



*After
The Come*

Series Finale

Reality just got REAL.

DANIELLE ALLEN

Table of Contents

[After The One](#)

[Copyright](#)

[After The One](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Unaired Wedding Special Footage](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[After The One Playlist](#)

[Danielle Allen](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Playlist](#)

After The One

DANIELLE ALLEN

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After The One

The insta-love.

The perfect couple.

The enchanted fairy tale.

The concept of ‘happily ever after’ on reality TV is beautiful, but it’s complete B.S.

I mean, I get the appeal.

The One is the most watched reality TV dating show because it sells the idea that two people “randomly” handpicked by producers will fall in love and ride off into the sunset. We are expected to believe that after having a group of women embarrass themselves for the affection of a man on national television, the bachelor and the chosen one fall in love and they live happily ever after.

Let’s be honest.

Shows like *The One* are really about fantasy romance and must-see entertainment—not happily ever afters. That’s why the creators and producers don’t show what happens after the exotic getaways, lavish lifestyles, and over-the-top proposals.

Even though reality TV relationships never last, they want us to buy into the fairy tale.

Truth is... when the cameras stop rolling, the number one killer of reality TV couples is real life.

And life just got REAL.

Dedication

To my readers—thank you.

Thank you for reading my novels.

Thank you for enjoying my stories.

Thank you for connecting with my characters.

Thank you for your reviews.

Thank you for your emails.

Thank you for your messages of love and support.

Thank you for getting it—both literally and figuratively.

To my readers—thank you.

You have changed my life.

Prologue

October 3

Julian,

I just want to start by saying that I'm so proud of you. You are on your first tour. That is such a big deal and I could not be more proud of you as an artist, of you as a business man, and of you as my boyfriend. And even though I'm proud and happy and wouldn't let you turn down this opportunity even if you wanted to, please know that I miss you like crazy. This is the longest time we've been apart since I left the show and to think that I have to suffer through two more months of this is driving me crazy. Again, I know you had to go. This is the opportunity of a lifetime. But I just want you to understand how much you are missed and how incredible you are.

We had an unconventional start to our relationship. When we met, you were dating eleven other women concurrently, but still, something happened. A light turned on within me. I had a hunch the first time I read your lyrics that you were different. But the moment that we met and spent time together in the garden, I knew you were different. And now, here we are.

This is real love, true love, everlasting love. And I know you feel the same. I just got your gift in the mail (THANK YOU!) and as sexy as that lingerie is, my favorite things were the poem and the letter about the life we're building together. Both touched my heart so deeply because the last nineteen months have been the best time of my life. I couldn't go another minute without putting my feelings for you on paper.

I have so much work to do and this case is kicking my ass, but I was unable to continue without writing my feelings down. I am overwhelmed and consumed by my need for you. I love you with everything in me and I trust you completely. I trust you with my heart and soul. I trust you with my life. Most importantly, I trust that we can and will conquer it all, rise above everything, get through anything as long as we have each other.

In response to the promises you made to me, please know that I promise to love you, adore you, cherish you, support you, romance you, encourage you, guide you, and protect you. I promise to do all I can to keep this relationship growing, thriving, and evolving. Being with you means more to me than I think you realize. You are an amazing man. You are my amazing man. And I loved you yesterday, I love you today, and I will love you for the rest of my life. God has blessed me with you and I am forever thankful for that. You have my complete love and devotion and you have my heart. To put it simply Julian: you are my everything.

Love you always...now and forever,

Zoe

Chapter 1

The sun blazed my path as I cruised down the highway with the windows down. It was December in Los Angeles and it felt like spring. I moved my body to the thumping beat of Beyoncé's latest hit as I accelerated my speed on my forty-minute commute from downtown.

It's Friday. Julian is home. I'm off of work early. He doesn't have anything to work on. I don't have anything to work on. We won't leave the house all weekend. I squealed internally. *Today is a good day and this weekend is going to be epic.*

The music faded away as the shrill tone of my phone ringing through my speakers announced an incoming call.

"I won the case," I yelled in lieu of a greeting as I rolled up the windows. "I won the case!" I took a sharp right turn and my black Dodge Challenger eased around the corner, hugging the curb as I entered the Brentwood area of L.A.

"That's wonderful, Zoe! I'm so proud of you!" The pride in my mother's voice made my heart swell. "I've been impressed with your work ethic and your dedication to this case for the last three months. I know you are really proving yourself over at Parker, Lee & Associates."

Impressing Elise Jordan, my mother, was always a good feeling, but any time I could impress Elise Jordan, attorney extraordinaire, I felt like I was on a career high.

I grinned as I pulled up to Julian's neighborhood, slowing as I approached the gate. "Thanks, Mom. I appreciate all your guidance through the process. I couldn't have done it without you. Hold on for one second please."

Turning toward the security officer in the booth, I flashed him a smile.

“Hi!” I greeted the muscular man with the gruff expression as I held up my pass.

He glanced at me before his eyes swept the car. Pulling out his clipboard, it appeared he was searching for my name.

“That’s Zoe Jordan,” Officer Mike offered as he rounded the booth. “She’s a resident. Her name is listed under Julian Winters on the second page.”

I hope my mom didn’t hear that.

Officer Mike explained to the new guy that after a few weeks, he would start to remember all the faces of the residents as the wrought iron gate opened.

“Okay, I’m back, Mom.”

Waving goodbye, I entered the small, elite neighborhood, tucked away in an unassuming part of West Los Angeles that housed only twenty homes. I made my way down the paved road.

“Resident, huh?” my mom inquired. I could hear the amusement in her voice.

I laughed heartily. “I was hoping you didn’t hear that because it’s not what you think!”

“Well when we fly out for Christmas in three weeks, I’ll be the judge of that!”

I laughed again as I continued down the winding road.

Julian and I had spent almost every night together since becoming an item. We generally alternated between his place and mine, but when he’d go out of town, I tended to stay at his to housesit and because I missed him. I had a full wardrobe at both locations so it wasn’t even a matter of packing a bag or anything. It felt like I lived at both places, but no discussion of

moving in with one another had ever occurred. It just sort of organically happened since we didn't want to be apart.

“You know, you and Julian have been together for almost two years now. It's not a bad idea to live with one another to make sure it's a good fit.”

“It's not that we are opposed to living together.” I cleared my throat. “But he just got home from his two-month tour yesterday morning and my case has had me so busy, we haven't talked about it. The lease to my apartment is up early next year so I'm sure we'll talk about it soon. We have time. He's taken the rest of December off and I put in for vacation so we will be spending lots of quality time together this month.”

“He doesn't go back on tour for a while though, right?”

I sighed, thinking about him being gone for another stretch of time. “He's touring again in March, April, and May.”

“Well, I know you missed each other terribly so enjoy your time together. Once you talk to him, let's finalize Christmas plans, okay? It's only a few weeks away!”

“I know. Time is flying.” I slowed to a stop outside of the gate blocking Julian's driveway. His wasn't the only house with a gate, but it was the only one with musical notes adorning the spokes. “As soon as he's settled, I will discuss details with him. But Mom, he's already said he wants everyone to stay at his place. I think you should probably cancel your hotel reservations.”

“You know I hate to impose. It's from Christmas Eve until January second. That's too long! Nine days.”

“It's not an imposition. You are family. We are spending Christmas together as a family. It'll be good times.”

She was quiet for a minute. “Speaking of family...”

Here we go with the marriage and family talk...again.

“Mom.” I cut her off in a respectful warning. “I expect it from Grandma and Nana. I expect it from Julian’s parents and especially his grandmother. I would even expect it from Dad. But you? Et tu, Brute?”

It was my mom’s turn to laugh hysterically. “Okay, calm down Shakespeare. What I was going to say is that I know you have hit a stride in your career and you are focused on knocking it out of the park. With this case and the attention the partners at the firm are surely going to give you for this win, I don’t want you to ever forget what’s important. You are my daughter in every sense of the word and I know how a win just feeds that need to do it again, to work harder and get even better. Just make sure you aren’t putting other important things on the backburner.”

I smiled because I knew she was right. Even though I was excited to spend the weekend with Julian, I was also excited to get back to work on Monday and bask in the glory of the unlikely win.

Especially since I was given the case with the expectation that I was going to lose.

“Family. Friends. Julian. Sleep. Food. I know what’s important. Next time I get a case, I’m just going to do a better job of not letting the stress of work affect me. I lost seven pounds and my eating has been ridiculous.”

“Stress will do that to you. And that was your first big case so being stressed was to be expected. Now that it’s over, you know what you need to do to balance things out.”

“Yes. Not skipping a trip home for Thanksgiving. More quality time with Julian. More nights out with Koko. Fewer thirteen hour days in the office. Less taking work home.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “And in reference to what you thought I was going to say, I trust you and I know you and Julian will make the right decisions with your life and your future. I’m so proud of you. I’m proud of you both and I look forward to what the future will bring for the two of you.”

I rolled my eyes good-naturedly. *When did Elise Jordan become such a sap?*

“Thank you.” I grinned as I typed in the code for Julian’s gate, waiting for it to open.

“Okay, sweetheart, I need to finish up my lunch before my next meeting. I can’t call a last-minute meeting and then be late to it.”

“No, you can’t,” I agreed with a giggle. “Thanks for calling me back so soon!” I called her before I even called Julian to share the good news. I didn’t expect a call back so soon.

“I’m just glad I wasn’t in court so we could have this chat.”

“Me too.”

We said our goodbyes as I pulled into the garage.

Grabbing all of my stuff, I entered the door that led to the kitchen and froze.

My mouth dropped open and my heartrate sped up. “Julian?” I whispered, unable to get the word to come out any louder. My eyes filled with tears as I took in the entire scene before returning my gaze to his broad shoulders. Six feet tall with an athlete’s body, his back muscles shifted under his skin with every move he made. “Julian...”

Seeming to feel my presence, Julian spun around quickly.

My eyes fixated on him and we just stood there staring at one another. I drank in his shirtlessness and the way his defined chest rose and fell with each breath. His smooth skin was the color of a rich almond cream and contrasted nicely

with the half-sleeve of black tattoos running from his shoulder to his elbow on his left arm. His short, black hair and thick, black lashes made his grey eyes stand out. His chiseled jawline was shadowed by two days of not shaving his beard. He was absolutely gorgeous.

And he's mine.

He ran his tongue across his full lips and I swallowed hard.

Even after almost two years, about twenty-one months, a little under seven hundred days, the sight of Julian Winters still made my heart skip a beat. I dropped my bags at my feet.

Sliding the headphones from his ears, he relocated them around his neck.

“Hi Beautiful,” he uttered, placing a lighter on the marble counter. “I wasn’t expecting you home for another thirty minutes or so. I thought I had time.”

I could hardly catch my breath as I gazed up at him like some sort of love-struck teenager. I moved toward the edge of the marble island in the middle of the kitchen. “Julian...what is this?” My arms gestured to the countless candles of varying sizes all over the room. Only half of them were lit.

His lips pulled upward into a sexy smirk as he ambled over to me. “This is a surprise congratulatory dinner.” He cradled my face in his hands, tilting my head upward. “For my gorgeous girlfriend...” He brought his face closer. “Who worked her ass off...” He pressed his forehead against mine. “To win her case...” His lips hovered just above my waiting lips. “To prove to everyone what I already know.”

“What’s that?” I asked breathily, my arms circled around him, enjoying the warmth of his skin.

He leaned back a little and searched my face. His thumbs slid over my cheeks and I felt myself becoming flushed. “That you are a brilliant lawyer and you can do anything.”

“I love you,” I responded, just as his mouth covered my own.

My eyes closed and I could feel the tears burning the insides of my eyelids. His words were sweet and his surprise was thoughtful, but I felt myself getting emotional over how much I loved him and how much I’d missed him the last couple months. Everything I felt for him was as vivid and intense as the kiss we shared.

The kiss was painstakingly slow and I melted into it, into him. His mouth moved over mine, controlling the tempo and allowing us to savor the feeling. I relished the feeling of his tongue brushing against mine, taunting me. Each second of the kiss held so much love and lust, hope and happiness, want and need, that I became overwhelmed.

He pulled back slightly, hovering just over my lips so that they were barely touching. My eyes opened and I realized a tear had slipped through and trickled down my face.

“I love you, too” he whispered. His thumbs swept the tear away. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing at all.” I pressed my lips against his. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” He squeezed me tighter. “It’s good to be home.”

I laid my head against his chest and moaned. “This, this right here is home.” The warmth, safety, and love I felt in his arms and against his chest was unmatched to anything else in the world. I sighed dreamily.

“I didn’t catch what you said.” He pulled back a little in order to see my face. “Where did you say home is?”

Staring up at him, I could feel the corners of my lips turning upward. “I already told you where home is.”

His smile grew as he shook his head and feigned confusion. “I don’t think I heard you.”

I loved how much he loved hearing me say it. I tapped his chest, right over his heart, with my manicured finger. “Right here.” I looked up at him, my light brown eyes boring into his grey ones as I spilled some of the contents of my heart. “This is home. You are home to me. You’ll always be home to me.”

He stared at me for a second as he let the words sink in. “I will never get tired of hearing you say that.”

“I’ll never get tired of saying it.”

He planted a too-swift kiss on my lips and then pulled away before I could turn it into more.

“I wasn’t done yet.” I took his hand from my cheek and placed it over my right breast. My hardened nipple could easily be felt through the satin material.

He groaned, palming my heavy breast in his hand and allowing his thumb to caress my nipple.

“No,” he growled as his hand moved to my left breast contradicting his statement. “Andre will be here any minute now to drop off the food I ordered for dinner.”

I dropped my eyes, noticing that he was tenting his pants. “How long would you say we have before your intern arrives?” I asked slowly, letting my hand play at the waistband of his jogging pants before brushing against his cock.

He sucked in a sharp breath. “We don’t have enough time for everything I want to do to you.” His voice had become raspy and both of his hands found their way under my shirt. “Do you know how bad I want you?”

“Show me,” I whispered, my body burning for him. “I didn’t go back to the office because I couldn’t wait to get back

here to you.” I slid my hand into his pants and wrapped my hands around his girth. “And this.”

He grunted before crashing his lips against mine hungrily. I moaned into his mouth as I tried to push his pants down. Pulling out of the kiss briefly, Julian grabbed at my fitted pencil skirt, becoming frustrated when it wouldn't come up over my round ass.

“Turn around,” he commanded, his voice low and gravely. “And spread your legs.”

My body shook in anticipation as I followed his orders.

He grabbed my hands and placed them against the cool marble countertop. Sliding his hands down my back until he reached my hips, he ground his hard dick against my soft ass and I pushed back against him. Not wasting any more time, Julian unzipped my skirt so forcefully I heard the expensive garment rip.

He pulled the material up, bunching it at my waist, and then he stopped. With my ass covered in the barely-there lace panties he'd sent me as a gift on the first leg of his tour, I heard a sharp intake of breath. I could almost feel it as he eyed the scant material on me for the first time.

“You like?” I purred, rotating my hips in a slow circle.

His hand grazed the lace. “I love.” His finger crept over the material before moving on to the damp spot between my legs. I gasped as his finger came in contact with the most sensitive part of me. “You like?”

“I—“

The doorbell rang.

“Fuck,” Julian swore as he scrambled to pull down my skirt and zip it.

“Julian?” Andre called out as he used a key to enter.

I was fully covered up, but I had to fold my arms over my chest to distract from my erect nipples.

Speaking of erect...

I eyed the still shirtless Julian and although Andre's intrusion had deflated his erection a little, the imprint of his thickness was obvious in his thin pants.

When I looked up at him, Julian's eyebrows came together in confusion and then flew up once he followed my line of sight. His eyes seemed to bulge as he noticed.

His head was on a swivel and I was sure he was considering hiding out in the garage.

I bit my lip and looked around the room.

"Julian? I'm going to come in and drop this stuff off in the kitchen!" Andre called out again.

Knowing we didn't have much time, I spotted the aprons we never really used hanging on the wall. Racing over, I grabbed them both and threw one to Julian. We had just tied them around our waists when Andre walked in and stopped short. With his big brown eyes and even bigger high top fade, the twenty-two year old college senior appeared surprised and amused at the same time.

"Hey...?" He said slowly, stretching the word out as he eyed us both. "Everything okay?"

"Hi Andre," I greeted him, hoping to cover up the sexual tension that lingered in the room with my chipper attitude. "Good to see you!"

Julian followed my lead. "Thanks for picking up the food for us!"

"No problem. Here's your change." He put the change and the receipt on the counter. Finding a candle-free corner, he put

the food down. “I don’t know what I interrupted, but you two are making this awkward for me.”

“What do you mean?” Amusement laced Julian’s words.

I looked away from them both and held my breath to keep from laughing.

“Well first, I called your name when I came in and you didn’t say anything. I know for a fact you can hear me in here. Second, let’s say you were really cooking. Let’s say I believed that. Julian, why do you have on an apron and no shirt? That has to be a health code violation!”

My body shook from holding in the laugh that was burning my throat.

Andre added. “Then you have on the wrong aprons.”

I looked down and then looked at Julian. I hadn’t noticed my name emblazoned on the front of the apron he was wearing since we were rushing when we put them on. When Julian and I caught each other’s eye, we both snickered.

Andre, always the comedian, continued. “And finally, you’re in the kitchen with your aprons on as if you’re going to cook dinner.” He pointed to the food he’d just brought in. “But it’s already cooked.” He looked between us. “It looks to me like the only thing you two were trying to put in the oven was a bun.”

We had tears in our eyes from laughing so hard.

“No, no, no,” I giggled. “No buns in ovens. Not yet.”

“Yeah, marriage first. Kids after that,” Julian agreed, looking over at me with a wink. “Way after that.”

“Way, way after that.” I wrapped my arms around Julian’s middle and grinned up at him.

“Your friends hate you a little bit, don’t they?” Andre joked, unable to stop his own chuckles, triggering ours.

A couple minutes later when we had gathered ourselves and stopped laughing, Julian pulled out a list of things he needed Andre to take care of over the next few days in exchange for studio time.

I smiled giddily as I heard him tell his intern that we weren't to be disturbed all weekend. Grabbing the bag of food, I relocated to the dining room table, giving them privacy.

A few minutes later, Andre poked his head in the dining room and waved. "See you later, Zoe."

"Bye, Andre! Thanks for bringing the food over."

"You know I have to do the grunt work sometimes in order to work with the genius. Just picking up food for the greatest artist, songwriter and producer triple threat since Kanye has made me a better DJ."

Spying Julian walking up behind Andre, I teased, "Don't let him hear you say that. It'll go to his head! You know—"

"I heard that!" Julian protested, cutting me off as he slipped a shirt over his head. "And I'm going to let you finish, but Andre had the best compliment of all time."

I let my head fall back as my laugh echoed through the room. "I'm just kidding, baby. You know I think you are unbelievably talented and I'm your biggest fan," I insisted. And even though I couldn't stop giggling, I honestly meant every single word.

Julian grinned. "That's more like it."

Andre rolled his eyes. "And that's my cue! Enjoy your vacation. I promise you won't see me for the rest of the month—especially since you two were being crazy inappropriate in the kitchen."

We both chuckled hard as we waved goodbye.

A few minutes later, Julian and I were seated and about to dig in to the authentic Italian feast.

“This smells delicious,” Julian pointed out. “I’m convinced a better baked ziti doesn’t exist outside of this place, except maybe in Italy.”

I inhaled deeply, expecting the usual garlic and cheese mixture to make me salivate. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect.

I sat up straight and put my hand to my mouth.

I feel sick.

“What’s wrong?” Julian asked, putting his fork back down and peering at me with concern.

I shook my head as the wave of nausea passed. “Nothing, I just felt a little sick for a second. I think it’s what I’ve been eating and the times I’ve been eating while working on the case. Long hours mean I’m eating at random times during the day.”

“When I talked to you the other night, you said you had a convenience store burrito. You hate burritos. Your stomach is probably mad about that.”

I giggled. “In my defense, it was two o’clock in the morning on a week night. Nothing was open near the office!”

He smiled. Then as suddenly as it appeared, it went away. “Zoe, are you sure you’re okay?”

I must’ve looked sick before I felt the wave of nausea hit me again. Springing to my feet, I bolted to the closest bathroom. I made it just in time to empty the contents of my stomach into the toilet.

After making sure everything was out of me, I washed my hands and rinsed my mouth out with water. I opened the door to find Julian standing there.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I think I just maybe ate too much earlier and the smell of the food triggered something.”

Julian quietly assessed me, his hands on my face and then shoulders. “Have you been taking care of yourself?”

“Um...well.” I lifted my shoulders as he scowled at me. “You saw the way things were before you left to go on tour. It only got worse once you were gone. You were my reason to get out of the office at least by ten o’clock. Without you here, I worked until three in the morning and then turned around and got started again around seven, seven-thirty. I wasn’t sleeping and was eating weird food at weird hours.”

“Zoe...” He sighed. “That’s not good. You have to take care of yourself.”

“I know. My mom already lectured me. She said it’s pretty normal on the first big case, but for me to learn from it and not do it again. It’s hard on the body. And now that the adrenaline of the case is over, I know I’m going to crash from exhaustion soon.”

“But have you been throwing up like this?”

I thought about it. “Not really...”

It’s only happened a few times.

And then it hit me.

I gave him a sheepish look. “Don’t judge me... I think maybe after the convenience store dinners.”

“Well, no more convenience store crap for my woman.”

I gave him a small smile. “Yes sir.”

With his hands cupping my face, Julian looked at me long and hard again. “Instead of the baked ziti, let me make you

some soup or something light. If your stomach hurts, you shouldn't eat anything heavy.”

Taking me by the hand, Julian guided me upstairs to the master bedroom. He stripped me until I was just in my panties and then pulled one of his t-shirts over my body. Once I was safely in bed, he left to put the food away, blow out the candles, and make me soup.

