beautiful,” Deborah, our mother-in-law, agreed.

I sighed. “That’s one of the places I want to visit. But there are so many, I don’t know how to plan everything. Aaron just sprung it on me this morning, and—”

“And if you would’ve told me what you wanted sooner, we would’ve had longer to plan,” my husband said as he came up behind me.

I turned to glare at him. He stared right back, a gleam in his eyes.

“We’ll need to go over security detail as well,” Brutus’ deep voice interjected. He’d come over just after Christmas

dinner with his wife, Mia, and their son and daughter.

“Babe, they probably don’t want to talk about security on Christmas,” Mia added, tugging her husband by the arm.

“What? I’m just reminding them that—”

“They know,” Mia cut him off, making all of the women crack up.

However, Aaron, his brothers, and their father agreed with Brutus on the necessity of a detailed security plan.

“Anyway,” I murmured to the women in the group as Aaron still held me around the waist, “we’re open to suggestions. The kids have already given their input.” I laughed as I thought back to Aaron explaining to our kids that we’d all be taking some time off to travel.

We’d told them once they’d opened all of their Christmas gifts. Stasi had been slightly disappointed to find there wasn’t a puppy waiting for her under the tree. But she fell in love with the cooking set and was elated when I told her she would get the chance to explore new types of cooking on our around-the-world trip.

That would delay her hopes of getting a dog for another year. I hoped.

The rest of the children took well to the news that they would finish out the remainder of the school year on the road. Once I explained my vision of seeing different countries and learning about various cultures on the ground and not via textbooks, they were all in.

“We’ll have to meet up with you somewhere next summer,” Michelle said, squeezing my arm. “That’s if I can get this guy to take off from the fire station.” She jutted her head in Carter’s direction as he stood just behind her.

Carter made a noise. “What?” He pulled Michelle to his side. “You act like I’m a workaholic or something.”

“You are, babe.”

“I know how to leave work at the station.”

Michelle frowned. “Why are you lying on Christmas?” She looked at the rest of us. “This man and his squad talk about firefighting nonstop. I swear some of ’em are pyromaniacs the way they love fires. Every barbecue we host, I have to make sure our homeowner’s insurance is updated. They love that damn grill.”

We all laughed, including Carter, because he knew it was true.

“Ma,” a deep voice called from behind Michelle.

We all turned to see Diego as he came in from the hallway. Like the rest of the children, he had gone to the entertainment room after dinner, leaving the adults. I looked him over, marveling at how he’d changed over the years. At six-foot-three, he slightly edged out his father in height. His golden eyes stood out against his tawny complexion.

“Has anyone else come over?” Diego asked his mother.

“And who are you expecting?”

She asked, but we all knew who. I smirked over at Destiny, who also grinned.

“No one,” he grumbled with a shake before walking off.

He passed by Joshua and Kayla, coming back up the hallway.

“And where were you two?” Deborah asked.

Joshua’s green eyes sparkled as he looked at his wife. Kayla’s cheeks turned crimson. Carter barked out a laugh.

Before anyone could say anything, the kids came storming up the hallway, begging someone to open the plastic cover on one of their toys.

“I’m going to hurt Tyler for getting Travis yet another one of those racetracks,” Destiny chided.

“You’re going to do what?” Tyler asked, sneaking up behind his wife and spinning her to face him. He towered over her, grinning.

“You heard me.”

“The boy likes race cars.”

Destiny pointed her finger at him. “And if my son ends up racing cars for a living, that’s your behind.”

“Ohh, Mommy said a bad word,” their youngest daughter, Nova, said.

Tyler chuckled and kissed Destiny before picking his daughter off her feet. “Mommy says a lot of bad words.” He looked over at Destiny and then back to her. “Want to hear some of them?”

“Tyler, that’s not funny.” Destiny followed her husband as he sauntered off down the hallway.

“Grandfather, you’re going back to work as the CEO,” Kyle said once the laughter died down.

Joshua, who took over as CEO when Aaron went out on family leave, would work side-by-side with Robert.

“Don’t burn it down while we’re gone,” Kyle said to his grandfather with an arm around his shoulder.

“I’ll teach both of you young asses a thing or two.” Robert reached up and put Kyle in a headlock, moving faster than Kyle expected.

“Thank you,” I told Aaron again when he moved to stand before me, taking my waist in his hands.

“The only thanks I need is that smile on your face.” He leaned in for a quick kiss.

As soon as he pulled back, the doorbell rang. It was the security bell for the front gate. We had visitors.

A few minutes later, Joshua’s best friend, Damon, and his wife, Sandra, came in. Damon held a stack of gifts in one arm and his wife’s hand in the other. By her side were their two youngest children, Damian and Avery. Behind them was their oldest daughter, Monique.

Like clockwork, Diego was back up the hallway. I glanced over at Michelle as she watched her son.

Diego hung back, not instantly going to the girl he once called his best friend. But it wasn't lost on any of the adults in the room that he couldn't stop looking at her.

For her part, Monique looked to be doing her best to steer clear of Diego. Instead, Monique trailed her parents as they greeted everyone and handed out gifts.

A minute later, Joshua's other best friend, Connor, and his wife, Resha—who was also Destiny's cousin—arrived with their children.

"It's about time," Destiny said, pulling Resha into a hug.

Resha laughed. "We just saw you yesterday."

"Auntie Destiny," Resha's daughter, Harper, called from beside Resha. "Is Nova here?"

"No, we left her at home by herself," Destiny joked with a hand on her hip. We all laughed. "She's down the hall with her daddy."

The little girl scurried off after being made to say hello to all the other adults in the room.

Eggnog was poured and passed to everyone, and Christmas music turned up. Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas Is You" was the first of a litany of our holiday classics to play.

Sometime later, I came to stand by Michelle. She glanced across the room at Diego, who was looking forlorn. I didn't need to turn my head to know he was staring over at Monique, who'd remained far away from him.

"I wonder what that's about," I said to Michelle.

"Hell if I know." She shrugged. "You think they'll work it out?"

I glanced between the two best friends seemingly turned ... enemies? "Probably. And it'll be an interesting story."

Michelle chuckled. "I bet it will."

Before she could fully finish her sentence, Aaron grabbed me from behind, spinning me to face him.

“I missed you.”

With a roll of my eyes, I reminded him, “We’ve been apart for fifteen minutes.”

“Too long,” he growled.

There went those butterflies in my belly. “You’re going to regret saying that after we spend a year country-hopping,” I teased.

He frowned. “A thousand years with you wouldn’t be enough.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Thank goodness you have me for eternity then.” I lifted on my tiptoes to press my lips to his.

“Thank God,” he murmured. “Merry Christmas, sweetness.”

* * *

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