I felt like if I moved, I would get sick again, so I hardly moved. I thumbed through the journal Julian filled with thoughts, lyrics, and poems while he was on the road. When my stomach felt settled enough, I got up to go brush my teeth. Unfortunately, I couldn't find the floss anywhere.

When was the last time I had it? I wondered as I opened drawers I never used. I racked my brain, but I was drawing a blank. I remembered flossing each and every time. *I didn't use it all. Did I?*

“Ah ha!” I said out loud as I found a new container of floss tucked behind a pink box in a bottom drawer.

Pregnancy test? When did he get this? Why did he get this?

Something in me stirred and my stomach fluttered. It wasn't a huge movement, but it was enough for me to look at the box again.

I grabbed it.

“Do you want chicken noodle or—” Julian stopped in his tracks. His eyes bounced from me to the box in my hand. “I can explain.”

“Yes, please do.” I tossed the box to him and started flossing as best I could with him watching me like a hawk.

“My mom brought it over here as a joke after our Thanksgiving in Maryland last year. Remember when they were all drunk off baby fever and wedding planning? She

came by with it as a joke to apologize when we got back in town. I threw it in that drawer and didn't think about it again."

"Ah." I nodded in understanding. "I get it."

I brushed my teeth, but kept glancing at him as he stared at the back of the box.

I wonder if his mom taped a note to it like she did that book she gave me. She's so funny. I hope she's not getting any ideas though. She—

"Have you been tired a lot?" Julian asked.

I spit the toothpaste out to answer. "Yes, but I've been working my ass off."

"Have you been urinating more frequently?"

The uptick of my heart rate made me nervous. "Yeah, but I've been drinking more to stay hydrated."

"Have you... When was the last time you were on your period?"

My hand shook as I put my toothbrush away. Our eyes met before I rinsed my mouth out and turned around to face him.

Shit, when was my last cycle?

"I think it..." My voice trailed off as I struggled to remember the last time I'd had my period. "Um, it was a couple of weeks before you left for tour. But I've been stressed and working a lot lately and stress messes with your cycle."

"You uh—you think you should take the test?"

Shit!

"Um, I mean, I can. Stress can prevent your period from coming," I informed him again as he handed me the box. I gave him a reassuring smile.

He smiled back as he crossed his arms over his chest, nervously waiting for me to take the test.

I made a face. “I need some privacy for this one.”

“Well after you pee on the stick, I’m coming back in here to wait with you.”

“Deal.”

Julian closed the door behind him and my smile fell. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach as my shaky hand opened the box. I couldn’t remember being on my period since before Julian left. I was so busy with work that I just didn’t think about it. I was too busy to think about anything except the case and the fact that I missed Julian like crazy.

We’ve had a scare before and it turned out fine.

The stress of the California State Bar Exam made me ten days late. Not just because of its reputation as the most difficult bar exam in the U.S., but because I’d freaked out the first time I’d attempted to take it. I was so stressed and felt like I had a lot riding on how I performed. I felt the same sort of pressure with the case.

Stress was high and my sleep pattern was off and my eating was unhealthy. That’s all it is. I know my body. Sure this isn’t ten days late, but this is only—oh no no no.

I let my head fall back and I pressed my eyes shut, trying to will my memory to remember something I knew in my heart didn’t happen.

If mid-September was the last time, I’m almost ten weeks late. How did I not notice I haven’t had my period for the last couple months?

I followed all of the directions on the back of the pink box and after washing my hands, I opened the door for Julian to come wait in the bathroom with me.

Longest three minutes of my fucking life.

Chapter 2

I stared at the ceiling, realizing I'd never truly appreciated how the grey paint combined with the soft lighting created a glow.

I cannot be pregnant. I can't. Julian has been home once in two months and before then, we've always been relatively careful. I mean, as careful as two people who don't use condoms can be. Oh my God...what were we thinking? We've been playing Russian roulette with my body since the day that we met and now... This is not me. This is not at all how we planned it. We were going to get married and then have children...later. I closed my eyes. If this test is correct, my mom is going to kill me and then Julian's grandma is going to resurrect me, only so Julian's mom can kill me again.

“What are you thinking?” Julian asked, his head perched in his hand as he lay beside me. With me on my back and him on his side, I was sure he had a clear view of all my thoughts as they played out on my face. “Talk to me.”

“Was that second line even there?” I asked, squeezing my eyes shut even tighter.

“Barely!”

I felt the corner of my lip pulling upward at the absurdity in his tone of voice as he humored me.

“And even if that was a second line, people get false positives all the time, right? The test is more than a year old. I just want to go to the doctor and get answers,” I told him as my eyes fluttered open. I cast my gaze across the room, taking everything in.

From the chrome fixtures to the black appliances, the bedroom was sleek with clean lines like the rest of the house. Although his home had a warm feel to it, it was decidedly sparse with masculine and monochromatic features. He said he wanted me to add my touch to it, but I thought it was stunning as it was.

“We can go to urgent care first thing in the morning. Or do you want to wait until Monday to see your own doctor?”

I shifted my head and locked eyes with him. “Hi, my name is Zoe Elise Jordan. Have we met?”

“Tomorrow it is,” he returned with a smirk.

I watched him scan my body and zero in on my belly. The hand holding his head above our pillows was steady, but as his free hand made contact with my belly, I felt a slight tremble. Tears pricked the back of my eyes and I covered his hand with my own. His eyes found mine and even though they weren’t wet with tears, I could feel so much emotion spilling out of them.

“I love you,” he whispered, giving me chills.

“I love you, too.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll roll with it.”

“It’s not how we planned it.”

“Nothing ever is.”

I closed my eyes. “I’m...”

A little scared, I finished the thought in my head.

After a few moments of silence, I opened my eyes to find him staring at me.

I blinked up at him. “Are you scared?”

He stared at me for a long time before answering. “It was only a matter of time. There is no other woman I’d want as the

mother of my children.”

I searched his face and even though he hadn't answered the question, I knew exactly what he meant. I couldn't imagine starting a family with anyone but Julian. I'd known from the moment I met him, he was everything I ever wanted. A couple months into the relationship, I knew I wanted to spend my life with him. But we had a timeline. We had goals we wanted to accomplish before we moved to the next step.

We definitely didn't plan to have a kid before getting married. He's trying to tour and promote his album while still writing and producing for others. He travels a lot. I know we planned to one day have a family, but once our lives start to actually change, will he feel the same?

As I looked into his eyes, all doubt cleared. I felt so overwhelmed with love. His look, his touch, his kiss told me that whatever happened next, we would be okay. And I believed him.

I have to believe him.

“No matter what, it's me and you.” He leaned down and tenderly kissed my full lips. “It's me and you.”

With my eyes still closed from the kiss, a smile played on the corner of my mouth as I thought of Julian as a father. “If we were to have a kid, that would be... It would be a commitment and it would completely change our lives.”

“Look at me.”

I opened my eyes to find his handsome face inches from mine. I sucked in a sharp breath.

“I'm already committed. Fully.” He slipped his hand underneath my shirt and ran his fingers across my bare skin. “With or without a kid, I'm not going anywhere.”

My heart fluttered and I took a few seconds to bask in the glow of his words. “You’re perfect, you know that?”

“Yes,” he answered, playfully nuzzling my neck with his nose.

I giggled at both the fact that he agreed that he was perfect and the way his nose tickled my skin. When my laughter faded, I was still anxious and a little more than scared, nevertheless, I found myself staring up at him all moony-eyed and love struck.

“This is crazy,” I commented softly, placing my hand over his hand underneath my shirt.

“We could be parents.”

As much as I wanted to remain in the safety of his arms, in the bed we shared, hearing the word ‘parents’ heightened my anxiety. Unable to see the clock, I sat up on my elbows and asked, “What time is it?”

Glancing at his watch, he answered, “Almost eight.”

“I can’t go another minute without knowing for sure. Get dressed.” I swung my feet off the bed and stood up. “We’re going to urgent care now.”

He chuckled to himself. “I was surprised we weren’t on the way after you took the test.”

I slid open the doors to the walk-in closet and grabbed a pair of jeans. “I think I was in shock.” I worked the stretchy denim up my thick thighs and round ass before adding, “We’re here getting worked up over what could be nothing when we should be there getting answers. We can’t even have a real conversation about anything until we know what’s going on.”

“Yeah. It could be nothing,” Julian repeated as he slipped on the jacket that matched his jogging pants. “Or it could be

something. Once we know what we are dealing with, we can make a new plan.”

After pulling my dark, tightly coiled hair into a ponytail, I stepped into my leather flats. “A new plan that involves condoms.”

Julian laughed. “We can pick some up on the way back.”

Putting his hand on the small of my back, he guided me out of the bedroom, down the steps, and out the door. We climbed into his black Maserati and before pulling away, Julian took my smaller hand into his larger one. For the fifteen-minute drive to the urgent care medical center, he didn’t let go of me.

We talked the entire way, but as soon as we turned into the parking lot, we both fell silent. He backed into the parking space in the very back of the lot like he always did, constantly worried his car might get hit. I stared at the brightly lit building and watched the people milling around the waiting room.

I’m going to walk in and find out if I’m pregnant or not. Either way, it’ll be okay.

I clasped Julian’s hand back. “Let’s do this.”

We opened our car doors and climbed out simultaneously. While he was looking for something in the backseat, I headed to the double doors of the building. There was a chill in the air and even though it wasn’t cold, I knew I should’ve put on a jacket. I hugged myself as I crossed the parking lot and rubbed my arms in an attempt to generate heat.

Once I’d made it to the sidewalk, I glanced over my shoulder for Julian. I tilted my head to the side and grinned at the sight of him jogging toward me.

Holding a leather jacket in his hand, he smirked. “I picked this up for you, but I left it in the car. I figured now is as good a time as any since the temperature dropped and you need to

wrap yourself up. I don't know what's going on with you, but let's say this is just a cold. You aren't doing the things you need to do to make sure you're staying healthy."

I giggled. "It's like you read my mind! Thank you." I jumped at him, wrapping my arms around his middle. "You are so sweet and thoughtful," I complimented melodiously.

He laughed. "And don't you forget it."

Julian held the jacket open and I turned around to allow him to put it on me. I stuck my arms into the holes and discovered it was a perfect fit.

Julian turned me around and grabbed the lapels of my jacket. "I love you."

I tilted my head to the side and grinned. "I love you, too."

"Now, let's figure out if we're having a baby or not," he stated as we pulled out of our embrace.

I spun around and pulled the door open. There weren't as many people in the waiting room as I'd thought there were, so once I signed in at the front desk, I was told it would only be a five minute wait.

"Thank you." I nodded politely at the medical assistant who had returned my insurance card.

Leaving the desk, I rounded the corner to the seating area closest to the television mounted on the wall. Julian stood as soon as he saw me, burying his hands in his pockets. When I was a few feet in front of him, I put my hands in my pockets mimicking his actions. Instead of finding empty space and fabric, I felt something with a sharp edge.

Immediately stopping in my tracks, I pulled the sharp object out of my pocket. I was surprised to see it was the folded edge of thick paper. I turned the sandy colored paper over in my hand before unfolding it.

What is this? My eyebrows came together in confusion. *Where did Julian buy this jacket? Did someone leave this in the pocket or did he?*

I looked up at him to tell him and when I saw the twinkle in his eye, I knew it was his doing. My head jerked around to the man sitting in the corner blowing his nose as he watched TV and the woman reprimanding her small children before I reconnected my eyes to the man I loved.

“Did you leave me a note?” I whispered, holding up the piece of paper. Wiggling my forefinger in the air, I continued, “Because it stabbed me.”

He grabbed my injured finger and pulled it to his lips. “Better?”

“Much.”

Freeing my hand from his grasp, I opened the paper and immediately sighed.

Sonnet XVII by Pablo Neruda.

My heart fluttered as I read the words of my favorite poet in the handwriting of my favorite man. Bringing the paper to my chest, I covered it with both hands. I lifted my gaze to find Julian watching me, his expression unreadable, but I could feel the love.

I love the way he looks at me.

“Zoe,” he began softly, placing his hands on my hips. He pulled me closer. “I know we had a plan. I know... I know I love you.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and searched his face. “I love you, too.”

My heart drummed in my chest as I tried to figure out what his next words were going to be. I didn’t know why I was

nervous, but there was something in the way he bit down on his bottom lip.

“If the test was right, if it’s positive...” His broad chest lifted and fell with the deep breath he took.

“Everything will change,” I finished for him.

“Yeah.” He kissed my forehead before resting his against mine. “But regardless of what we find out tonight—”

“Zoe Jordan,” a nurse called out, interrupting our moment.

I held on to Julian’s stare for a second longer before turning toward the voice. “Right here,” I replied, lifting my hand in the air to catch the nurse’s attention.

Refolding my poem, I tucked it away in my pocket.

Julian cleared his throat. “I’ll be right here.”

I looked at him. The insanely talented Greek god of a man that I was in love with stood with his hands stuffed in his pockets, appearing uncertain. I reached my hand out to him.

“I want you with me.”

He didn’t hesitate to intertwine his fingers with mine.

We followed the white-haired nurse through the doors to the clinic and after taking my height and weight, she put us in the third exam room.

“Change into this gown and the doctor will be with you shortly.” She handed me a blue cloth gown and gave Julian a look. “Young man, will you follow me please? It’ll just take a minute.”

She turned on her heels, leaving Julian and I in a stunned silence. We stared at each other with our mouths hanging open, stifling our laughter.

“I think you’re in trouble,” I whispered, giggling behind my hand as he stood and followed the nurse out of the room.

Once I was alone, I stripped out of my clothes and stood in front of the full-length mirror. I pulled the hair tie out of my hair and shook my kinky curls out before repositioning the ponytail, keeping the hair off of my neck. I took a second to appreciate the way the emerald green bra and panties complimented my bronze skin.

I love this bra.

My C-cup breasts spilled from the top of the bra sexily. I cocked my head to the side and ran my hands down the curve of my waist before settling on the fullness of my hips. I turned to the side and put my hand on my belly.

Although the scale confirmed I'd lost seven pounds, the voice in the back of my head still nagged at me.

I'm pregnant.

"You're beautiful." Julian's voice cut through the room, startling me. I turned my head toward his voice quickly. My body heated as I watched his eyes rake over my body. He shook his head as if he were in a daze and then gave me a smile. "The doctor wants to know if you're ready."

I pulled on the gown and tied it closed in record time. "Ready!"

Julian laughed and then opened the curtain.

A balding man with thick black glasses followed him into the room.

"Hello, Zoe. I'm Dr. Nelson, how are you?"

I shook his outstretched hand. "I'm well, thank you. How are you?"

"I'm pretty good for an old man," he joked. "What brings you in tonight?"

"Well, I've been extremely busy for the past three months working on a case I was expected to lose." My words started

tumbling out of my mouth in a rush. “I started my cycle a week after getting assigned to the case and then two weeks later, Julian went out of town. Without him home, I spent the next two months working nonstop. It’s been a lot of long hours with little sleep. My eating schedule has been completely out of whack. I’ve been running on fumes and completely stressed out.”

Dr. Nelson held up his hand. “Take a deep breath.”

I glanced at Julian; he looked as on edge as I felt, but his lips moved into an easy smile and I felt peace coming over me. I took a deep breath.

“My last cycle ended in mid-September. I’ve been stressed and I know that can affect it, but we wanted to get a pregnancy test done.”

“Of course. Let me ask you a few questions first.” Dr. Nelson grabbed his tablet. “Do you smoke or drink?”

“Smoke, no. Drink, socially.”

“Have you consumed alcohol in the last couple of months?”

“No, I haven’t had a social life. I haven’t done anything but drink water and coffee. I’ve had a lot of coffee.” I covered my mouth. “I shouldn’t have had coffee.”

“Well first things first, let’s finish these questions and then you’ll need to provide urine and blood samples.”

I answered the rest of the doctor’s questions from medical history to sexual history. Julian knew most of the answers I provided so nothing seemed to take him by surprise or change his expression, but I noticed his lip twitched when I was asked about the frequency of our sexual exploits.

“When we are in the same place at the same time, we can’t keep our hands off each other,” I answered seriously, causing even the doctor to chuckle.

I provided a urine sample, the nurse came back to take my blood sample, and then I answered more questions.

“We will have the results in a few minutes. I’ll be back to check on you.”

Knowing that in a few short minutes, my life could possibly be forever changed was daunting.

“What are you doing?” Julian asked as I jumped off the table without warning.

“I’m getting dressed.”

He looked at his watch. “Aren’t they going to do more tests if...”

“If they come back and confirm, I’ll make an appointment with my gynecologist on Monday.” I lowered my voice. “The sonogram is...invasive.”

Julian nodded, his right leg bouncing nervously. “Got it.”

I grabbed my jeans and pulled them on underneath the gown. I expected him to make a joke about me not stripping for him, but he seemed distracted. I removed my gown completely and hurriedly pulled on my shirt before any of the clinic staff entered the room again.

“Come here.” I reached out for him.

He rose to his feet and took the couple steps toward me. Cradling my face with his hands, he stared into my eyes. “You’re doing great, you know that?”

“It’s a little surreal.” I bit my lip. “But thank you.”

He shook his head. “Zoe, I’m serious. You’re strong. You handle things well under pressure. You don’t scare easily.” He placed a soft kiss against my lips before resting his forehead against mine. “Not to mention you’re smart, soulful, poetic, fun, and you’re funny. You even had the doctor cracking up.”

I grinned. “He did think I was pretty funny, didn’t he?”

He smirked. “And not lawyer funny, but seriously funny.”

My head fell back and I laughed. “I know! That doesn’t happen regularly.” When my giggles subsided, I brought my forehead back to his and noticed something had changed. I swallowed hard.

He let out a shaky breath. “My point is that you are an incredible woman in every way possible. Most importantly, you are full of so much light and love. You...you’re going to be an amazing mother. Whether it’s now or a few years from now, our child is going to be so much better off because they will have you as a mom.”

I didn’t know what he was going to say, but I didn’t expect that. Tears pricked my eyes and blurred my vision. I blinked them back. I took several trembling breaths before I had to pull away from him. I turned around to grab a tissue. It wasn’t as if in the time we’d been together, he hadn’t made me cry in public—hell, he’d made me cry on national TV—but a few tears due to his unexpected surprises were nothing compared to the sob that his words were on the brink of evoking.

“Julian,” I sighed, wiping the corners of my eyes. I let out a rush of air and shook my arms at my sides. “You know how I feel about you making me cry in public.” I tried to laugh it off as I tossed the tissue into the trash can, but it came out as a strained, breathy noise. “I swear, you are the most roman—”

I turned back to face him and gasped. My hands flew to my mouth and my heart felt like it was in a vice grip.

Staring up at me from his kneeled position, Julian’s mouth opened and closed twice before he licked his lips and cleared his throat.

“Zoe Jordan. I would love to say to you that during our time together, I realized you were it for me. But honestly, the

moment I knew was when you walked into the garden. You stole my heart when we spent those hours together writing and being inspired, laughing and joking, talking and connecting, because it was everything I knew I wanted to share with someone, but didn't really think I would find a woman who embodied all of that. I'd gone my entire life without a two-hour block of time that felt that meaningful. I'd never met another person that changed my life the way you did. I've worked with some of the best in the music game, but not one person that I've met has impacted my life as completely as when I met you."

Reaching up, Julian tugged at my elbow, bringing my left hand down. He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and then brought his lips to the center of my palm.

His kiss scorched the skin of my palm and coursed through my entire body. My free hand moved from my cheek to my belly as I was besieged with butterflies. Overcome with emotion and hypnotized by his eyes and his words, I couldn't say anything. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

Grabbing my right hand with his free hand, Julian twirled the stunning ring he'd given me on live television. "Zoe, I gave you this ring because I wanted you to have a constant reminder that you will never have to compete for a place in my heart because you have it. You own it. It's yours. It's been yours since day one."

He took a breath but never broke eye contact as he let go of my hand. His breathing became unsteady as he dug into his pocket. His chest rose and fell quickly and my breathing started mimicking his.

"I want to give you this ring because I want you to have a constant reminder that for the rest of my life, I will do everything in my power to make you feel the way you make me feel. You are the music in me. You..."

His voice cracked and when he cleared his throat to keep it together, I lost it. Tears trickled down my cheeks freely.

“You are the music that beats in my heart, that guides my steps, that makes me whole. You are the music that inspires me, that captivates me, that drives me. You are the music I’ve been looking for to go with the lyrics in my heart.”

Julian broke eye contact for the first time as he slipped a stunning four-karat princess cut diamond onto the ring finger of my left hand.

“I’ve been planning this for months and I asked your dad before I returned from tour. I was going to wait until New Year’s Eve, but I’m doing this right now because I don’t want you to ever think I’m asking you because you’re pregnant. I don’t want you to ever doubt that I’m doing this because it’s exactly what I want to do. Zoe, you are the love of my life and I want to marry you because it didn’t feel like my life started until you. I want to marry you because you make everything in my life make sense. And if you’ll have me, I’ll fill you with so much love that even on our bad days, you won’t ever regret this decision. So, Zoe Elise Jordan, will you marry me?”

My stomach quivered. My heart fluttered before coming to a complete stop and then starting again erratically. I’d never felt anything so intense. With just his words, Julian Winters had rendered me speechless when all I wanted to do was shout from the rooftops.

“Sorry for the delay. Your results—oh!” Dr. Nelson walked in, jerking me out of the single most epically romantic stunt Julian had ever pulled.

I quickly turned my head to the surprised doctor, wiping my face dry. “Please, one more minute! Don’t tell us yet.” I turned back to Julian. “Yes. Absolutely, yes. You are the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. You are it for me. I love you so much. There is no scenario in which I wouldn’t accept.” My

voice dissolved into a few heaving breaths. I bit my lip. “But your words... God, Julian. Your words go directly from your lips to my heart. You’re a poet and I’m all flustered and I’m trying really hard not to break down right now...”

I swallowed the sob that was lodged in my throat. When my body started to shake, Julian stood up and captured my head in his hands. His glassy eyes searched mine as I continued. “There is no title I would want more than to be known as your wife. I love you. I love you for the man you are. I love you for the husband you will become.” I removed one of his hands from my face and relocated it to my lower belly. “And I love you for the father you will be.”

Julian closed his eyes for a few seconds as his hands flexed against my belly. He let out a rough breath before he grabbed my face again, pressing his lips against mine softly. “I love you,” he uttered before kissing me again. “I love you so much,” he repeated.

“Knock knock,” Dr. Nelson said, forcing us apart before I was ready. The doctor had his head peeking into the room.

“Come in,” Julian and I said at the same time. We looked at each other and laughed together.

It felt good to laugh.

“So what did I walk into?” The doctor tried to play it cool, but it was painfully obvious that he knew.

“My amazing, talented, handsome boyfriend is going to be my amazing, talented, handsome husband.” I bit my lip as I gazed at the bauble on my finger. Just saying that Julian was going to be my husband gave me butterflies.

Julian looked at me. “What she means is she is about to make me the luckiest man on Earth by becoming my wife.”

My lip slipped from between my teeth as I grinned at him.

“I’m very happy for you two. Congratulations!” He shook Julian’s hand and then he shook mine before he pulled the stool to the center of the room. He gestured for us to sit and we did. “Now, your results. You said the test you used at home was expired, so that explains some of the confusion...”

Chapter 3

The weekend was a complete blur. The results of the pregnancy test did not fully hit me until I was sitting in the passenger seat of Julian's car on the way home from seeing my gynecologist, Dr. Lynn Maxwell. Void of music and with the world's smoothest engine, the car was absolutely silent for the majority of the ride home.

I let out a deep breath as I said what I had been thinking all weekend, but especially since getting the ultrasound picture. "What do we do now?"

I stared at his chiseled profile. The quiet question hung in the air as Julian maneuvered into the neighborhood, waving at security as they opened the gate.

"What do you mean, Beautiful?"

"This changes everything." I swallowed, feeling pulled in so many different directions.

"It does." He slowed to a stop a few feet from the driveway and looked at me. "What are you thinking?"

That our careers are over. Oh and—no, one thing at a time.

Julian and I had spent all Friday night talking about our childhoods and everything we wanted to teach our future child. We discussed our hopes and dreams for the child we created. We knew we should wait until we met with Dr. Maxwell to get too wrapped up into the idea so we kept our baby talk to a minimum, but I'd spent all weekend silently stressing about how a baby would affect our careers.

“Let’s talk in the house,” I answered as he pulled up to the gate.

Julian gave me a look before typing in the gate code.

I gripped the ultrasound picture in my hand.

He parked his car next to mine and turned off the ignition. “I know you. I know something has been on your mind, but I’ve been taking your lead. Friday you wanted to talk about the idea of a baby so we talked. The rest of the weekend you didn’t want to focus on the baby at all. You just wanted to celebrate our engagement so we did.” He licked his lips and slipped his hand over my thigh, causing me to squirm. “All weekend long.”

My body heated at memory of the different positions he’d had me in all weekend long. We’d had sex all over the house to make up for the time he’d been gone. I smiled languidly. “It was a really, really good weekend. Best sex of my life.”

He smiled, sliding his hand and resting it at the apex of my thighs. “I would have to agree, and I think we should try to top it.” He paused. “But first, I need to know what’s going on in that head of yours.”

“That I planned on talking to you once we got confirmation.” I looked down at the ultrasound photo and blew out a long, tired breath. “And now we have it.”

“Look at me.”

I met his gaze, my heart beating a tick faster than before.

Julian searched my face and then unbuckled my seatbelt. Taking the picture out of my hand, he said, “Follow me.”

He opened his door to get out of the car so I grabbed my paperwork, prenatal vitamins, and handbag then followed him into the house.

I dropped everything on the marble island in the middle of the kitchen and eyed Julian as he found a magnet in a drawer to put the picture on the refrigerator.

He turned toward me. Leaning against the counter next to the refrigerator, Julian pointed to the picture he'd just proudly hung. "We're having a baby, Zoe. It's here and it's real and I know you're scared...but I hope you're not doubting me or us. I hope you know how happy I am to be with you, to be sharing this with you."

I flew across the room and into his arms. "Stop! Please stop." I buried my head in his firm chest. "I don't doubt you. I'm so sorry I made you feel that way, Julian." I hugged him tighter as I felt his body relax a little from my words. "I love you."

He kissed the top of my head repeatedly. "I love you too."

I looked up at him. "I've been thinking about how this is going to change everything...career-wise."

Julian's eyebrows came together as he gave me a perplexed look. "What do you mean?"

Wordlessly, I unraveled my body from his and took his hand. I pulled him through the kitchen, down the hallway, to the den. From talking to watching a movie together, the huge television and state-of-the-art sound system made the den our favorite place to hang out.

Well, besides the bedroom.

Plopping down on the couch, I quickly threw my legs over Julian's lap and snuggled up close. He ran his hands over the side of my leg before settling on keeping one hand on my hip and the other wrapped around my calf.

I smiled nervously at him as his grey eyes settled on me. "Things change, I know, but I can't help but think that this is going to..." I struggled to find the right words.

He clutched my hip. “Just say it.”

“This may ruin our careers.”

Julian looked at me for a second before he smirked. “Ruin our careers?”

I covered my face with my hands and peeked at him between my fingers. “Does that make me a horrible person? Am I a horrible mother already?”

Julian chuckled. “No, you’re not at all, but I don’t understand why you’d think it’d ruin anything. Change, yes. Ruin, no.”

Was he not in the appointment with me today?

“Because of my race and gender, I have to work harder than any of the other lawyers at Parker, Lee & Associates to be taken seriously.”

“I know, Beautiful. I know.” He wrapped his arm around me and hoisted me into his lap. “If they think your gorgeous skin or the fact that you’re a woman creating life makes you less of a lawyer, you need a better firm.”

I nodded in agreement. “When I first started, one of the paralegals went out on maternity leave and never came back. The official email that went out said she chose to stay home, but I overheard that she was forced out for wanting to spend a few extra weeks with her kid.”

Julian shook his head. “That’s fucked up.”

“Exactly.” I swallowed hard. “And I don’t think I’ve been there long enough to not receive the same treatment.”

“If they do that to you, we’ll sue the shit out of them.”

I smiled. “You sound like Mom.”

Julian let out a little laugh and it made my insides quiver.

My eyelashes fluttered as I cast my gaze downward before peeking at him. “I’m just worried about job security and advancement, that’s all. Most of the people I graduated with are not working—well, not working as lawyers anyway. I earned this opportunity and I don’t want to blow it.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about. If that case they didn’t even expect you to win proves anything, it’s that you deserve to be there. If they don’t see that, you don’t need them.” He kissed my shoulder. “You’re a hard worker and an excellent lawyer and if they think a baby will change that, they are idiots.”

I felt the warmth of his love as it blanketed me. “You are the sweetest.” I dropped a quick kiss on his lips. “But you’re wrong. It will change that. I won’t be working eighteen hour days to win a case when my body needs more rest. I won’t be eating sketchy food at random late-night gas stations while I’m carrying our child. I won’t physically be able to do any of the things I did over the last three months in order to discover the break that won the case.”

Julian made a face as he realized I was right. He didn’t say anything for a long time, but I could almost hear the gears in his head turning. “We’ll figure something out. You will be fine though, Zoe. I don’t want you stressing over this.”

With my arm around his neck, I lightly tugged at his earlobe. “It’s not just me I’m worried about,” I admitted gently, anxiety twisting in my gut.

“What do you mean?”

“You worked your ass off last year promoting your album. You just finished up opening for Super Casanova and you have your own tour coming up. You’re going to be on tour for three months next year, for almost the entire third trimester,” I pointed out, examining his face as the information hit him.

He froze for a second as he seemed to remember the tour dates. He chewed his bottom lip as he thought and then he slowly shook his head. “I’ll cancel it.”

My eyebrows flew up. “You’re just going to cancel your tour?”

“Yes. You’re more important. You’re the most important thing in my life. No contest.”

“And you’re the most important thing to me, but you can’t just opt out of your tour. It’s your tour. You put it together. You signed the contracts. It’s slated to sell out.”

He shrugged as if to dismiss all that, but the look in his eyes broadcasted his uncertainty. “I’ll get my lawyers to figure something out. Done and done.”

My heart skipped a beat and if it was at all possible to be more in love with him after his proposal, I was. We both knew it was highly unlikely for him to get out of the contracts without taking a huge financial hit, but the fact that he offered was more than I could’ve ever asked for.

My heart was full and I knew he could see it all over my face. “I love you for that, I really do, but we both know...”

Tangling his hand in my hair and bringing me closer, Julian brought my lips to his. The move was so sudden that I gasped.

The want and the need that always existed between us flooded my system, causing my breathing to change.

“We will make this work.” Julian spoke in a hushed tone that turned me on. “Even if worst case scenario happens, we will make this work. You’re my priority and you’re carrying our child. I don’t want you stressed about anything. I’m going to make sure you’re okay. For the rest of my life, I will make sure you’re okay. Do you understand me?”

Holy. Shit.

My lips parted, but no words came out. I nodded slowly.

“I want to hear you say it. Do you understand?” he repeated. His voice was deeper, sexier.

“Yes.” My voice came out hot and needy.

He brushed his mouth against mine before capturing my bottom lip and sucking softly. He pulled away and I let out a soft whimper.

“Now was that the only thing on your mind?” he questioned softly.

Before I had a chance to respond, his mouth covered mine again. His hand eased up my leg and gripped my hip, causing a fire to burn throughout my body.

My heart thudded in my chest as our kiss deepened. Each time his tongue grazed mine, the pull deep in my gut tightened. I rotated my hips, rocking against his hard dick beneath me. Shivers traveled up and down my spine. A rumbling groan escaped his lips and soaked my already wet panties.

He pulled out of the kiss and stared into my eyes.

My chest rose and fell as I felt slightly winded from the self-restraint it took for me to not rip his clothes off and mount him.

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember the question.” I licked my lips. “I think another kiss will help jog my memory though.”

The amusement in his voice was evident. “Oh we will be doing a lot more than kissing. But first, I want to make sure you’re good before I ask you what I want to ask you. I don’t want us to move on until we’re on the same page. So what was the other thing on your mind?”

Either he’ll say yes or he’ll say no. If he says no, it’ll still be okay. I’ll deal with it.

Thinking about what I wanted to ask him unnerved me for some reason. I shifted my eyes away from his momentarily before returning his gaze.

His smile waned. There was a flash of doubt in his eyes and I knew I had to get it out.

“Okay,” I conceded with a nod. The flutter in my chest revved up, causing a slight hesitation. “So...”

“You’re nervous,” he noticed, touching my face gently.

I nodded. “Only because of how it’s going to seem, but...” I shook my head. “I know I can tell you anything. It’s just... ahhh!” I wiggled my body trying to shake off the nerves.

“You doing that move right there in my lap is how we got into this situation to begin with.”

I let my head fall back as I laughed loudly and it wasn’t long before he joined in.

Once our laughter died down, Julian brought me closer. “Should I be worried?”

“About what?”

“About what you’re scared to tell me. You aren’t scared to tell me anything, so the fact that you’re hesitating is making me a little worried.”

“I want to get married before the baby comes,” I declared in a rush.

His eyebrows flew up in shock. “You do?”

I nodded, unsure of what his response was going to be. “We’ve always talked about getting married before having children, but the real reason is...” I shrugged, unsure of how to even put it into words. “As insignificant as it sounds, I just want us to establish our family.” I put my hand on my belly. “Before...”

I could feel Julian's heart thumping against my side as he waited for me to continue. I lost myself in his eyes and couldn't get the rest of my thoughts to formulate into words.

"Why were you nervous to tell me that?" Julian asked carefully, his expression revealing nothing.

"Because the last time I checked the calendar, it wasn't the sixties. I know it's not necessary, and regardless of what our families think, I know it doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things. But, it's something that I want. You are the man I plan to spend the rest of my life with and you're the father of our child. I want him or her to come into the world as an addition to our already established family."

Julian gaped at me. "Do you want to know what my request was?"

"What?" I said the word slowly, a chill running down my spine again.

"For you to consider marrying me before the baby comes so you both will have my last name."

I cocked my head to the side and looked at him. "Really? You want to get married before the baby comes too?"

"Yes. I want the world to know you're mine and that we created a life together."

I squealed, sprinkling kisses all over him until he started laughing. When I wouldn't stop with the smattering of kisses, he started tickling me, causing me to laugh hysterically. In an attempt to get away from him, I jumped up and ran out of the room.

He didn't waste any time chasing me so I made a beeline for the kitchen. Getting to one side of the island before he entered, I was able to create the necessary distance from my faster and more athletic fiancé.

“Truce?” he offered, lifting his hands up in surrender.

I stepped slowly around the island as he started to move. “If you were going to call a truce, why would you chase me?”

Julian smirked. “Because I would follow you anywhere.”

“You are such a flirt!” I walked toward him and he scooped me up in his arms.

“With you? Every chance I get.”

My skin tingled where his breath hit the skin on my neck. I sighed happily.

I love this man.

I opened my eyes and found myself facing the ultrasound photo on the refrigerator.

“It feels real now,” I pointed out softly.

I stared at the black and white picture until Julian set my feet on the ground. He turned around so we could both stare at the image. Moving the magnet, I plucked the picture from its position and held it between my fingers. “We’re having a baby.”

I turned my head, looking up at Julian. His smile played on his lips before he gave in and let it stretch across his face. Reaching over, he dropped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into him. “We’re having a baby.”

The sound of my phone vibrating against marble echoed through the kitchen.

“We should wait until Christmas to tell our families,” I mentioned as I made my way to my phone.

Twenty-three emails.

“Yeah, that’ll be cool.”

“We could do something over the top and surprise them.” I glanced at the text message from my best friend before

looking back up. “I can keep this from my family for the next three and a half weeks because they won’t even think to ask if I’m pregnant. If your mom is dropping off pregnancy tests, she may be a little harder to mislead.”

“No misleading necessary. I’m just going to avoid her at all costs.” He grabbed a bottle of water and leaned against the counter to watch me. “I might avoid seeing her altogether.”

I laughed as put my cell phone down. “You are not going to be able to avoid her. She’s your mom.”

“They are leaving to go camping next week and won’t be back until just before Christmas. If she’s going to pop up, it’ll be this week, and that means she could catch either one of us. I know I can throw my mom off our scent. What about you? What’s your plan? If she shows up here, you’re going to be asked the same questions.” He crossed his arms and smirked. “How are you going to get out of this one?”

I lifted my eyebrow. “I’m a lawyer. I can bluff.”

“Try me.”

I started giggling instantly. “I can’t bluff you.”

He grinned because he knew it was true. “Yeah, because I can see through your shit.”

My phone vibrated again and my laughter intensified. “Apparently Koko can too.” I looked up at him. “I have to tell her. She’s going to figure it out the moment she sees me and this text she just sent is ridiculous.”

“What does it say?”

“She said, ‘I haven’t heard from you since Wednesday and I swear to God if you ran off and eloped, I will punch you in the stomach. Unless you eloped because you’re pregnant.’”

“For a woman with no muscle, she talks the most shit.”

“Right?” I shook my head. “I miss her.”

As a makeup artist, Koko still worked with world-renowned makeup guru Julia Jones on *The One*. Each season featured four bachelors on four separate month long sessions. The summer after I appeared on the show, they started having the summer sessions that featured a female bachelorette. Koko worked all six sessions a year, keeping her busy.

“I know I kept you tied up all weekend—”

“Literally,” we said in unison before bursting out laughing.

“So give her a call back,” he continued, still chuckling under his breath. “I’m assuming you’re going to tell her, right?”

I lifted my shoulders and turned up my hands. “I mean... I don’t think I have a choice at this point.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Amusement lingered in his tone as he walked around the island to stand next to me. “Call her back and then meet me upstairs.” He leaned down and put his lips against the shell of my ear. “I have something I want to give you.”

The whispered words were void of all humor, holding a sexual promise that completely shifted the air in the room.

“Julian,” I protested, my voice laced with desire as I leaned into him.

“Don’t be long.” He smacked my ass and walked out of the kitchen, his laughter hanging in the air.

“You’re such a tease!” I yelled after him as I still felt his lips on my collarbone.

I’ll get him back, I thought as I picked up my cell phone and scrolled down to my best friend’s name.

“Zoe Jordan!” Koko shrieked as a greeting. The noise surrounding her sounded more like she was at a night club than at work.

“Kumiko Green,” I returned with a laugh. “How are you?”

“I’m good. Busy, but good. Worried about you.”

I smiled. “I’m sorry I haven’t been at home lately. Have you been staying at the apartment or have you been staying with Bryce?”

“Who?” she asked calmly.

My eyebrows flew up.

Koko and Bryce Wilson had been messing around since my session of *The One*. After a year of off-and-on casual sex, they made it an official relationship over the summer, but they still kept it under wraps because they worked together. For a solid five months, it seemed like things were going well.

Granted, I’ve been busy for the last three months, but every time I check in with her, she never says anything is wrong.

“Koko, what happened with Bryce?” I repeated.

She sighed. “Are you talking about Bryce Wilson?”

“The only Bryce I know? Yes. That’s the one.” I rolled my eyes though she couldn’t see me. “What’s going on?”

“Well he said some things and I said some things and now we’re not talking.”

“I’m sorry, Koko.” My heart was heavy for her. “What things were said? Start at the beginning.”

“Hold on one second.” The phone sounded muffled as if she slipped it into her pocket, but I could still hear her talking. “Are you new? Yes, take this palette to JJ. Julia Jones is JJ. Julia Jones, JJ. Listen, I don’t care if he’s requesting me. JJ is handling Mr. Wilson’s makeup.”

I strained when her voice got lower, but I couldn’t hear anything more. Relocating to the den, I stretched out on the couch.

I really thought Koko and Bryce were going to make it.

“Sorry about that,” Koko apologized when she returned to the phone. It was noticeably quiet on her end. “I’m in the trailer now.”

“Is JJ there?”

“No, but she will probably be back soon so I have like five minutes to tell you this.”

“Start at the beginning. What happened?”

“Well,” she started, dragging the word out. “Long story short, he said he was having dinner with a colleague...but it was Leah. And he knows I don’t fuck with that bitch.”

“Wait, what?” I sat up quickly. “Did you just say Bryce was having dinner with Leah?”

Leah Trotter had been on Julian’s session of *The One* and she was a manipulative bitch.

I always tried my hardest not to refer to any woman as a bitch, but Leah was a bitch. There was just no way around that accurate of a description.

She wasn’t a bitch because Julian kissed her for the sake of the show. She wasn’t even a bitch because she lied and manipulated her way through the show. And although those things contributed to why I didn’t like her, Leah’s bitch status was earned due to the way she lied about me on live TV when she went on talk shows.

It only took a few rounds on the night show circuit for the viewing public to catch her in her lies and recognize that she was a jealous and petty bitch. In almost two years, I’d let go of everything that had taken place on the show. But Leah took things too far after Julian chose me. She tried to ruin my career, my relationship, and my reputation. The show was over

and done with and the fact that she still felt the need to attack me solidified my unrelenting disdain for her.

“He was at dinner with her?” I repeated, my voice rising in confused horror.

“Yes! On a date,” Koko growled. “So I told him it was over.”

I stood up in a daze and started pacing the room. “And it was just the two of them? Having dinner?”

“Yes! I walked into the restaurant and saw them together. And even if I didn’t see it myself, the pictures that were all over the gossip magazines and the show’s website would’ve given them away.”

“What the hell? Why would he...” I exhaled sharply, trying to calm myself down. “This makes no sense. I never got the impression he liked Leah as a human being let alone developed an actual interest in her. There has to be another explanation. Even Bryce isn’t dumb enough to fall for Leah’s bullshit. When did this happen?”

“Friday night.”

I heard her slamming things down in the background. “I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you call me?” I wrapped my free arm around my waist as I slowed to a stop.

“Because I’m fine and I knew this was your weekend fuck fest with Julian.”

The gasping screeches of Koko’s laughter echoed through the phone and without fail, I joined in.

“Fuck fest? Really?” I giggled, collapsing on the couch again. When the humor passed, I paused. “Do you need anything? Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes, you can tell me how you’re doing. I got your text message about you winning the case and I’m so proud of

you!”

I smiled. “Thank you, but I’m worried about you. Have you talked to him?”

“Don’t be. I’m fine. I’ve managed to avoid him or be around other people when he comes looking for me on set so I’m not forced to talk to the jackass.”

“You should talk to him. At least let him explain why he was having dinner with her. Even if you decide you’re done with him, you should at least hear him out.”

Koko was quiet for a minute and then she let out a frustrated wail. “I’ll think about it. I hate that you’re the voice of reason.”

“No, you don’t.”

She cackled on the other end of the line, causing me to grin. “Anyway, what’s going on with you? How’s Julian?”

I looked down at the diamond on my ring finger and my stomach flipped. “I have to tell you something, but you have to swear you aren’t going to say anything. We’re not telling anyone else until Christmas.”

“Oh shit! You’re pregnant?”

My mouth fell open. “How did you guess?”

“You are my best friend, we tell each other everything, and you’re swearing me to secrecy. What else could it be? That you tried anal?”

My head fell back and I laughed loudly. “I can’t deal with you right now.” I gasped between bouts of laughter. “Oh my God, you are ridiculous!”

Once we both pulled ourselves together, I told her everything that happened during the appointment with Dr. Nelson.

“You sound so happy and that makes me happy. I know ‘voice of reason’ is usually your title, but I have to ask... how are you feeling about all of this? You’ve always said you wanted to be married before you have a kid. Are you okay?”

My eyes migrated to the flawless diamond Julian had slipped on my finger as the words he’d spoken from his heart to mine ran through my memory. “I’m more than okay and I will be married before we have the baby.”

“What?!”

I had to pull the phone away from my ear because the piercing scream felt like it was going to shatter my eardrum.

“What?!” she repeated.

I stifled a giggle. “Yeah, Julian proposed on Friday night.”

I told her everything that happened, from the home pregnancy test to the poem in the jacket pocket to the urgent care exam room proposal. I was nearly in tears as I summarized some of what Julian had said to me that night.

“He is the perfect man for you. I knew it. I sat in our apartment and I told you he would be perfect for you, didn’t I? And the fact that I pretty much hooked you two up will be highlighted in my maid of honor speech.”

I laughed. “Deal.”

“Okay so if you are two and a half months pregnant now and you are getting married before the baby comes, when is this wedding supposed to be? We only have six months to work with!”

“We actually haven’t talked about that yet, but it’ll have to be in the next six weeks. I don’t know when I’m going to start showing, but if I want to keep the pregnancy a secret for as long as possible, I should probably not look pregnant in our wedding photos.”

“I agree, and I guarantee you’ll be showing by the end of January.”

“Maybe I can go upstairs and convince him to do a New Year’s wedding.”

“Zoe, that man adores you. You won’t have to convince him to do anything.”

“Bryce feels the same way about you. That’s why you should talk to him.”

“He lied to me and said he was meeting a colleague and he met Lucifer’s sister.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I get it, but there has to be a reason.”

“That bitch talked shit about my best friend and was rude to me every time I had to do her makeup. There’s no reason. If —” Koko stopped talking abruptly.

“Hello?” Concern flooded my system.

“I don’t want to talk to you.” Koko’s icy tone immediately alerted me to who had walked into the trailer. “If I send someone to tell you JJ will do your makeup, don’t come looking for me. I’m on the phone. Get away from me. Give me my phone back!”

I tucked my legs underneath my body and hugged myself.

“Hello? Zoe?” Bryce’s tired voice burst onto the phone.

“Oh...hey Bryce,” I greeted him awkwardly.

“Dude, please get Koko to listen to me. I did not go on a date with Leah. Why would I go on a date with Leah? I was meeting with Robert Brady and his guests. He called them my colleagues. What am I supposed to do? Tell the creator of the show that I need to know who his guests are before we can meet? Leah and I got there on time, but Robert was running

late. I had no idea she was coming. Please make her understand I would never do anything like that to her.”

I didn't say a word.

“Zoe?” Bryce questioned the silence.

“Is she still standing in front of you?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Then she heard you. Is she glaring at you or is she avoiding eye contact?”

“Glaring. Definitely glaring.”

“Then she's considering that you might be telling the truth. Tell her to call me back later and talk to her.”

“Thanks Zoe.”

“And Bryce...”

“Yeah?”

“There aren't many people Koko and I don't fuck with. Don't make a habit of dining with people on that short list. Really, don't make a habit of dining with any woman that isn't Koko or heads will roll—particularly yours.”

He chuckled. “I know. I apologize to you both. We'll call you back.”

Once the call was disconnected, I peeled myself off the couch and wandered upstairs. I found Julian in his office at the desk.

“How's Koko?” Julian asked as he typed.

“She's well. She's excited for us.” He looked up and grinned at me.

My heart fluttered.

“That's good,” he said, with a nod. “I'm excited for us, too.”

“But she said something that got me thinking. Are you busy? Is everything okay?”

“I’m just looking at my calendar.” He turned in his swivel chair and beckoned me over. “Come sit.” He patted his lap.

I slinked over to him and wrapped my arms around his neck as I got comfortable. He wrapped one arm around me and turned us so we could face the computer screen.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, scratching my fingernails against his scalp soothingly.

“I have my lawyers looking at the tour dates to see if I can move some dates around. It doesn’t look good though.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think you should adjust the dates. People have already committed those dates to their schedules. It would be different if it was an emergency and you had to cancel a stop or two. It’s a whole other thing to rearrange or cancel. That’s not a good look for you or the hundreds of people who are working on the tour with you.”

“But that means we’d have to get married in the next three months.”

“What do you think about a New Year’s Day wedding?” I blurted out without careful consideration.

Julian’s grey eyes held my brown ones as the question hung in the air.

“That’s soon,” he pointed out, forehead creased with uncertainty. “Is that what you want?”

“I mean...” My disappointment in his lack of enthusiasm dried my mouth. “I just thought it would be better for me since I may not be showing then. If most maternity clothes lack style and ingenuity, I can only imagine the wedding gown selection.”

“I hear you, but you look beautiful in everything.” He kissed my shoulder. “Do you think we could pull off a wedding in a month though? I just don’t want you to regret anything by rushing it. I want to give you your dream wedding.”

My heart swelled. “The wedding isn’t the dream. You are.” I kissed his soft lips and rested my forehead against his. “I love you and I want to marry you. I want to look at the pictures of our wedding and remember the moment I became your wife...in a great dress.”

The deep timber of his chuckle rumbled through his chest. “Well then go grab your laptop and look for your great dress and I’ll contact the lawyers.”

“Your lawyers?”

“They’re going to need to find a wedding planner who can work fast and be discreet.”

I nodded. “Ah, that makes sense.”

I got up and went to find my laptop. I had it when I got home from work on Friday afternoon, but I couldn’t remember the next place I’d had it.

“Fuck!” Julian roared from upstairs. “Fuck!”

I jumped, startled by his outburst. Feeling panic sweep over me, I launched myself upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. My heart thudded against my chest as I skidded into the office.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” I sputtered, looking around the room and then back at Julian. “What’s wrong?”

Julian was slumped in his chair as anger and defeat billowed off of him. He was staring straight ahead as he held the phone to his ear.

I tentatively approached him and stood silently beside his chair. My options were to sit on his desk where important

papers were spread out or try to climb into his lap as he was clearly having an angry conversation. I chose to drop to my knees in front of him. I rubbed his knee supportively and gave him a small smile.

Although he intertwined his fingers with mine, he did not return the smile.

“Yeah, I get it. And there’s nothing that can be done? Can you try?” He was quiet for a minute. “I understand that, but—” He was quiet again and then he looked at me.

He barked a few more demands into the phone before concluding the call and dropping it loudly against the glass desk.

“What’s wrong?”

“I told the team we were engaged and want to get married on January first.” He let out a ragged breath.

My eyes widened.

Do they not want him marrying me or something? What could be this bad?

“Okay...?” I said slowly.

“They reminded me of my contract... which says I’m required to report my engagement to Robert Brady.”

My stomach fell as the sinking feeling consumed me. I shook my head as the memory of Robert Brady’s parting words to us came flooding back, confirming Julian’s concerns.

“If we get married when we want to get married, we have to...” His jaw tensed and tightened as his voice trailed off. It was as if it hurt him to continue the sentence.

“No no no no no.” I shook my head vehemently as my insides threatened to come to the outside.

“I’m sorry, Zoe,” Julian whispered his apology. “If we get married before the two year mark, Robert Brady owns the rights to my wedding to you.”

My eyes stung with tears even though I knew I wouldn’t let any of them fall. “I didn’t sign anything giving them access to my life. Does that matter?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure. They’re looking into it, but it doesn’t look good. They think the only way we can get married before the baby comes is to do a...” He cleared his throat. “Wedding special.”

Chapter 4

I sat in my parked car in the garage for a few minutes while I gathered my thoughts Tuesday evening. With my eyes closed, I sucked in a deep breath.

If I can make it through the rest of the week, I won't have to return to work until next year.

I didn't tell any of the partners I was pregnant. I didn't know how to broach the subject, especially since I was looking at an almost four-week vacation.

They can find out when we announce it to people in general. I'm not hiding anything; I just don't need to spend the next four weeks worrying about how they are trying to get away with firing me. I need to tell my family first and they will be here in two weeks. I'm getting married in three weeks. Then I'm going back to work. I'll work my ass off and then when I start showing, they will know. I don't need to stress over how they're going to react. Why should I even have to deal with that? My body is a vessel and I'm creating life. This same body has walked in and out of their prestigious glass doors day in and day out, busting ass to prove myself for over a year now. They may have gotten away with pushing that one paralegal out, but they will not do that to me. I know my rights and Title VII's pregnancy-related protections include my right to tell or not tell whoever the fuck I want—

“Zoe?” The knock against my window scared me and I gasped, recoiling from the noise.

Looking into those amused grey eyes, I breathed a sigh of relief. “Julian.” I pushed the car door open carefully as he

backed up. He reached his hand out for me, helping me out of the car. “You scared me love. Thank you.”

“I saw.” He searched my face. “Everything okay? Did the partners take the news well?”

I didn't tell them, I answered him silently.

“Yeah, I'm okay.” I smiled at him. “I'm happy to be home though.”

“I missed you.” He kissed me softly before grabbing my workbag and laptop case. “I'm ready for this week to be over.”

My face lit up. “I was just thinking the same thing! The only thing that kept me from wallowing in how much I missed you was the fact that after Friday, for three whole weeks, it'll just be me and you.” I wiggled my eyebrows for emphasis.

Chuckling, Julian opened the door that led into the house and I followed behind him. As we walked in, the sound of his phone violently vibrating against the counter disrupted the quiet solitude in the air. He placed my belongings on the counter and then turned around to face me as he answered the call.

“Hey Beverly. Did you—” Julian's sentence broke off as he appeared to be listening attentively while watching me. “Yeah. We told our families last night.” He smiled and crossed his arm across his chest. “No not the date. We told them it'll be soon, but we didn't say when. We're still waiting on the final word from the lawyers.” He chuckled softly. “Thank you. Yeah, I agree with you. I'm a lucky man and I won't mess it up.”

Oh Beverly.

I grinned at Julian's response.

Beverly Davis was not only Julian's personal assistant; she was the first person he ever hired. As a nineteen year old

musical phenomenon, he chose the no nonsense nanny who was looking to segue into working with adults. Perhaps it was her fifteen years of experience with whipping children and families into shape, but she was excellent at her job. She even took care of me, although I insisted she didn't.

“She just got home.” His face became serious as he chewed his bottom lip. “Okay. Yeah, we'll handle it. Thanks for calling.” He paused for a long time, presumably listening as he watched my every move. “Let me know if you hear anything else. I haven't heard from anyone yet, but if they get wind of it, I'm sure they will be in touch with you or the lawyers.”

My eyebrows furrowed as I preheated the oven. *Handle what? Haven't heard from who? His side of the conversation has the least amount of information!*

I returned to the island, standing directly across from him, and watched him watching me.

He wore jeans low on his hips and a white t-shirt that stretched across his chest and arms deliciously. As he said his goodbyes, his smile was slow, easing across his handsome face, and the shadow darkening his jawline only made it sexier.

“So...? What's going on?”

I stepped out of my black pumps and the cool tile welcomed my bare feet. Stripping out of my lightweight, burgundy jacket, I kept my eyes focused on him. I wanted him to see and fully appreciate the form fitting black dress that hugged my curves.

Ignoring my questions, he eyed me distractedly. “Lawyers aren't supposed to look this sexy.” He let out a low whistle. “Turn around.”

I let out a staggering breath that gave way to a beaming smile. The unexpected compliment caught me by surprise and

I could feel myself glowing. I did a slow spin as I ran my hand over the plumpness of my ass. “You like?”

“I don’t like, I love. I’d rack up a lot of billable hours if I got to stare at you all day.”

My skin heated from his words. “If you were looking at me the way that you do, I wouldn’t bill you anyway.”

“How do I look at you?” he asked huskily as he stepped forward, backing me into the island in the middle of the kitchen.

I tilted my head up to maintain eye contact as he closed the distance between us. His hands cradled my face as he gazed down at me.

My stomach flipped twice. I gripped the hem of his t-shirt and pulled him closer. “Like that,” I whispered. My heart stopped and started erratically. “Like I’m...”

My voice trailed off because I couldn’t quite explain the look that he gave me, but it was everything. With one look, he managed to make me feel incredibly weak and unbelievably strong at the same time.

Without saying a word, he leaned down and kissed me lightly. His soft, full lips only fleetingly grazed mine before he applied more pressure, cranking up the intensity. Before my tongue had a chance to caress his, the beeping of the oven interrupted our kiss.

I pulled out of our embrace and winked. “I was looking forward to where that was going.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t have to wait long,” he returned with a smirk.

“You are such a flirt.” Amusement filled my voice as I washed my hands and headed to the refrigerator. “Now that

you aren't seducing me with your eyes and that small shirt, what happened with Beverly?"

Julian threw his head back and laughed heartily. "You think my shirt is small?"

"No! I think your muscles are too big for that particular cotton shirt."

The deep timber of his laugh flitted through the kitchen and filled me up. I was so full. I couldn't help but imagine myself as his wife in that moment.

Julian Winters is going to be my husband and I am going to be his wife.

"I have some...news," Julian started once his amusement had subsided.

I returned to the middle of the kitchen and left a few feet of space between us, but Julian pulled me flush against his body anyway and lifted me off of my feet.

Spinning me around, he sat me on the flat surface of the marble island. Wedging my legs open, my dress slipped up high on my thighs and he positioned himself between them. We were eye-to-eye.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I cocked my head to the side. "You've located a quill pen for us to write poetry with and be really pretentious about it?"

He let out a short chuckle. "If you write me anything in a quill pen, I'd hear it in a tone."

I nodded profusely. "Like a high society...rich dignitary type of tone."

"Yeah, exactly." He smiled, running his hands over my hips. "And the fact that you knew what tone I was talking about is the reason you don't need a quill pen."

“You get me.” I giggled, watching him watching me. I touched his handsome face. “What’s going on, baby?”

Uncertainty flashed in his eyes before he started to speak. “You know Beverly has alerts on anything that comes up related to me...or you, right?”

I nodded slowly, unease giving me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

His hands patted my hips while it appeared he was bracing himself for what he was about to say. “Well...one of those reality TV gossip sites reported that we were engaged.”

My eyebrows flew up. “Oh shit...”

He nodded. “Yeah, but it’s okay for now,” he assured me. “It’s just that one site so it hasn’t gotten any traction, but this means that Robert Brady will probably find out sooner than we were hoping, so we have to make a plan.”

My heart felt heavy because the fantasy plans we’d made in bed the night before were just that—a fantasy. The reality was that in order to marry the man that I loved in the timeframe I wanted while all of our closest friends and family were still in town, we’d have to get married on television.

Unless...

“What if we marry in secret?” I murmured softly, even though I knew the risks.

Julian’s head tilted as he stared at me. He brought his hand to my head, smoothing it over my hair that was slicked back into a coarse bun. He let his fingers trail a path from my temple to my cheek and then down my neck. His touch was light and feathery, stirring up all types of feelings within me.

“You want me to violate the terms of the contract?” His voice was as soft as his touch.

I did, but I didn't. I did because I wanted our wedding to be ours, but I didn't because I knew it would be a huge financial setback and a legal and PR nightmare.

I shook my head. "I don't want you to do anything in violation of the contract."

"What do you want?"

"To marry you."

He gave me a look. "What do you want?"

"I want to marry you in a beautiful dress in front of our family and best friends. I want Chele King to sing 'Always The One' acappella as I walk down the aisle to you. I want it to be intimate. I want it to be us. Just us." I looked down temporarily before making eye contact again. "I don't want to do it in front of hundreds of strangers. I know it's how we met and how we got together, but marriage is sacred and I want it to be ours. So if there's any way we can avoid doing it on live TV, I would love that...but I've read the contract. Your team has read the contract. I don't think it's possible." I paused. "What do you want?"

He swallowed hard. "I want you as my wife. Last night, we talked about getting married on New Year's Day with the hope that I can get out of my contract." He stared at me for a long while and the subtle twitch of his eyebrow alerted me to his nervousness. He licked his lips. "Let's say we can't get out of the contract, what then? What do you want to do?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but he interrupted before I could answer.

"But before you answer, just know that I know I'm willing to do whatever you want to do. It kills me that I might not be able to give you the wedding you've always wanted. If you want to postpone, I'll—"

Pressing my lips against his, I stopped his flood of words with a kiss. “Julian, stop.” I searched his eyes until I saw the uncertainty receding. “You are going to give me the marriage I’ve always wanted; that’s what matters.” Ignoring the nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach, I made a conscious decision to do what was best for our family. “We’re not going to postpone. Just like we said last night, we’re going to start the year as Mr. and Mrs. Winters.”

Relief smoothed out the crease between his eyebrows as he sighed. “Thank God.”

Capturing my lips with his, he kissed me with a tenderness that caused me to feel faint. My body heated, my brain flooded with emotions, and my heart skipped a beat. I wrapped my legs around his hips and pulled him closer as he leisurely explored my mouth with his own. The kiss was gentle and reverent.

I felt loved.

Pulling out of the kiss, we stared into each other’s eyes. “January first,” I breathed, a bit of wonder in my voice. “We’re getting married in less than a month.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “You sure you don’t want to push it to February or right before I leave in March, give us time to plan?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter if it’s January first or March first. Unless there’s a way out of the contract, we still couldn’t have the wedding we talked about last night.” I let my fingers play along his chiseled jaw. “So why delay having you as my husband?”

“So we’re doing this?” Julian questioned, eyes crinkling happily.

Scooping me up into his arms, Julian helped me off the island. “We’re doing this,” I giggled, unwrapping my legs

from around his body and placing my feet on the ground. “So I guess I need to find a dress.”

“You do that. I have to make a few calls before dinner.” His lips brushed against mine. “I’ll be in the office if you need me.”

I watched his sexy ass leave the kitchen.

“I love you,” I called out to his retreating back.

“I love you, too.”

He went to handle his business and I handled mine. Two hours later, we were sitting side-by-side on our laptops in the den as we listened to music and planned our wedding.

Although they were unable to find a loophole to get us out of any kind of contractual obligation to *The One*, his team of lawyers found a wedding planner named Peri Moore who was available and able to execute in a few weeks’ time. We spoke to her briefly and told her our wedding colors were a twist on the classic black and white. She assured us we were in capable hands and that she would handle everything.

Well, everything except for the fashion and the music.

Julian and I made it clear that we were going to take care of those things and let her know what we decided when we met with her in a few days.

With that out of the way, we contacted the rest of our wedding party and then worked on random wedding tasks. I’d just gotten off of the phone with Koko, who had received my email about her maid of honor dress, when Julian’s phone rang.

“Hello?” he answered.

We were sitting close enough that I could hear a man’s voice, but I couldn’t make out who it was.

Julian pulled the phone from his ear to look at the number again. “This number is private. How did you get it?” he asked sharply. Although it was subtle, I heard the intimidating shift in his tone.

I didn’t even pretend not to be listening as I turned my head to look at him.

“Beverly has my calendar. There was no reason for you to bypass her.” He was quiet for a minute, listening. “We can discuss this at another time.”

I eyed him and could feel the tension rolling off him. He didn’t raise his voice, but the rough tone indicated that he was not pleased with the caller. He clenched his jaw and that worried me, but the fact that he hadn’t made eye contact with me worried me even more.

“I’ll give you one hour. Yeah. Friday night. I’ll have Beverly get back to you with my availability.”

Julian hung up the phone, tossing it on the couch cushion. He let his head drop back.

“What’s wrong?”

“That was Robert Brady.”

My stomach lurched. “What did he want?”

Julian lifted his head and looked at me. “He said he wanted to congratulate us on our engagement and it felt too impersonal to have his assistant call mine and he didn’t want to go through Beverly when he could just call me directly.” He shook his head hard once. “Arrogant asshole.”

I moved my laptop and then moved his off of his lap. He wrapped his arm around me as I curled into his side. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“No, I’m sorry. We should be celebrating on Friday, but instead, I need to meet with him and deal with this.” He

rubbed his hand against my skin. “I’m going to make it up to you though.”

“No need. I’m coming with you.”

Julian laughed. “I didn’t think you’d want to.”

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t, but we are going to settle this thing once and for all. Maybe seeing us together will change his mind and his heart. Maybe he’ll let you out of the contract once he sees that this is real and doesn’t need to be exploited.”

A ghost of a smile graced Julian’s lips as his eyes explored mine.

I felt myself beaming at him. “I love the way you look at me.”

“And how is that?” His quiet question pulled at my heart.

I never answered him earlier, I remembered, the familiar rattle in my chest present.

“You look at me like you’re promising me the world,” I answered faintly.

His chest rose and fell twice as my words hung in the air. “Zoe...” He brought his forehead to mine. “I look at you like you are my world,” he uttered so quietly, I felt the words more than I heard them.

My heart stopped and my breath caught in my chest.

I kissed him my ‘I love you’ and as his lips enveloped mine, I felt his ‘I love you’ in return.

Even though there were case files I needed to review for work, I spent the rest of the night on the couch with Julian. He alternated between building wedding playlists and writing lyrics for potential wedding songs. I jotted down boutiques I wanted to check out for wedding dresses and then I found the bridesmaid dress for my bridesmaids.

I need to call Keisha and Lenny tomorrow. I have to tell them I'm engaged before they read it somewhere. And I need to ask them to be bridesmaids.

Keisha Hall was a close friend from college and we also went through law school together. She'd taken the bar exam when I originally was supposed to take it and landed an awesome job in San Diego.

Lennon Oliver, better known as Lenny, was a close friend who worked at Breakers Bar with me. She moved to L.A. to be an actress at eighteen and then by twenty-one she'd changed her entire life plan. At the time I met her, her life goal was to be a bartender in a cool bar and give unsolicited advice.

I didn't see either of the women as often as I used to due to our schedules and the distance, but whenever we talked, it was like no time or distance or life change had occurred. We always picked up right where we'd left off because our friendship stood the test of time.

I sighed.

Hearing the news of my engagement from anyone but me would hurt them.

I'm just going to send them a text telling them and then I'll talk to them on the phone tomorrow.

Julian laughed as I finished up my second text message.

Putting my phone down, I looked over at him and smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Omar." He shook his head as he chuckled again. "I asked him to be my best man and he said he would think about it because he had plans."

My eyes widened. "He has plans?" I asked, surprised. "I thought everyone was coming over here for New Year's anyway."

Julian's thumbs were flying as he typed out a response. His lips were turned up in a wicked grin. He hit send and then looked at me. "Those are the plans he's talking about."

I giggled. "He's ridiculous."

"He said he wants to decline the best man position just so he can walk down the aisle with Keisha." He paused with a light snicker. "I told him if he won't be the best man then he is getting demoted to ring bearer, and he said his day just freed up."

"Omar and Scott crushing on Keisha is hilarious to me. It's like a bad rom-com."

Julian made a face. "Who says rom-com?" Tossing his phone to the side, he tickled me. "No seriously, who says that?"

I laughed, scrambling to get away from him. Unfortunately, I wasn't fast enough as he held me down and tickled my sides.

"What was that you said again?" Julian taunted me as he held his fingers above me.

I laughed preemptively as I struggled to get away from him. "Rom-com!" My throaty voice was high and pitchy as I defiantly answered his question.

He licked his lips before they spread into the sexiest smile. His fingers quickly snuck under my shirt and danced across my skin. "Oh really?"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I squealed my apology as I thrashed around.

"What kind of movie is the whole Omar-Keisha-Scott thing?"

"Romantic comedy!" I laughed so hard, tears were streaming from the corners of my eyes.

Pulling me into his lap, he eyed me as I caught my breath.

I smiled at his smile. “What?”

“It’s good to be home.”

Chapter 5

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” Julian asked me as I yawned for the third time on Friday night.

The work week had flown by and I had gone nonstop the whole time. The case files I didn’t review on Tuesday night ended up costing me the rest of the week. I thought it was going to be something I could glance over in an hour for another lawyer, but because I hadn’t done it, my assignment got switched to review another case file. Unfortunately, my new assignment was for one of the partners and the ‘glance over’ was actually the task of getting the preliminary information necessary for a hearing. Although I didn’t stay at the office late to complete the assignment, I worked at home for a couple of hours while Julian handled the preparations for our Christmas celebration. The late nights and early mornings wore me out, but being able to kick off a long vacation by slipping on a sexy dress and going out with my sexy man made it worthwhile.

Julian pulled into the valet parking line. “Say the word and we’ll reschedule.”

I smiled sleepily at him and squeezed his hand. “This week has been exhausting, but I’m fine. I promise. Once we get in there, I’ll be good.”

“We will be here for an hour, tops. You look incredible, by the way.” He squeezed my hand back. “Don’t move.”

Julian slipped out of the car and gave the eager teenager instructions about his car and a stern look. I laughed to myself as he pointed at the kid one final time. When he made his way

to my side of the car, he opened my door and grabbed my hand.

“Thank you, love,” I said as I let him pull me out of my seat. Releasing his hand, I looked down and smoothed out the red peplum dress. Squaring my shoulders, I flashed him a bright smile. “See, I’m good.”

Julian put his arm around my shoulders and I didn’t even care that he was smashing my curls down after I’d spent an extra twenty minutes trying to breathe life into them. I relished in the feeling of being tucked in the crevice of his arm. It made me happy.

The doorman held the door open for us and Julian stepped back, allowing me to walk in front of him. My eyes widened as we entered the Mediterranean restaurant, Mykonos. It felt like as soon as we passed through both sets of double doors, we had entered a completely different place and time.

The doors blocked the sound of the busy street and the laughing valet staff and the soft instrumental music moved through the air. The warm colors of the décor and the textured walls brought the restaurant to life. The low lighting gave a sexy vibe, but the deep orange walls gave the place vibrancy. A sweet aroma greeted us, but it wasn’t food. It was heavy and damp, almost like the smell of flowers, but I looked around and couldn’t find the source.

Although I had only taken a few steps away from Julian, a female employee made a beeline for him. “Hi,” she greeted him flirtatiously. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

I stayed where I was and watched the dynamic. It was a difficult transition at first, but I’d learned to take a minute to figure out if a woman was a fan of his work or if she was hitting on him. I trusted Julian and didn’t feel threatened at all, but I also wasn’t going to let someone disrespect me. I was

maybe five feet away from them, but from the way she was gazing up at him, I might as well have not existed.

“Hello,” Julian returned her greeting politely. “We’re meeting Robert Brady.”

I tried not to smile as I heard the emphasis he put on *we*.

She looked at him for a beat too long before she glanced at her tablet. “I need to find you on the list. What’s your name?”

“Julian Winters.”

“Hmmm. Let me see...” She searched the list and then looked up. “I found you.” She gave him another onceover. “Your name sounds familiar. Do I know you from somewhere? A movie?”

Julian was well known in the music industry and popular with a number of artists, but as someone who was new to the spotlight, he wasn’t famous. The woman who was eyeing him wasn’t doing it because she recognized him. As I watched her body language, I saw that she wasn’t planning on requesting an autograph or a photo. She was looking at him like he was sex personified.

And he is, I thought, taking him in. That’s a really good color on him.

His dark green shirt brought out the dark undertones of his skin and couldn’t hide his well-defined body. Paired with a black tie and his black leather jacket, he looked like a mix between the men parents warn daughters about and the men parents hope their sons become. He looked like the kind of man who broke hearts, but at the same time wore his own heart on his sleeve. His sex appeal and confidence broadcasted that he was the type of man who could fuck like a porn star or make sweet love, depending on the moment. He embodied so many amazing qualities and they were wrapped in a delicious package.

I can't be mad that women are attracted to him. They have eyes. He can't contain all that sexy.

“No. I’m not an actor,” he answered, throwing a look my way.

I remained standing where I was. I could see she was interested in him, but I was truly interested in seeing how far she was going to try to take it with me standing right there. She was definitely a bold one. Since leaving *The One*, I’d only encountered a couple of women who were disrespectful enough to blatantly hit on Julian while I was with him. It was always a pathetic reminder of how low some people would go to try to take what’s yours.

The attempt is pathetic, but it's all about the follow through. As long as Julian doesn't follow through, there's no issue.

Fortunately, I knew I didn’t have anything to worry about.

“You could definitely be an actor.” She looked him up and down again, taking a step closer to him. “My name is Beth, by the way.”

He took a step back, away from her. “Thank you.” He looked at me again. “I’m Julian, and this is my fiancée, Zoe.”

I took my time closing the gap between us as I concentrated on not smiling. I didn’t want to gloat even though I was positive my face glowed.

Beth cast a quick look my way before focusing her attention back on Julian. She lowered her voice. “I didn’t realize you two were together.”

Julian lifted his arm so I could attach myself to his side. Again, I didn’t mind one bit that his arm crushed my coiled hair, likely flattening it in the back.

“We arrived together and we’ll be leaving together,” I replied sweetly.

Julian grinned down at me before planting a kiss on my forehead.

Beth didn't seem phased at all as she continued to eye-fuck my man. "The stairwell is straight ahead and the elevators are around the corner. The attendant on the second floor will take you where you need to go." She backed away slowly. "If you need anything Julian Winters, just ask for Beth."

"He won't need anything from you, Beth. But thank you for your hospitality. We will be sure to let your manager know how hospitable you've been," I informed her, my tone as transparent as she was.

Beth's eyes darted around before she scurried off.

Julian's chuckle started deep in his chest and vibrated through him. "God, I love you."

"I love you, too...which is why I needed to let her know that her services were not needed."

"Even if you didn't, you know I would've told her." He continued to snicker. "Come on. Let's go get this over with."

I pulled away from him to fluff my hair out and give it more body. Switching my black handbag to my other hand, I reached out and grabbed his, intertwining our fingers.

"This place is nice," I noted, looking around as we eased deeper into the restaurant.

I attempted to go straight to follow where the people who were flowing in and out of the building were headed. Most of the hostesses led individuals behind the large staircase and curiosity was getting the better of me.

"This way. The private rooms are upstairs." He glanced at my four-inch open toe booties and we bypassed the staircase. "And we should take the elevator."

I nodded. "Yes, please."

The elevator was gold with a mirroring effect. I stared at Julian's reflection and felt a little flutter in my stomach.

Just as the elevator door opened, he caught me checking him out and a slow smile spread across his face.

"Don't look at me like that," he warned as he followed me into the elevator. He hit the second floor button.

"Why?" I giggled as he backed me into the wall of the elevator. "You're so sexy. I can't help it."

"I'm warning you..." He put his hands on my hips and then slid them around to my ass. He pressed his hard body against me and stared at me as if he knew my panties were becoming damp.

The heat crept up my body from my core. I licked my lips.

The elevator dinged and he dropped a quick kiss against my lips before taking a step away from me.

Our hands found each other instinctually and we walked into the second floor lobby. A woman rushed toward us, requesting our names before leading us to one of the four private dining rooms.

"Mr. Brady is already here," she informed us as she gestured to the brightly colored door. "Your waiter will be with you shortly."

"You okay?" Julian mouthed to me, touching my face with the back of his hand.

I nodded, leaning into his touch.

Julian nodded back before pushing the door open and setting his hand on the small of my back.

"Julian Winters and Zoe Jordan," Robert Brady greeted us merrily from the head of the table.

The older man wore khaki pants and a dark brown jacket. The top two buttons of his white shirt were undone and a thin gold chain was almost lost in the brown chest hair that peeked out of his shirt. I tried not to stare, but I was taken aback. The chest hair didn't bother me as much as the fact that his chest hair appeared to eat the chain.

I just want to button those buttons!

He took a sip of his amber colored liquor before standing and reaching out his hand.

“Robert.” Julian’s voice was firm as he shook his hand.

“Zoe, you look beautiful,” he complimented as he planted a kiss on my cheek.

“Thank you.” I gave him a tight smile before allowing Julian to pull out my chair so I could have a seat.

The men sat down as soon as I was settled in my chair. I cast my eyes around the gold and orange hued room and noticed that even the tablecloth had a hint of gold to it. The chandelier hung low over the six person diner table. The room was sexy.

Well, it would've been sexy if we were alone.

As if there was a hidden camera notifying the wait staff that we were seated, a waiter entered and took our drink orders. My stomach rumbled gently and I picked up my menu. The waiter went over the specials and left us to decide what we wanted to eat.

“So what brings us here, Robert?” Julian started, his jaw already set as if he was anticipating trouble.

I gave him a look from behind my menu.

Although Julian looked sexy as hell, our goal was to get Robert Brady to not want to film our wedding. If Julian bit his head off, he wouldn't be willing to compromise.

“Let’s place our orders first before getting into all this business.”

The waiter brought Robert a second glass of whiskey and Julian and I both waters. He brought a pitcher filled with ice and a few slices of limes and placed it in the middle of the table. Robert ordered food, but Julian and I both declined, not wanting to prolong the meeting. The waiter scampered out of the room, leaving the three of us alone again.

“No food.” Robert nodded. “Okay, I guess you want to get down to business.” He finished off his tumbler of whiskey before he gave us both a crooked smile. “That’s a nice ring,” he mentioned nonchalantly.

I looked down at the bauble. “Thank you. I would agree.” I reached over and placed my hand on Julian’s. “He did a good job.”

Robert’s eyes zoomed in our hands and his smile widened. “I would agree,” he repeated my words back to me.

“Robert, why are we here?” Julian asked, his voice conveying his true feelings about the meeting.

“You know why we’re here. We’re here to talk about the wedding special.”

“Like I mentioned on the phone, we are not interested in getting married on camera. We want to have a small, intimate wedding. If anything, we’d like to discuss you letting me out of my contract. We’re only a few months away from the two year mark anyway. You’ve had seven bachelors since then and a bunch before me. Are any of them planning their wedding?”

I gave Julian an encouraging smile. He had been straight forward without allowing his emotions to get the best of him. I knew how much restraint he was using. After the conversation he’d had with Robert on Tuesday night, he was on edge every time his name was brought up.

“I hear what you’re saying, Julian. I do.” Robert sighed, almost as if he were being forced to pursue the idea. “But this last season slumped. Both the first and the second sessions didn’t exceed expectations. The bachelors were good and our ratings were strong, but we didn’t have the same web presence as we did with your session. We have high hopes for the third and fourth sessions though.”

“I’m sorry your show isn’t doing what you’d hoped, but audiences fluctuate all the time. I’m sure you’ll bounce back with the spring sessions, but we can’t help you. This is our wedding day, Robert.” Julian cleared his throat. “Please.”

Robert looked between the two of us and actually managed to look contrite. “I know this isn’t the conversation you were hoping you would have with me and yes, most of the other couples got engaged at the end of the show. And most of them are over and done with now.” He let out a short laugh. “Getting engaged after dating for a month is ridiculous.”

Ummmm...isn't that the premise of your whole show? I stared at him, my eyebrows flying up.

I shook my head. “Wait, what? I thought that’s what your show was all about: getting engaged to someone you barely know after dating them for maybe three hours and twenty-two minutes one-on-one.”

Julian chuckled beside me and after a brief pause, Robert joined in.

“You’re funny,” he said to me before looking at Julian. “She’s funny.” He finished off the whisky and slammed the glass down on the table. He made a face as if it burned going down. “The show pays for a ring...period. Most assume it has to be an engagement ring, but it doesn’t explicitly say engagement ring. The bachelors pick out a ring and if the relationship falls apart, the ring comes back as property of the show. If the relationship makes it, the wedding is part of the

series and they keep the ring. But I would never mandate an engagement and force people to get married. I just finished going through my third divorce.”

Julian sat up, leaning forward. “So if you don’t want to force people to get married, don’t try to force us to get married on your show.”

“It would be ratings gold,” Robert argued.

Julian looked over at me. “I’m more concerned about giving Zoe the wedding we planned for ourselves and the marriage she deserves.” He looked back at the creator of the show. “The ratings don’t have anything to do with us.”

“This could be mutually beneficial. We are willing to pay you each one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars and we will cover all wedding expenses.”

That’s two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Two hundred fifty thousand dollars for us to get married, which we were already going to do anyway. A quarter of a million dollars for us to get married which we were already going to do anyway and they are going to pay for the wedding?

I had to admit, it was tempting. My eyebrows seemed to have permanently relocated to the center of my forehead, and I shifted my stunned gaze to Julian.

“We don’t need the money.”

I mean, technically he doesn’t need the money. But okay...

“I know you don’t need the money, but law school was expensive I’m sure. School loans—”

“Her school loans are paid off,” Julian interjected.

In early November, for my twenty-seventh birthday, Julian couldn’t be home since he was on tour and they were on the East Coast. So, he sent a romantic card, beautiful flowers, and

a receipt letting me know I didn't owe the government any more money.

I took my hand off the table and placed it on his thigh. He covered my hand with his, running his fingers over mine.

Robert snickered under his breath. "I get it. I get it. You don't need the money. But ask yourself this: if a small wedding costs an estimated fifty thousand dollars, are you willing to walk away from this table knowing you're giving up three hundred thousand dollars?"

We have to stay strong... I gripped Julian's thigh. *Even though that would be an unbelievable nest egg for our child...*

Neither Julian nor I said anything. I knew my hesitation was because the offer sounded good. It wasn't until Julian glanced at me that I knew he was also considering it.

No, stay strong, baby, I encouraged him silently as I stared at his profile. *The only way for the show to be entertaining is for there to be drama and I don't want drama or people I don't really know sharing our day with us.*

"It's a really good offer and we appreciate it, but we must decline. We aren't trying to be reality TV stars. We don't want to get married on camera. We are asking you to respect that."

Something happened. I wasn't sure what it was, but as the silence descended upon us, the mood changed.

Robert stared at Julian. "And I'm asking you to respect the contract you signed."

Julian stared at Robert. "And I'm asking you to release me from the contract."

My eyes shifted back and forth and then I sighed.

This isn't going anywhere good. If there is no loophole and Robert isn't budging on letting Julian out of the contract,

we're just going to have to suck it up and do the wedding special.

Robert tapped his finger against the table.

Although I could feel Julian becoming rigid in his chair, I hoped to prevent the conversation from going from bad to worse.

“Gentlemen—,” I started speaking at the same time as Julian.

“I signed that contract and agreed to your terms, but Zoe didn’t. You can’t have a wedding without two people.”

“Well...” Robert stretched the word out and smirked. He continued tapping his fingers against the table. His eyes focused on the heavy fabrics that draped from the ceiling high above the chandelier. His fingers stopped abruptly. “You can’t have a wedding without two people, but we can film a wedding with you. If we have to get a stand-in for Zoe, we’ll get a stand-in.”

My jaw dropped. “Seriously?” I interjected. “A stand-in?”

A stand-in? On my wedding day? Oh my God!

“Absolutely not,” Julian barked, his jaw clenching as he noticeably ground his teeth. “I’m not walking down the aisle with anyone but Zoe.”

Robert leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table. “I don’t want you to walk down the aisle with anyone else either. I want you and Zoe. I want...” He gestured to us and our body language. “...this. You two may be my golden couple. You two may be the only couple to survive the show and actually marry. This is good TV.”

What the hell? This isn’t good TV. This is our life!

“This is fucked up, Brady and you know it!” Julian roared, pushing his chair away from the table and standing.

“No. This is business, Julian. I had my lawyers review the contract for any way you can get out of it and there isn’t one. If you want to get married on January first because—what was the reason again? Your families are going to be in town?”

Neither Julian nor I answered the question so Robert rose to his feet and continued.

“Whatever the reason, it was your decision to wed before the contract runs out in April. You knew what the terms were. You made the decision, not me, so don’t come in here grandstanding about what’s fucked. You want to get married on January first, then you get married on January first and we will film it and we will both get richer off of it. That’s the only option here. Your soon-to-be wife can explain to you that if there are any issues with a contract, you don’t sign it. If you have a problem with the contract, you negotiate. If you sign the contract and then do something in breach of it, you will wish you took my offer because I’ll sue you for everything you’re worth. I’ve been following your album. It’s been a slow, but steady riser. By the time we’re done in court, I wouldn’t doubt you’ll be seeing a decent return. Don’t let me take all that away from you.”

He’s right.

Julian took a step forward and I jumped up. “Wait!” I grabbed Julian’s arm, tugging him back. I looked between both men and sighed. “We’ll take the money. We’ll do the show.”

Julian’s brows furrowed and his head tilted in confusion. “What? We can still try to fight this.”

Turning my entire body toward him, I placed my hands on the center of his chest. “I love that you would do that for me, but Robert’s right. There are no loopholes to find or your team would’ve found them by now.”

His eyes burned into mine with unrelenting passion. “I want to give you the wedding you want, not the one we’re being

forced into, so for us to get married on January first, we have to keep looking.”

I slid my hands up his chest and rested them against the sides of his face. “I want to marry you on the day we decided. I want to be your wife. If we have to do it on TV, fine. But I am marrying you on January first and no other woman is walking down the aisle with you on our wedding day. That’s not happening.”

Julian wrapped his arms around my waist and it was as if Robert and everything else disappeared. “So you’re okay with this?”

I gazed up at him, my heart swelling. “Is it ideal? No. But I’m going to be your wife and I can deal with anything that makes that happen.”

Julian brought his forehead to mine. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you,” I returned breathily.

Robert cleared his throat. “So I take it we have a deal?”

The excitement in his voice made my stomach turn.

“Once we have the paperwork and review it, we will be in touch,” Julian answered, releasing me out of his arms.

Robert sat down in his chair, grinning from ear to ear. “This is going to be good. This is going to be really good. I’ll have the team put together an entire wedding package. We will have one-hour specials with all the couples that happen to still be together and then finally, the crowning achievement of *The One*.” He gestured to us with both arms. “You two will complete the wedding miniseries. All the other couples and former contestants will be there to witness it. Everyone will come together to celebrate the one couple to make it. Not only will it make everyone believe in the idea that they can find

love on this show, but it'll really reel in audience members for the third and fourth sessions.”

His entire focus was on the wedding special and not on the fact that it was our wedding.

I spoke up, folding my arms over my chest. “I have a few things that are deal breakers for me.”

Robert laughed but picked up his phone. His thumb flew over the screen before he looked up and said, “Ready?”

“Our planner continues to plan the wedding.”

“Hmmm.” Robert sat up and pointed. “Your planner continues to plan the wedding, but at the location of my choice.”

I looked at Julian who nodded succinctly.

“Fine,” I relented. “Also, all music and fashion choices are decided by us.”

“That’s reasonable.” He nodded. “But everything about production and editing is up to me.”

“No,” Julian and I said in unison.

I smiled over at him. When he winked in response, my smile grew wider.

“You want production. Yeah, okay. That’s fine,” Julian started, running his hand across his jaw. “But we’ll make the final editing decisions. It’s our wedding.”

Robert looked at us for a long time, seeming to mull over the request. Just as he started to part his lips, the waiter entered the private room. He stopped short with a surprised look on his face because Julian and I were standing.

“Is everything okay?” he asked nervously, approaching us slowly.

Robert waved his hand so he would bring his meal to the table. “Everything is fine. Please. I’m starving.”

Me too, I thought as the heavenly smell of the Mediterranean phyllo cheese roll wafted into the air. My stomach rumbled.

The waiter eyed us suspiciously as he sat the plate in front of Robert. When he exited the room, Robert returned his gaze to us.

“Would you like some fries?” he offered, holding up the plate of eggplant fries.

“No, thank you,” Julian answered for the both of us.

I hoped my face didn’t give away how hungry I was. The various foods in front of him looked as delicious as they smelled.

“But back to what we were saying,” Julian continued. “It’s our wedding, we deserve to have a final say in what footage is presented to the public.”

“Julian, Julian, Julian... I’m really not a bad guy and this partnership we just formed makes me happy. You know why?” Robert popped a fry into his mouth. “Because it’s going to make me money. And money makes me happy. Very happy.”

“So then we agree that the final cut of the special will have to be approved by me and Zoe before it can air?”

Robert shook his head before popping a fry into his mouth. “Now, I can’t do that! This is my show. I have to have final say, but I will take what you two think into advisement.” He chewed loudly as he smiled.

Although I was disgusted by him chewing with his mouth open, I couldn’t help but wonder if that was parmesan cheese sprinkled on the eggplant fries.

“No, no deal.” Julian’s face was darkening and his eyes were narrowing. I put my hand on his back. “I’m not going to let you bully us into this and then make a joke out of us for ratings.”

“Make a joke?” The older man wiped his mouth with a napkin. “You two are the success story. You two are the one couple that made it and will give these suckers hope that they can find love too. I want this shit to be a fairy tale. I’ve already talked to Finance about the budget. I don’t know what you two were planning to spend on your wedding, but take that number and triple it.” He laughed. “But at the end of the day, this is my show. I want to tell the story that needs to be told, the story that’s best for business and a love story is good for business.”

“Drama and fights trump the love story every time in ratings and you know it,” I interjected, ripping my eyes away from his plate. “So what about this: we have final say regarding the wedding ceremony. That’s sacred and special and ours. That’s non-negotiable. Every image of us and our family and friends at the ceremony must be approved by us. Any of our family or friends who choose not to be on TV has the right to refuse and they will not be approached by producers or filmed. If we have total control of the ceremony and what you can and cannot do, you can have the major reception moments. Obviously, our input should be taken into consideration and if there’s anything we’re not comfortable with, it stops immediately. But the reception is where you’re going to get your money shots anyway. Unlimited drinks and pseudo celebrities looking for love. That’s your story and that can be your focus. If you must find filler conversations and drama, you can look for it within the former contestants of *The One* if they’ve already consented.”

Both men were quiet as I looked from one to the other.

“I can live with that,” Robert decided after a moment of silence.

“Me too,” Julian agreed.

“Also, we will have a contract drawn up for you to sign as well so we will all be under obligation to adhere to what we’ve discussed tonight.”

Robert laughed. “I like her,” he mentioned to Julian. “You made a good choice.”

Julian slipped his arm around me protectively and pulled me into him. He dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “I know.”

Chapter 6

“Are you ready yet?” Julian asked as soon as I answered my cell phone. The sound of music and laughter in the background reminded me that I needed to get downstairs.

“I’ll be down in a few minutes,” I promised as I closed my laptop. “Love you!”

I’d been mostly ready for the last twenty minutes, but I was reading over the contracts Julian’s lawyers had put together. Based on the verbal agreement we’d made with Robert at the dinnerless dinner a week prior, everything seemed to line up. Robert and the lawyers from *The One* had put something together over the weekend and had it sent over to us on the following Monday. There was a negotiation back and forth between the two groups, but by Friday night both groups had agreed. Although I was confident in Julian’s team of lawyers, I couldn’t help but look over the final drafts myself.

Just appeasing my curiosity, I told myself as I hopped on the computer twenty minutes after I got dressed.

I tucked my phone away in my black clutch and gave myself a once over in the mirror. The leather pants were tight, sticking to my body like a second skin. My sleeveless white top dipped low, showing the swell of my breasts. The clingy shirt was longer in some areas than others, giving the sexy material a cool asymmetrical edge. I shrugged on my black leather motorcycle jacket and felt like I was in a motorcycle gang.

Or Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” video.

“This is a lot of leather,” I muttered under my breath as I turned around. My ass looked fantastic in the leather pants. “But damn.”

Over the last seven days of my vacation, I’d made a point to wear my most formfitting outfits. Julian and I went out and did something new and different to make up for the time he was on tour and each night, I was in something clingy. The reality was that I knew I would likely never fit into most of the items again.

I ran my hand down my sides and took a step back, smiling at my appearance. From my burgundy, peep-toe booties to my hair, which was smoothed and pinned into a bun in the center of my head, I was pleased.

“You look beautiful,” Julian commented from the doorway.

I looked over at him as I put in white gold earrings that dangled, highlighting my exposed neck. “Thank you. I’m sorry for taking so long. I’m ready now.” I smiled at him as I walked in his direction.

He slipped into the room, closing the door behind him. As soon as I was close, Julian put his hands around my neck. Leaning his face down to mine, our lips were just millimeters apart.

I inhaled, breathing him in. He always smelled so good, clean with an earthy undertone.

“Hi.” The word was small but the effect his voice had on me was big.

I wanted to kiss him so badly I could almost taste the amaretto on his lips. “Hi,” I breathed, sliding my hands inside of the fitted suit jacket he wore.

His lips brushed mine softly, gently. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to succumb to the warmth of his body and the fire in his touch. His hands tightened around my neck slightly

as he moaned into my mouth. I squeezed my thighs together in an attempt to relieve the tension he'd just created.

He pulled out of the kiss and my eyes fluttered open.

We stared at each other, motionless. My lips tingled and my eyes dropped down to his lips.

"I came upstairs to see if you were okay," Julian informed me with a hint of concern as he searched my face. "You were taking a long time."

"I'm sorry. I was distracted on the computer and then with the realization that this will probably be the last time I wear these pants. I wanted to bask in the glory. Because I mean, come on..." I stepped out of his arms to turn around.

"Damn," he swore quietly.

I peeked over my shoulder and his eyes were glued to my ass as I moved it from side to side seductively. "You like?"

Julian grabbed my arm and spun me back around. He put my hand over the dark denim bulge in the front of his pants and I inhaled sharply.

"I don't like. I love," he growled as my fingers gripped him and maneuvered over his thickness.

As seconds passed, my heart raced and my chest heaved. He had me pinned with his eyes as he moved my hand up and down over the growing bulge. I was tempted to drop to my knees and wrap my mouth around his dick, but the sound of my phone going off inside my clutch gave me pause.

Once everyone gets here, we have to leave and Lenny is always late so that's probably a text from her telling me she's on her way. Hmmm... maybe there's time.

"What time will everyone be here?" I asked, unzipping his jeans slowly and snaking my hand inside. Only the thin cotton of his boxer briefs separated me from what I really wanted.

Julian wrapped one hand around my neck and ran the fingers of his other hand across my collarbone, giving me chills. “Everyone’s here, but they can wait twenty more minutes,” he whispered sexily before he leaned in for a kiss.

I dodged his parted lips and my overeager hand froze mid-stroke. “Everyone’s here?”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to stop.” His fingertips came in contact with my hard nipples before he palmed my heavy breasts. “They can wait.”

He tried to kiss me again and I swatted him away as I removed my hand from his pants and reached for the doorknob. “Julian! I didn’t know everyone was here already!”

He chuckled from deep in his belly at my panic and even though I wanted to narrow my eyes at him, his laugh spread warmth through me.

I could feel the confusion on my face as he continued to look at me in total amusement. “Even Lenny is here?”

“Even Lenny is here.”

“I haven’t seen my best friends in forever and I’m being a terrible host! I thought just your boys were down there.” I threw my hands up in the air in mock frustration. “You can’t come up here looking like that and seduce me when we have a house full of guests!”

He made his way to the mirror and adjusted himself. “I seduced you? You were the one waving that ass around. You know how I can’t resist it.”

I eyed him. “And you know I can’t resist you.”

His dark denim jeans, plain white t-shirt, and fitted grey blazer looked incredible on him.

Julian was undeniably sexy. From the way he moved to the way he spoke to the way he dressed, Julian managed to make

everything he did call out to my mind, my body, and my soul. On top of that, the clothing he chose to adorn his magnificent body always looked like it was custom made just for him.

Well the blazer was custom made just for him, but still.

He adjusted the crotch of his jeans once more as he turned to face me. His grin stretched from ear to ear. “Well if you can’t resist me and I can’t resist you, maybe we should stop putting up a fight and give in to the feeling.”

With a giggle, I picked up my clutch from the carpeted floor; I didn’t even realize how or when it had ended up there. “But,” I paused, letting the clenching feeling deep in my core pass. “They’re waiting on us.” I sounded breathy and unsure... and completely horny. I ripped my eyes from his lips and tried to look more convincing than I sounded.

Yep. Saved it.

I gave myself a mental high-five until Julian licked his lips as if he heard the hesitation in my voice.

I swallowed hard.

Without warning, Julian lurched toward me and I squealed before attempting to take off running out the door. As soon as the door opened, the music thumping through the house greeted me. Julian grabbed me from behind, pulling me into his body, my back to his front. He had one hand splayed across my belly and one over my heart.

“Don’t run. I don’t want you to slip and fall.” His lips skated across the back of my neck before landing right behind my ear. He kissed and nibbled on my skin for a second before he added with his voice lowered, “I don’t want anything to happen to you or our baby.”

I melted. He made my heart swell.

“I got you.” Julian lifted me and held me steady until I could get back on my feet. “You okay?”

I looked back at him. “I was swooning.”

He laughed loudly, smacking me on my ass as he let me go.

“I love you,” I said, intertwining my hand with his. I looked at him, attempting to have a serious moment as he continued to be entertained by my swoon. “And I love that you said that, because I am so enamored with...our poem.” I stretched out the word ‘poem’ hoping Julian would understand that I was using it as code for ‘baby’.

“Poem?” Julian questioned, his brows furrowed as we descended the staircase.

Come on, love. You did not have that much to drink.

I touched my belly. “Our poem.”

His eyes widened. “Oh!” He nodded as he grinned at me. “I like that.”

“I was worried you weren’t on the same page as me.”

“Well, counselor, in my defense, this is the first time you’ve ever referred to our...poem as a poem.”

I poked him in his side as we landed on the first floor of the house. “Or Scott must be playing bartender because he always makes the drinks extra strong.”

“Speaking of extra strong drinks, how are you going to distract from the fact that you’re not drinking?”

“I’ll just say I can’t afford the empty calories.” I winked. “See, I have a plan.”

“Oh speaking of a plan, the honeymoon is planned and booked.”

All the air left my lungs as I stopped on the bottom step. My heart pounded. “What?”

“You’ve been busy looking for dresses and giving ideas to the wedding planner so I wanted to do something for you—well, for us.” His eyes were full of excitement and his smile was boyish. He closed the gap between us, teasing, “Don’t you want to know where we’re going?”

With him on the marble landing and me on the last step, I was eye to eye with the love of my life. The love I felt for him was reflected back to me through his eyes and the apprehension I was feeling was forced down, out of my consciousness.

“Where are we going?” I whispered.

“Italy. A few days in Venice, a few days in Rome, and finally we will spend the rest of the time relaxing at Lake Como.”

Maybe it was the alcohol, but he was beaming and I could tell he was thrilled. His energy was infectious.

“That sounds amazing, Julian! Thank you.” I threw my arms around his neck and he held me close, nuzzling my hair.

“Anything for you. Thank you for accepting my proposal.”

I pulled away from him slightly so I could look into his eyes again. “Thank you for proposing. Becoming your wife is an honor.”

I wasn’t surprised by the sweetness of him planning our honeymoon, but I was just a little surprised he didn’t remember I had to return to work by January third.

Our lips met softly, lovingly before I ended it in a series of pecks. I stepped down onto the landing and looked up at him. “That trip sounds amazing, but I have to be back at work soon after the wedding.”

“No, you don’t,” Julian replied distractedly as we walked toward the music. “If they won’t let you take the time off, fuck

them.”

I stopped, my mouth dipping into a slight frown. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t have to go back. You don’t have to work. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” He cupped my face and gazed into my eyes. “You’re about to be my wife and you’re having my baby. I’m always going to take care of you and make sure you’re okay.”

He’s drunk...or at least tipsy. He’s not implying that I... I shook my head, unable to finish the thought. He’s tipsy.

The nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach was definitely there, but the look he gave me soothed me until I forgot about it.

He brought his lips so close to mine that if I moved at all, we’d kiss. The electricity between us was palpable and I felt myself succumbing to my feelings. I knew I’d have to talk to him about what was bothering me, but I couldn’t do it right then.

Our friends are here... He’s been drinking... And I don’t want to. Not right now. I just want to stay in this moment.

Having Julian so close made it hard to think straight, let alone have a coherent conversation that strictly followed logic and went against what my heart wanted me to do. Inhaling his scent, feeling his touch, and staring into his eyes rendered me powerless. In general, I knew I had to tell him that I’d worked too hard and too long to just abandon my goals to solely be a wife and mother. In actuality, I knew that over the last two weeks creating and cultivating our family had somehow become the most important thing to me. If Julian asked me to choose between being his wife and taking care of our child or pursuing the goals I’d had since I was a little girl, I would choose our family.

And that scares the shit out of me.

Julian's lips came in contact with mine and the fear, anxiety, and nerves that sat heavy in the pit of my stomach dissipated. All I felt was love, hope, devotion, and commitment as my heart thudded in my chest and my skin tingled.

"I love you," I murmured against his sweet lips.

Before Julian could respond, I heard my best friend before I saw her.

"Zoe Elise Jordan!" Koko screamed loudly over the music.

Julian and I backed away from each other and I grinned. "Kumiko Liane Green!" I yelled back as she came barreling toward me.

With her long, jet black hair mostly streaked with teal framing her heart-shaped face, Koko looked amazing. Her makeup was impeccable, highlighting her porcelain complexion and she wore a short black dress with thigh-high black boots.

Julian let my hand go as soon as it was clear Koko was not slowing down. My eyebrows flew up as she threw her arms around me at a solid five miles per hour.

"I've missed you so much!" Her squeal mixed with her laugh, amusing me. "And you look hot!"

I giddily returned, "So do you and I've missed you too! This is the longest we've gone without seeing each other."

"We've never been apart for this long. It's been what? Six weeks? Seven?" She let me go and stepped back to look at me. "You look good. You look the same."

I knew she meant I wasn't showing and I nodded. "We have to figure out how we can fix our schedules so we can see each other more often. We've been so busy lately."

“Yeah, I know what you have been busy doing.” She cut her eyes to Julian before thrusting her slim hips against me repeatedly.

The pointed look she gave Julian was hysterical.

Julian and I cracked up. I tossed my head back and with my eyes closed and I felt carefree and a little sentimental. I’d missed her so much. Going almost seven weeks without seeing the person who had been there for me my entire adulthood and who I’d lived with since I moving to California was rough.

During the break between the first and second sessions of *The One*, Koko showed up to my office with dinner. That was the night I discovered the break in the case. I told her the next day on the phone that it was due to her mom’s home-cooked stir-fry and yakitori.

“Are we humping Zoe now? Is that how we’re saying hello?” Lennon asked as she walked up on us.

Throwing open my arms, I embraced my former coworker that I hadn’t seen in months. “Lenny!” I took a step back. “You look gorgeous.”

Lenny’s shoulder-length auburn hair had so much body as she sashayed and spun in a circle. Her black pencil skirt on her full figure gave her a sexy pinup look. She wore a red cropped top that was both low cut and managed to show off a small section of skin right below the breasts. The glow of her honey-toned skin combined with her signature winged eyeliner and bright red lipstick just added to her overall beauty and style.

“Thank you, thank you.” Lenny grinned. “And you, you are stunning. Turn around, let me see you.”

As if I was a runway model or at a fashion show, I took a few steps and then posed before turning and posing again.

“Yasss, honey!” Lenny cheered. She looked at Julian with a quirked eyebrow. “If I were you, I would marry this one before

we get to the club. Someone is going to try to take her.”

“Right,” Koko added, tilting her head to the side, assessing my outfit. “You look flawless and your ass is going to inspire a few rap songs tonight.”

Julian ambled over to me, a sexy smile on his face. His eyes were bright with adoration as he winked at me before looking at my friends. “I’m a lucky man.” He planted a soft kiss on my lips and with his back to them and his eyes on me, he told them, “She’s mine, and I’m lucky to have her. I’m not worried about anyone taking what’s mine.”

The feminist in me would’ve cringed at the reference to ownership if my panties weren’t completely soaked.

Well damn... I exhaled.

Julian placed another sexy but swift kiss against my lips and then took a step back. Leaving me speechless and a little breathless, he turned and walked toward the music, leaving me alone in the foyer with two of my closest friends.

I stared wide eyed as he turned the corner, I couldn’t deny the truth in it.

I was his. I had never given myself as completely to anyone and I didn’t think it was possible to love someone as fully as I did. My mind was consumed with thoughts of him. My heart was full of love for him. My body only called out for him. As much as I hated the terminology, it was true. I was his in every way.

“Zoe...” Koko’s voice had a hint of exasperation as if she’d been calling my name for a while.

I shook my head and snapped out of it. I looked at them and we all started laughing at the same time.

“I’m a stone cold bitch and even I was a little into that,” Lenny joked, putting her hand on her hip. “And to think I

wanted to fix you up on a blind date with my cousin.”

The music from the living room happened to turn off at the same time Koko laughed at Lennon’s statement. Her gasping giggles were high-pitched and shrill and somehow managed to echo throughout the house. It didn’t take long for me and Lenny to start laughing with her.

“Zoe!” Keisha greeted me as she sauntered over to me, leaving Omar and Scott salivating behind her.

My jaw dropped. With rich brown skin and large almond shaped eyes, Keisha had always been a gorgeous woman. She had a permanent glow about her that radiated through her pores. Over the last few years, with our strict study schedules and then crazy work schedules, Keisha and I never went out to a club or lounge together. Even in our undergraduate years, Keisha didn’t ever want to go to the club because she opted to study so seeing Keisha in club attire was shocking.

“Keisha, you look hot!” I exclaimed, forgoing a proper greeting. We embraced. “I mean, really hot.”

Wearing tight black cigarette pants and a black and sheer cropped corset, Keisha was definitely bringing sex appeal.

“I needed a night out so I went shopping and...here we are.”

I looked her up and down and then looked at Koko and Lenny. “Are you guys seeing this?” I gestured to her curvy body that was scantily clad. “Our little girl is growing up.”

My friends laughed.

“I was shocked she didn’t come in here with one of her power suits,” Koko chimed in.

We all laughed hysterically as she pointed to Scott. He was holding the jacket that matched her pants.

Keisha was a professional and while I prided myself on my business attire and professionalism, I liked to toe the line and

let my personality shine through my clothes. Keisha kept it traditional and owned a ridiculous amount of pantsuits. They looked good on her and fit her body well, but it seemed like every single picture of her that would float down our newsfeed on the rare occasion she'd post on social media was of her in a pantsuit.

I greeted Julian's best friends and then took a step back and looked around at our bridal party.

This is a good-looking bunch of bridesmaids and groomsmen.

I hugged Scott first because he was closest. With olive skin, hazel eyes, and short brown hair, Scott looked like he was a model for one of those name brand clothing stores where rich teens shopped. He had a charming, easy going smile and gave off a friendly, good guy vibe.

Next, I hugged James, the quintessential bad boy of the group. He had that sexy, bad boy look which he used to his advantage for the women who were into that sort of thing. Even though he looked the part, he was really a good guy. He had dark brown shoulder-length hair that he kept pulled back into a bun. He had a beard, mustache combo that added to his allure and gave him a mysterious vibe. His skin was the color of desert sand and his voice was deep, yet soft, especially when he spoke Farsi.

Last, but not least, I hugged Omar. Julian had grown up with him so out of the three, Omar was his best friend. He was the epitome of tall, dark and handsome. He had black hair that was cut close and he was always clean shaven when I saw him. His chocolate brown eyes and dark caramel skin tone added to why he was strikingly handsome.

They were all tall, and very attractive, each with a very unique style, but tonight all of them were wearing their own spin on pretty much the same outfit.

I'd never tell them that though. I wouldn't hear the end of it.

“Are we finally ready?” I asked jokingly since I was the reason we were late.

Groans and laughter mixed as we streamed out the door and all the way down the driveway. After passing through the gate, we piled into the spacious stretch Hummer limousine. Once we'd gotten on the highway, I passed a bottle of champagne around as I took a bottle of water.

“I'd like to make a toast,” I started, lifting my water bottle up.

“With water?” Omar asked skeptically.

“Empty calories. I have a wedding dress to squeeze into.”

They hooted and hollered as I tried not to laugh. I waited until everyone finished their cheers and joined me in the toast.

“First and foremost, to Julian who proposed to me two weeks ago today, I love you with every fiber of my being.”

I grinned as everyone took a sip of the expensive bubbly. I turned to Julian just as he was attempting to give me a kiss on the cheek. Since I was facing him, his lips landed on mine and I couldn't resist kissing him back.

Even though they were just two little pecks, I could still feel Julian's amaretto soaked lips against mine. I licked my lips and closed my eyes.

“So do you think they forgot we were here? Or...more probably, Zoe forgot what she was going to say?” Lenny asked loudly, bringing my mind back to our friends.

My eyes flew open. I tried to look serious, but I could feel the love-struck smile on my face.

“I'm assuming there's a second of all. You can't say first of all without a second of all.” Koko giggled from directly in front of me.

I looked around the limo as the amusement loudly bounced around the vehicle. “He’s been gone for two months and his kisses are distracting,” I explained, looking around. “Sorry!”

Everyone groaned again as the teasing revved up.

“Okay, okay, okay.” I tried to corral everyone’s attention back toward me as I suppressed the giggle that lodged in my throat. Once everyone was quiet and had their glasses back up, I continued, “When Julian and I called you all last weekend to tell you about the conversation with the creator of *The One* and the contractual obligation, we knew there was a chance you wouldn’t want to take part in the wedding. But you all still did and that means everything to us. When we asked if you would be interested in coming down for dress shopping and tux fitting, we were sure some of you wouldn’t be able to make it, but you rearranged your schedules to come into town tonight so we could make a night out of this and then handle wedding business tomorrow. Everything is happening so fast and we appreciate you rolling with it.” I felt myself getting choked up and it took me by surprise. I cleared my throat. “I just want to say that I love you, we love you and we thank you. Now let’s get crazy tonight!”

Everyone cheered and someone turned the music up as a Julian Winters-produced track thumped through the speakers.

Forty-five minutes later, we arrived at Lux Lounge. The Los Angeles club was a celebrity hotspot due to the strict no cell phone policy. Stories about famous hookups at the club littered gossip magazines, but with no photo evidence, the stories died quickly.

“Don’t forget to leave your phone in here,” Julian reminded us just as we rolled to a stop at the side of the building.

The limo driver opened the door and as soon as I stepped out, the flash of a paparazzi photographer taking a picture

surprised me. When Julian stepped out of the car behind me, the onslaught of photos and questions commenced.

“Julian! Zoe! Over here!”

“Pose for a picture!”

“Let us see the ring!”

“Are the wedding rumors true?”

“Why the rush?”

“What took so long?”

It was overwhelming so I kept my head down and walked toward the building. I felt Julian’s hand on the small of my back and it filled me with a sense of safety and security.

As each of the rest of our friends ducked out, the questions were directed toward them.

“Who are you? Are you musicians?”

“Why are they rushing down the aisle?”

“Are you going to the wedding?”

“Do you know when the wedding is?”

After finding Julian’s name on the list, security let us in the VIP entrance and we waited in the mirrored hallway. One by one, our friends rushed in.

“Don’t worry about it, Lenny,” James said as he followed her in. They were the last to enter. “He’s an asshole.”

“Who’s an asshole?” I asked, taking note of Lennon’s flushed face.

“Some idiot out there told me I was pretty for a big girl.” Lenny shrugged.

“What?” Koko and I exclaimed in outraged unison.

“Who was it?” Keisha added. It was at that moment I realized that she had put her fitted jacket back on.

Julian looked pissed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s the most ass backwards ‘compliment’ and unfortunately, I get it all the time, but never with so many cameras recording it,” she explained. She gestured to James with her bright red lips turned upward into a smile. “But James here went straight knight in shining armor and threatened the guy.”

James ran his hand over his beard as he looked at her. “If I’m the knight, does that make you a damsel in distress?”

“I don’t need a knight,” Lenny returned. Her eyes narrowed, but there was a hint of a smile on her lips.

James smirked. “That’s because you haven’t experienced this knight before.”

“Oh shit!” Omar laughed.

“Ohhhh!” Julian and Scott called out, hyping the situation up.

Koko and Keisha fanned themselves.

The door opened, interrupting our ridiculousness.

Oh. My. God.

Three of the four members of the pop-rock group Burgundy Four walked in. They offered polite greetings and then saw Julian.

“Julian!” The lead singer, Adam Dean, gave Julian a handshake, one-armed hug greeting. “I’ve been meaning to get in touch with you. How are you?”

“I’m good, man. I’m good,” Julian replied as he slipped his arm around me. “Life is good.”

Adam looked at me and replied, “I see that it is.” Taking my hand, Adam kissed it. “Very nice to meet you.”

Julian pushed his shoulder good-naturedly. “Okay Mr. Sexiest Man of the Year, keep it moving. This is my fiancé you’re flirting with.”

After the other members of the group greeted and congratulated Julian and Julian offered a quick introduction to all of us, Adam said, “I’m sorry, man. I’ll keep my flirting to myself. I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that you are engaged.” He looked at me. “You must be something because this is the pickiest man I’ve ever met.”

“Okay, okay, you can go now,” Julian joked, while his best friends howled with laughter.

There must be some truth to that, I considered silently as I grinned.

“I’m going to get in touch with you Monday. We’re looking for a certain sound and we think you can give it to us.”

“Call me and we can set something up.”

After the Burgundy Four continued down the long hallway, Julian turned and looked us. “Before we go inside, I just want to say that the bullshit with the paparazzi will die down after the wedding airs. For a couple of months after the show aired, Zoe and I didn’t really go out in L.A. We didn’t really go out much at all, now that I think about it. Then the summer show with Bailey premiered and it was safe to live our lives again. It may be like this for the next month or so, and not just for us, for you too. If it’s too much for you and you want to back out, we will understand. We know we’re asking for a lot from you.”

“How much liquor did you put in those drinks Scott?” Omar asked. “You have Julian over here being emotional and shit.” The guys laughed as Omar came over and slapped Julian on

the back. “I’ve been your boy since you moved to Cali. I didn’t stop having your back when you wore suspenders in eighth grade. I didn’t stop having your back when you almost got us kicked out of the dorm because you played your music too loud. I didn’t stop having your back when you put every penny into your studio and didn’t have enough money to eat. I didn’t stop having your back when you started succeeding. So don’t think a couple cameras and a few write-ups in the media will stop me from having your back. And that goes for all of us. Now we came here to party so get your sappy ass together and let’s do this shit!”

Everyone cheered and I gave Omar the biggest hug. When I looked back up at Julian, I saw the worry in his eyes had dissipated completely and I was happy about that.

I glanced at my best friends and realized that while Julian’s best friends may have grown used to this life, my friends were new to it.

“I’m going to talk to the ladies for a second,” I whispered to Julian. “You guys go ahead. We’ll be right behind you.”

The guys headed down the hallway and I turned to my best friends.

“To piggyback off what Julian said, are you okay with all this? It’s crazy and inconvenient, but it should die down soon after the wedding. If it makes you uncomfortable in any way, please don’t feel like you have to do this.”

“It’s fine,” Koko said, waving her hand in the air. “I’m supporting my best friend in the entire world. Period.”

“Yeah, it’s a few pictures. Don’t worry about us,” Keisha added, touching my arm comfortingly.

“Exactly. We can handle it. And that guy outside was nothing compared to the Friday night crowd at Breakers.

Don't tell me you've been in the law office for so long you've forgotten?"

I laughed. "No, I didn't forget." I looked at each of the gorgeous women who'd had my back for my entire adult life. "I love you so much. Thank you for being here."

We did a group hug and then walked to catch up with the guys, where they were waiting at the door for us. The closer we came to the door with the words 'Entrance Only' emblazoned across the top, the more the mirrors seemed to shake from the vibrations of the music on the other side.

"I am uncomfortable with one thing," Lenny whispered.

"What's that?" I asked, glancing at her in the mirror as we continued the walk.

"I'm kind of into James right now."

"Uh, yeah. Obviously." Koko's shrill giggle-gasp combo stopped us all in our tracks.

"Where did that come from?" Keisha asked Lenny, seeming to hold in a giggle.

"Did you hear what he said to me back there?" Lenny peeked over my shoulder to where the men stood and then huddled us all closer together.

"Yeah, the knight in shining armor thing," I answered.

She shook her head. "After that. You were talking to Adam Dean." She looked at the other two. "Did you hear him?"

"No, I was trying to get Adam's attention to let him know I'm newly single," Koko admitted, running her hands through her blue hair.

Keisha shook her head. "I was in an argument with Omar and Scott. What did he say?"

“He said that both him and his dick would love the opportunity to show me just how beautiful I am. I told him I have no doubt about how beautiful I am. And his response was that his dick could tell me in ways I’d never experienced before.” Lenny gave us a look. “I damn near came right then and there!”

I laughed so hard I doubled over. Julian found his way over to us and rubbed my heaving back with a hand wrapped around my arm for support.

“What’s so funny?” he asked when I stood up straight to wipe the tears from my eyes.

“I’ll tell you when we get inside.” I looked in the mirror to make sure my eyeliner wasn’t running. I caught Lenny’s eye in the reflection and she gave me the same look, causing me to crack up all over again.

“What’s so funny?” Scott asked, looking around at all of us.

James eyed us all before his eyes landed on Lenny. “They’re laughing because Lenny’s not going to be able to walk tomorrow.” Then he opened the door and the hallway flooded with music and blinking lights.

If that wasn’t a mic drop, I don’t know what is.

Chapter 7

I pushed my sunglasses to the top of my head as we approached the boutique. I was exhausted, but Koko, Lenny and Keisha were suffering from varying degrees of being hung over. I'd hoped brunch would perk the ladies up, but they were still a little sluggish.

Lux Lounge was a success. We had a VIP space on the second floor balcony so we could overlook the packed dance floor and party privately. We only left the VIP area once so we could dance in the throng of people on the floor. The majority of the night we just spent time with each other, having a good time.

It was the first time since Julian's birthday, the first year we were a couple, that we'd all gotten together like that. With all of our busy schedules, whenever something was planned, all eight of us weren't able to attend because one or two had prior commitments. It wasn't our official bachelor and bachelorette party, but with so little time before the wedding, we partied like it was.

"Here we are," I announced, holding open the door open to Urbane Bridal.

"Why are you so perky?" Koko whined, her long ponytail swinging back and forth as she entered first.

I felt refreshed, especially after Julian had surprised me with a quickie in the shower before the ladies and I embarked on a day of shopping.

"It's so early," Keisha groaned as she crossed the threshold into the boutique.

I laughed. “It’s eleven o’clock.”

“Yeah, but it was a late night,” Lenny complained as she passed me.

I shook my head and followed the three of them into the boutique.

“Hi! Welcome to Urbane Bridal. Do you have an appointment?”

“Yes,” I answered, walking around my friends. “My name is Zoe. We have an eleven o’clock.”

“Yes, we have you right here, Ms. Jordan. I’m Anastacia and I will be your consultant today. Please follow me.”

We followed the clicking of her heels as she swiftly moved us through the empty boutique to one of two stark white dressing areas. One of the three walls was just one big mirror and directly across a row of free-standing curtains created the actual dressing rooms. Three antique couches and a chaise lounge were strategically situated along the back wall with a glass table with mimosas and water on the table.

“Wow,” I commented as we entered the room.

Anastacia tossed her auburn hair over her shoulder and smiled. “I take it you like the set up.”

I nodded. It looked like something from the movies.

Is this where they filmed ‘Pretty Woman’? I wondered, trying to think back to the movie I saw my freshman year in high school.

“This is your area for the next ninety minutes. You are free to choose up to four dresses per person at a time to bring back to this dressing area. I will be your main consultant, but Kim will also be assisting. The brides who choose Urbane Bridal are usually looking for something different. Your chart said

you were looking for black dresses so I'll have Kim bring in our suggestions. Do you have any questions?"

"No, thank you. I'm just excited to get started."

"While we wait for Kim, tell me a little about you and your fiancé. What song are you walking down the aisle to?"

The corner of my mouth quirked up as I thought about the plans Julian and I had made. "An acoustic version of Chele King's 'Always The One'."

Just thinking about Chele King's voice singing those lyrics instantly made my eyes sting. Somehow, without knowing me or my relationship, Chele King managed to encompass every single thought, feeling, and emotion that I had about Julian. "Always The One" wasn't just a song to me; it was my heart, fully exposed. Having my feelings represented through Chele King's song as I walked down the aisle to the man I wanted to spend my life with felt right to me. On my wedding day, I wanted to shout my love for Julian from the rooftops and with that song, the love that filled my heart would be completely on display for everyone to see.

"Check out the expression on her face. Awww," Keisha teased wistfully, both of her hands on her chest.

Anastacia looked over her shoulder, seeming to look for Kim. When she looked at me again, her brown eyes bore into mine with feigned interest. "So, how did the two of you fall in love? How do you know he's the man you want to spend your life with?"

I knew she wasn't sincerely interested, but fortunately, I loved talking about how much I loved Julian.

"Well we fell for each other fast and even though I knew it was real, I also knew it was way too soon for marriage and he felt the same way. Once we officially became a couple, we spent a lot of time at home, just the two of us. He was out of

town every other week for a couple of days for work and I was studying for the bar exam so we were busy, but we made it work. Even though we already felt that ‘in love’ feeling, we spent a lot of time getting to know each other on a deeper level. We took the time to build what we had. We didn’t just want to give each other butterflies; we wanted to give each other a future together. He is the best man I’ve ever known.”

“Awwww,” my friends cooed, causing me to giggle.

Anastacia’s face softened. “He sounds perfect.”

“He’s not.” I had a huge grin on my face as I shook my head. “He’s not perfect at all. Occasionally he’ll get it wrong just like I do. We argue and fight just like anyone else, but the difference between him and any other man I’ve ever known is that he understands me. He gets me completely and I understand and get him too. And because we communicate so well, every argument has ultimately just brought us closer. I wouldn’t trade him for anything in the world.”

“Well, you sound happy and he sounds like a catch,” Anastacia commented.

“I am and he is.” I looked down briefly, feeling a swell of emotions come over me. I swallowed them back. “I’m blessed.”

A blonde I assumed was Kim pushed in a rolling cart full of black dresses and then disappeared. Once the dresses arrived, my friends shifted from giggling school girls to fashion week fashionistas.

Anastacia pulled each of the dresses from the cart and showed them to us. I wasn’t impressed, but I was more interested in the feedback from my bridesmaids. They were also unimpressed.

“These are lovely.” I gestured to the tulle, silk, and satin fabrics. “But I am looking for something different. I want it to

be interesting without being distracting. Would it be okay if we looked around?”

Anastacia did a horrible job of hiding her displeasure. I could tell she was excited about the dresses she'd picked, but I knew what I wanted. With a sad smile plastered on her face, she said, “Of course. Feel free to roam around.”

She turned on her heel and the clicking of her shoes on the floor alerted us to how fast she exited.

“Great job, Bridezilla,” Koko joked as she poked me in my side.

I jumped away from the tickling and smacked her hand playfully. “I hope I didn't hurt her feelings. That was not my intention at all.”

Keisha put her arm around me. “No, you were sweet about it. I think she was just really proud of her selection and when you shut her down, she was disappointed.”

“Yeah, don't worry about it,” Lenny added. “It's your wedding day. You have to pick what you want.”

Keisha bumped me with her hip before letting me go. “Even if you are a bridezilla.”

I pointed at each of them as they laughed at me. “You're all in a three-way tie for the worst!”

We spent twenty minutes searching for dresses that could be purchased same-day since they were leaving in a few hours and there wouldn't be a lot of time for alterations if we had to wait for shipping. Another group of bridesmaids entered and I felt pressure to find something before they started looking as well. I didn't want my perfect bridesmaid dress to wind up in the ‘no’ pile in the other dressing room.

If this place doesn't have the dresses, I don't know—

My thoughts stopped almost as abruptly as I did.

“That’s it,” I mumbled after being in a daze for at least a minute.

I grabbed the dress from the wall and held it in my hands. The black satin gown was short in the front and long in the back. It had a deep V-neck with a sheer and black lace panel that carried over the shoulders and down to the small of the back. The dress was sexy without trying too hard. It used traditional fabrics in a unique way.

It was completely me.

“Hey, I found it,” I called out to my friends. As they got closer, their eyes widened. “Anastacia!” I swept my eyes around and heard her shoes clicking the floor before I actually saw her.

“Oh!” The surprise in her voice as she stared at the dress gave me pause, but I didn’t let it deter me.

“Do you have this dress in stock?”

“Well we just got it today. It is an original design concept from Urbane’s couture line. It’s at market price and will be for the next eight weeks. We get new shipments of the mass market dresses every day though.” She made a face. “Sorry.”

“Oh okay. It sounds as if you’re making some assumptions.” I flashed a tight smile, not trying to be rude even though I felt like she was trying to talk me out of looking at the dress. “So to be clear, I looked at the price tag and I’m aware of the cost, but I appreciate you letting me know.”

“Not a problem.” Her smile matched mine. “I can find some similar styles for you just in case. Now that I know what style you’re looking for, I’m sure I can find you some great alternatives.”

I paused, grinding my teeth from irritation. My eyes narrowed, challenging her. “No, this isn’t the style I’m looking for. This is the dress. This exact dress.”

“Oh,” Anastacia replied, her thin auburn eyebrows relocated to the center of her forehead. She pursed her lips before casting her gaze to my friends. “I’ll need to take measurements and then I can check.”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

She gave me a tight smile as she turned and stormed off to the back of the store.

“What was that about?” Koko asked with her hands on her hips.

I carried the dress in my arms like a small child. “I have no idea.”

“If she wants the commission and doesn’t want to lose it to Kim, I suggest she fixes her attitude,” Lenny snapped.

Keisha laughed. “I was thinking the same thing! We will call Kim over to do our measurements in a heartbeat.”

A few minutes after we entered our dressing area, Anastacia reappeared with Kim on her heels. I sat on the couch directly in the middle and picked up a bottle of water. Anastacia and Kim took Koko and Keisha behind the curtains first.

“So...?” I pried, dying for an opportunity to ask Lenny about the conclusion of her night. “I saw you and James talking in the kitchen before Julian and I went to bed. What’s going on with you two?”

“And speak up so we can hear you!” Keisha yelled out.

Koko started laughing which just made me laugh. A second later, all four of us were cracking up.

“Well...” Lenny started, a glimmer of something devious in her eyes. “James talks a big game, but he’s nothing like he seems.”

I covered my ears and recoiled from her. “Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

Koko's curtain opened first and then Keisha's. They were both wearing white oversized robes.

"I think I'm thinking the same thing Zoe is thinking," Koko vocalized in a singsong voice.

Anastacia gestured for Lenny to come to her. "I'm ready when you are."

Lenny got up and winked at us in the mirror. "To be continued."

The three of us loudly speculated until Lenny was done with her measurements and exited in the same white robe the other two wore.

She strutted across the room toward us. "I've been around James maybe ten times over the last couple of years and even though I think he's sexy, I was never interested in him. I mean, there was always a woman all over him. I honestly don't think I've ever seen him without a woman trying to attach herself to him, so I thought he was a playboy, you know?" A small smile played on her lips. "But last night, we just talked."

"Awww," I cooed.

"Not that we could've fucked anyway with how loud you and Julian were," Lenny finished, giving me a look.

I felt my face starting to heat up as Koko and Keisha howled with laughter. A giggle escaped my lips as I tried to look perplexed.

"What are you guys talking about?"

"I didn't know what that knocking was!" Koko gasped between bouts of laughter. "I thought I was just having a drunken dream!"

Keisha was clutching Lenny's arm as she tried to talk. "I thought Scott was watching porn!"

I let my head fall into my hands as I laughed. My shoulders bounced and my stomach muscles hurt.

“Sounds to me like I know why you’re marrying him,” Koko joked before she stood up and thrust her hips.

Anastacia walked in just in time to see Koko’s slim hips pumping, which made us laugh even harder.

“While you’re standing, here’s the size two,” Anastacia said slowly, hanging the dress in one of the dressing rooms. She looked at Koko. “You can get dressed when you’re ready.”

She looked at Keisha. “Your measurements indicate that you’d be a size six; however, due to your, um, lower body—”

“My ass,” Keisha offered, taking a sip of her mimosa.

“Well, um.” Anastacia flushed. “Yes. I have an eight here for you. You’ll need to get it taken in.”

With a look at Lenny, Anastacia looked uncomfortable as she hung up the third dress in the third dressing room. “Your dress is right here.” She gave her a sympathetic look. “If you need a larger size, we don’t have anything bigger than this. Our slimming girdles are around the corner in the bridal lingerie section. That should help.”

My mouth fell open and I eyed her glaringly. “That was rude and unnecessary.”

“Oh, it wasn’t my intention to be rude,” she replied in a tone that contradicted her words.

“Zoe, it’s cool. Anastacia, I should be good with the size twenty, but thank you so much for your concern.” Lenny rolled her eyes.

“We are going to sit and talk for a few minutes before we get started,” Koko announced.

I looked at my phone to check the time and nodded. “We’ll let you know when we’re ready to get started.”

“Very well,” she replied as she exited the area, shoes clicking in her wake.

“We’re not going to let her negative ass ruin our time together. So let’s get back to the porn star Zoe is marrying,” Lenny joked.

I rolled my eyes good-naturedly, but the grin on my face was undeniable. “I don’t even know what to say in response to that.”

“Besides the sex—because from what I heard, that has to be one of the reasons,” Keisha started with a giggle. “Besides the sex, what made you decide to marry Julian right now?”

All three pairs of eyes looked at me eagerly as I bit my bottom lip. “The moment I knew I would marry him was about eight, maybe nine months after the show ended. We’d just gotten back from spending Thanksgiving with our families and went straight to the apartment when we got back to Cali. I got my bar results and he read them aloud to me and then he kissed me.” I paused, closing my eyes and remembering that moment. “He’s kissed me hundreds of thousands of times before that kiss and each was amazing, but that kiss was something different.” I opened my eyes and looked around at my friends. “That kiss was like he was promising me forever. When we pulled away, he stared at me and said ‘I’m proud of you. I love you. Go call your mom.’” I slumped back in my seat with my hand over my heart. “He knew. He knew exactly what I needed and that was the moment I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. When he returned from tour, it was the first time we’d been apart for any significant amount of time and when I walked in the house and saw him, those feelings just intensified.”

“I never knew that.” Lenny’s red painted lips turned downward. “What is this feeling I’m feeling? My heart feels

funny. I feel like crying...but...I'm...happy?" Her voice got comically higher with each word.

"Does he have a brother?" Keisha asked, tapping her finger against her chin.

"At this point, I'll take a cousin," Koko chimed in.

I laughed. "You guys go get dressed! Why are we talking about me? I thought we were trying to find out what's going on with Lenny and James. And Keisha, you have two very eligible bachelors fighting over you. Koko..." I cocked my head to the side. "You need to talk to your man and see what's really going on because I've been around you two. He loves you."

"I told you guys last night." Koko took the sunglasses off my head as she stood, sliding them onto her face. "I'm single," she sang comically as she made her way into her dressing room.

All three of them went into their dressing rooms and a few minutes later, Anastacia and Kim returned. They helped each of them into the gowns and then one by one each of my best friends came out.

"Oh my God... Stunning. You all look stunning."

Although they were wearing the exact same dress, because they had such different body types, the dress took on a life of its own. For Koko's thin frame, the dress managed to make her appear curvier in the hips while accentuating her long legs. For Keisha, the deep V-neck of the dress made her breasts look a little bigger and her waist a little smaller before fanning out dramatically around her hips, giving her a distinct hourglass silhouette. For Lennon's larger frame, the sheer and lace design fanning out into the satin skirt highlighted the sexiness and softness of her body without trying to cover her up. The dresses were even more exquisite on them than on the rack.

“How do you feel?” I asked them.

They raved about the cut, the fit, the color, the design, and my style choice. I was glad to hear it because I’d already planned on buying the dresses anyway.

“I’ll take them. All of them!”

Anastacia’s eyes widened. “You want all of them?”

I nodded. “Absolutely.”

I looked at my friends, who looked absolutely beautiful in the gowns they were going to wear for my wedding to the love of my life, and I felt a flutter of excitement. Prior to that moment, I was just thrilled about being Julian’s wife. The wedding, especially after having to fulfill Julian’s contract with *The One*, was for everyone else. But, as I watched the curtains close and Kim popping in and out from each dressing room helping them remove the expensive garments, I was actually looking forward to the wedding. Even though it would be filmed and televised, I started to get excited about the public declaration of my love for Julian Evan Winters.

Fifteen minutes later, I was standing at the cash register swiping a black credit card to pay the ten thousand dollars for the three gowns.

Robert Brady is going to regret saying money was no object.

I had no intention of being wasteful with my spending just because the network was paying for it, but I knew if I had to sacrifice the wedding I wanted for a drama-filled weekend of debauchery, I was going to make sure my family and friends looked good.

The four of us left the boutique and headed to a few shoe stores until we found the perfect shoe to match their bridesmaid dresses. After an impromptu frozen yogurt stop, we headed back home with the bridesmaid dresses

strategically placed in the trunk and four boxes of shoes stuffed between Keisha and Lenny in the backseat.

We laughed, joked, and sang the entire way back. I turned the music down and flashed a smile to the security officer at the entrance of Julian's neighborhood. He opened the gate without hesitation as familiarity registered on his features and he waved.

"So when did you officially move in?" Lenny asked from the back seat.

I glanced over at Koko in the front seat next to me. "Um, I guess I haven't officially moved in. I still pay rent downtown and Julian and I haven't really talked about it." I shrugged, my hands tightly gripping the steering wheel.

"You go back and forth?" Keisha questioned, confusion in her voice.

"I have stuff here and some stuff in the apartment," I answered uneasily.

Koko must've sensed that I was uncomfortable with my backseat inquisition so she stepped in. "Zoe is getting married. Of course she's going to be living with her husband. But since he's on his way to superstardom and he travels, whenever she needs to stay with me, she has a key. It'll always be our apartment."

She reached over and held my arm. I smiled at her. Without me saying a word, I knew she got it. It felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

It wasn't that I was avoiding the conversation, but something about letting go of the apartment felt wrong to me. Koko was at work most of the time and when she wasn't, she was with Bryce.

Well, before they broke up.

Most of my time was spent at work or with Julian so neither of us were hardly ever there, but it was our safety net.

The apartment is like home base.

With me getting married and Koko breaking up with Bryce, the timing didn't feel right for me to officially move out... even though I had unofficially moved out over a year ago.

I punched in the code for the gate and then crept up the driveway and into the garage.

"I'm sad I have to get on the road. This is going to be the longest drive," Keisha said with a pout.

"It's two and a half hours right?" I asked, looking at the time.

"Yes...unless there's traffic, and then it's easily five hours."

We laughed.

Getting out of the car, we heard the guys before we saw them. They were in the kitchen, heading to the garage just as we were coming in.

Goodbyes and hugs were exchanged. Dresses were shown and ogled. Laughter and genuine happiness filled the space. I thought I even saw some flirting between James and Lenny. The kitchen was lively and active then forty minutes later, I was closing the door behind Koko, who was the last to leave.

I exhaled loudly as I slumped against the door. My hand slipped underneath my tunic and rested on the fleshiness of my belly.

"Tired?" Julian asked without turning around, as he diced an onion. Wearing a sleeveless t-shirt, his biceps flexed with each chop.

"Exhausted. What about you?"

“Well, I took a nap after our shower, so I’m feeling ok. The tailors came by and we were measured, and then we watched football and hung out. Oh and they’ll have the tuxes back the Thursday before the wedding.”

My eyebrows flew up as I stared at him tossing the onions into something that was simmering on the stovetop. “It won’t be back until the Thursday before the wedding? What if it doesn’t come in on time?”

“It should be fine.” He looked over his shoulder and smiled. “Don’t worry.”

I pushed myself off the door and locked it behind me. Crossing the kitchen, I stood behind him, kissing the back of his arm. “It’s just cutting it close, that’s all.”

“It’ll be here long before you choose a wedding dress.”

“Hey now,” I protested, slapping him on the ass for good measure. “Don’t you worry about my dress that I’m getting off the rack somewhere. You worry about these custom silk suits you and your boys are getting.”

Julian chuckled. “Why silk? In the two years we’ve known each other, what have I ever done or said that would lead you to believe that I’d wear a silk suit?”

“The amount of nineties R&B we’ve been listening to,” I returned, amusement in my voice.

His head lolled to the side as he continued laughing. “Dinner is ready.”

I grabbed two plates and sat them on the counter next to him. Heading to the refrigerator, I glanced over my shoulder to find him staring at me. “Do you want wine or something else?”

“I want you. I’ll settle for whatever you’re drinking.”

I felt my lips turning upward as I grabbed two bottles of water and silverware before heading to the dining room.

“So funny thing,” I started after we’d been eating for a few minutes. “Either we were really loud last night or the walls are thinner than they look.”

Julian’s chewing slowed as he gaped at me. He took a swig of water before he spoke. “What?”

I nodded, taking a small sip of water. “While we were dress shopping, it came out that we were overheard after we got home from Lux. As I’m told, we were loud.” I bit my bottom lip as I thought for a second. “I didn’t think I was much louder than usual.”

“You can get loud, beautiful.” His grey eyes darkened as his voice lowered an octave. “And it’s hot as shit.”

I crossed my legs and leaned forward, pointing my finger at him. “Don’t. You. Dare. We need to eat.”

He leaned forward and let his tongue run from one corner of his mouth to the other. He looked at me like he was going to spread me out on the table and eat me.

My stomach coiled and I shifted in my seat.

“Julian, focus,” I whined, letting my head drop back. “I need to tell you this and you know I can’t resist you when you look at me like that.”

He lifted his hands in surrender and sat back in his chair. “Then I won’t tell you what’s happening underneath the table so you can tell your story.” He couldn’t even finish his sentence without his deep laugh erupting from him.

“Okay, listen,” I directed with a giggle. “This is important because in less than a week our families are going to be staying here. With us. For a week.”

I told him the entire story as it was relayed to me and his face reddened with each bout of laughter that shook him.

“Did you know the walls were so thin?” I questioned after I took another bite of food.

“No, not at all. You know I moved to this place less than a year before I did the show. I’ve never brought anyone here.”

Slowly, a grin spread across my face. “I was the first woman you ever brought here?” My voice was soft as warmth spread inside me.

I put a forkful of food in my mouth and chewed quickly.

He smirked. “Yes, Ms. Jordan. You are the first and only woman to ever to enter my property for sexual purposes.”

“That’s kind of hot. That means that if we live here, the ghosts of girlfriends past won’t haunt our marriage.”

Julian chuckled under his breath. “The ghosts of girlfriends past huh?” He paused to finish his chicken. He wiped his mouth with a napkin then lifted his eyebrows. “Does that mean the ghosts of boyfriends past haunt your apartment?”

I didn’t know why I hadn’t seen the conversation taking that turn, but I didn’t anticipate it at all.

Coughing on the mouthful of food I was trying to swallow, I grabbed my bottle of water and gulped it down.

“Are you okay?” Julian asked, concern etched across his face.

I nodded, clearing my throat and looking back down at my plate. “I’m okay.” I cleared my throat again.

When my gaze met his again, we both cracked up laughing.

Julian stood up with his empty plate in his hand and stacked it on top of my empty plate. Leaning down, he kissed the top

of my head. “So I guess that means the ghosts are running rampant over there.”

I stood and followed him into the kitchen. He didn’t sound mad or anything, but I could tell something was off.

I studied his body language as he walked. When he stopped at the sink, I saddled up beside him. “Hey... What’s going on?”

He smirked, but I could almost see the wheels turning in his head. “I was just asking the same question you asked me.”

We were quiet as he rinsed the dishes and I put them in the dishwasher. Something was definitely off, and I didn’t want to push it until we could actually sit down and talk face to face. We completed the task then dried our hands on the same kitchen towel. Tossing it behind me, I leaned against the island and he leaned against counter directly across from me.

“What—”

“I was—”

We started talking at the same time and then stopped. I sighed, cocking my head to the side. “I feel like I hit a nerve, but I’m not sure why.”

He exhaled. “It’s not that you hit a nerve, but we should at some point talk about the fact that you have two places to live.”

“Oh is that what this is about?” I swallowed nervously.

I knew it was time for us to talk about it—all of it. And that I didn’t know how he was going to take it. I didn’t even have all my thoughts together to think everything through because of all the fun stuff we’d been doing over the weekend. I knew I needed to talk to him, I wanted to talk to him, I just wanted to make sure I had a chance to get my words right.

I guess I'll just start with the easy answer and then go from there.

“I don’t want to abandon Koko,” I explained, shifting my weight from one foot to another. “We moved into that apartment together six years ago and even though for the last year and a half I haven’t been there much, I don’t want to just...” I let my sentence trail off because I didn’t know how else to explain it.

“I get that.” He had his hands in his pockets and he chewed his bottom lip.

I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to continue, but then snapped it shut.

Is he going to take this the wrong way? I wondered.

I knew Julian well enough to know he didn’t get offended easily and had thick skin—to be in the industry he was in, he had to—but it was different with me. He wasn’t insecure at all, but just like I was vulnerable with him, he was vulnerable with me. We were embarking on this totally unexpected life journey together and I knew he was just as rattled by the pregnancy as I was. Knowing all of that, I worried that my words or my reasoning would make him think that I doubted him, or us, or our future.

Even though that’s not the case at all.

“Is that all?” The deep sound of Julian’s voice ricocheted through me. “Talk to me, Zoe.”

“I love you. I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know you make me the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. I know all of this.”

Julian’s long legs crossed the kitchen in a few steps as he wrapped his hands around my neck and pressed his forehead against mine. “But what?”

I licked my lips. Because I hadn't had a chance to fully flesh out my thoughts, staring into his eyes made it that much more difficult to think straight. My heart was beating erratically and I was consumed by his scent.

"I don't know how to explain it," I breathed, fisting his shirt, pulling him closer to me. "But I know that I love you."

He chewed on his bottom lip as he stared at me. His eyes were filled with confusion...maybe even pain. "Are you having doubts about us? About the baby? About marriage? About moving in?" He lifted his forehead from mine and created space between us as he searched my face. "What is it?"

As my eyes filled with tears, I reached up and grabbed his face. I pulled his lips to mine, kissing him. I felt myself panicking as his soft lips reluctantly returned my advances.

Lifting myself to my tiptoes, I captured his bottom lip with my mouth and sucked gently. When I released it, I felt Julian's hands grip my ass and lift me onto the island.

He kissed me hard, almost angrily. I wrapped my legs around his waist and he pulled me to the edge of the island. His hands moved across my body protectively as he held me in place. His tongue explored my mouth urgently as if he were seeking out the answers to his questions. My tongue met his, telling him everything that was in my heart. All the pent-up anxiety, confusion and sexual tension between us exploded as we moaned into each other's mouth.

Tears burned behind my closed eyelids.

I'd never loved that hard or that completely before and knowing what I would do for him, what I would sacrifice for him overwhelmed me.

I wanted him. I wanted to be his wife. I wanted to have his kids. I wanted to grow old with him.

I just don't want to lose myself in him.

He ripped himself away, ending the kiss abruptly.

We were both out of breath, our chests heaving.

I felt emotionally raw and exposed.

And scared.

A tear fell, slipping down my cheek.

The look on his face when he saw it broke my heart. The confusion, fear, and frustration I felt played out over his handsome features. Using his thumb, he wiped the tear from my cheek and replaced it with a kiss.

It was the sweetest thing and I shuddered.

A silent sob threatened to ripple through my body, but I swallowed it back down. I closed my eyes tightly to keep the tears at bay.

“If you need time to talk to me about it, I’ll give you some time.” His voice was pained, rasping over each word. “But I need to know right now that you want this life. I know a child this early in our relationship wasn’t the plan. I don’t doubt that you love me and that you want to be with me. I don’t even doubt that you want to marry me. But...”

He lowered his eyes and put his hands on the sides of my waist, letting his thumbs stroke my belly. It seemed to be hard for him to get the next words out as he took several short breaths before continuing.

“But I don’t know if...if this is too much too soon.”

As the tears tumbled down my cheeks, words tumbled out my mouth. “No,” I cried. “I don’t want you to think that. I don’t want...I don’t know how to explain it other than to say that I want this life with you and our baby.” My voice broke as I sniffled. My chin met my chest as the weight of my feelings kept me from looking him in his eyes. “But I also don’t want

anything to change. I've been working my ass off to establish myself at the firm and it feels like everything I've worked for is going to fall apart. I'm... I don't want to sound selfish, but I don't want to lose... I don't want things to change. I want you and I want our baby... I just also want my career and my life."

Julian was quiet as his hands, positioned on my hips, kneaded the fullness of them. "Where is this coming from? For the last couple weeks, you were on board with this. You said you wanted this."

My head snapped up and I wiped the tears from my face.

Julian's eyes had darkened with confusion and hurt. His face had hardened as if he were protecting himself.

From me, I realized.

I knew I needed to approach the conversation delicately. I knew my words were all wrong. I knew I needed to make it clear that it had less to do with him and the baby and more to do with me. I knew I needed to calm down, take a minute to get myself together, and just talk to him when my emotions weren't all over the place.

"I do want this. I do," I assured him weepily. I dried my hands on the kitchen towel next to me before placing them against his clenched jaw. "I just don't want to give up the things that make me, *me*. I don't know if I'm explaining it right."

Julian put his hands over mine and then slowly backed away from me until my hands slipped from his face. My heart broke on the spot and a new flood of tears welled up inside of me. I fought to hold them in. I figured if I could get control of my emotions, I could get control of my thoughts, and if I could get control of my thoughts, I'd get control of my words and the direction of the conversation.

The tear snuck out from the corner of my eye.

Damn hormones!

Julian chewed his bottom lip before shaking his head. His shoulders lifted as he stood just out of my reach. “Yesterday we were talking about our family and today you want your career and your life?” His tone was low and flat. “I don’t even know what to do with that Zoe.”

“That’s not how I meant it... I...”

I put my head in my hands. *I just have to make him understand what I’m saying. I just need to calm down. Stop crying. Get my hormones in check. Figure out what I’m trying to say and then say it. He listens to me. He understands me. He gets me. We’re okay. We’re okay.*

Putting the heels of my hands to my eyes to push back the tears, I took a deep breath and then lifted my head.

“Julian—”

“I need a minute,” Julian interrupted as he stormed out of the kitchen.

I didn’t know what to say as I sat in shock. My heart thudded in my chest as I felt the panic welling up inside me. I wanted to call out to him, but I couldn’t find my voice.

Did he just walk off?

My feelings were hurt. I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. I placed my hand on my belly and breathed through the hurt.

A few minutes passed and he hadn’t returned. I slithered to the edge of the island and then hopped off, prepared to find him. Even if he needed a minute, the way he’d abruptly cut off the conversation and left wasn’t right.

And it’s not us.

Before I could circle the island, Julian marched into the kitchen wearing jogging pants and a hoodie. His headphones

were positioned around his neck. He couldn't hold my gaze for longer than a few seconds at a time.

"Julian," I started, frozen in place. Although I saw him, it took a minute for everything to register. The thought evaporated as I noticed his shoes. "Where are you going?"

He grabbed his keys and stuffed them into his pocket. "I need to go for a run."

"What?" I sputtered, my eyebrows flying up and the hurt leveling me. My heart was pounding in my ears. I could barely hear myself think. "What?"

When he reached the door that led to the garage, he paused. "I'll be back in a little while."

And then he left. He fucking left.

The door clicking closed echoed in my mind over and over again. The hurt I felt was so severe that I doubled over where I stood.

Was what I said so bad?

I replayed the conversation in my head. I couldn't figure out where it had gone wrong. We'd argued plenty of times before. Julian and I were on the same page most of the time, but when I would get too consumed with work or he'd take on too many out of town projects, we'd get snippy with one another. We'd be mad, but we always talked it out and it almost always came down to the fact that we missed each other or one of us was over-prioritizing work.

This is different. This is bigger, more significant.

I knew I didn't have my wording together, but I didn't understand how the message he was getting and the one I was trying to convey were so off base.

What did I say that was so wrong that he'd walk out?

Once my heartrate returned to normal, I pushed myself off the marble island and padded out of the kitchen. As I climbed up the steps, my body felt heavy. Once I got to the bedroom, I stripped and eased into our large en-suite bathroom. I took a long hot shower and spent the entire time figuring out what I was really feeling and how to better communicate it. By the time I was pulling on my white cotton tank top, I'd moved from sad to mad.

He left?! I don't care if I said something wrong. I don't care if he thought I said I wasn't ready for all of this. He can't just leave. Take some time, need some space, go in the other room, sure. But leave? Get dressed and leave?! No. Hell no.

We told each other we'd never go to bed angry. We told each other we would talk out whatever issue came up. We told each other when I left the show was the last time either one of us would walk away from one another. So when I got in bed, I had every intention of staying awake since it was only seven o'clock. But between the long day, the late night, the stress of the argument, and my overly emotional state, I started falling asleep before Julian returned.

Chapter 8

A fresh, clean scent infiltrated my senses. I inhaled deeply as I started to gain consciousness. The sensation of the comforter and sheet shifting across my bare arm registered gently as I teetered between being asleep and being awake. The cool sheets were replaced by a familiar heat and his presence fully roused me.

My eyes fluttered open to find Julian looking at me. Even in the dark, I could make out his strong jaw and defined features. But it was his eyes and the way I could feel them on my face that grabbed my attention.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you,” he whispered as he resumed getting comfortable in bed.

I cleared my throat. “What time is it?” My voice was still hoarse.

“Just after eleven.”

“You’ve been gone this whole time?” I questioned. I felt my face contorting as I said it.

“No.” Julian’s mouth formed a tight line. “I got back around eight. I came up here and you were sleeping so I just wrote in the backyard.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

He sighed. “Because I didn’t want to wake you up just to fight.” He flipped over onto his stomach, his head still facing me. “You’ve been tired all day and you need your rest. You...” He stopped as if he didn’t want to say what was on his mind. “You need your rest.”

I was quiet. “You walked out on me in the middle of our conversation.”

“I needed a minute, but I shouldn’t have done it like that.” He propped himself up on his elbow so I rose up and did the same. “I’m sorry.”

My body deflated as I let go of the anger I’d had toward him and the situation before I fell asleep. “Apology accepted.” I let my foot creep over to his side of the bed and my toes burrowed under his legs. “Now please tell me what I said that made you mad because I’ve been running it over in my head and I don’t know. I do know that I want to—no, I need to explain what I meant. I want you to understand. Even if you don’t agree, I just want you to understand what I’m saying.”

“It’s late.” His tone was flat, dry. He held my gaze for a while before he realized I wasn’t going to let it go. “Are you sure you want to get into this?”

“Yes I’m sure. We said we would never go to bed angry.” I pushed my body all the way up, tucking my legs underneath me. “Please tell me why you left. Tell me what you heard me say so I can understand exactly where my message went wrong.”

Julian let out a deep, aggravated breath as he sat up. He stretched his legs out on either side of me. Scrubbing his face with his hands, he said, “If you’re having second thoughts, that’s something we need to talk about, but when you said this was too much and that you...” The sentence trailed off and he shook his head in the darkness. “It’s your body and I respect your right to... I wasn’t ready to hear that you aren’t ready to be a mother—I’m still not, so if that’s what you want to talk about, let’s save it for the morning.”

Wait, what?!

I tried to clear my foggy mind to figure out what I said downstairs hours before.

I was clear about wanting our kid. I know I was clear about that, right? Because I feel like I've made that abundantly clear. What the hell is going on?

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see the pain etched in the shadows of his face. I grabbed one of his hands. "I'm sorry," I apologized. My voice was soft but clear as it carried through the dark room. "I'm sorry I didn't do a better job of explaining myself. I'm sorry my words hurt you—that was never my intention. But what would make you think that I don't want our child? What did I say that made you think I would..."

I couldn't even finish the sentence as my chest felt like it would cave in.

He thought I didn't want the baby? Our baby? He thought I wanted—

My heart shattered and I choked on the shards of the realization of what he thought I wanted in regards to our child. I blinked back tears. "What...?" My mouth was agape as the word just hung softly between us.

"Your pregnancy was a surprise to both of us and I know it wasn't in your grand plan. When I asked you if you wanted this, you said that you did, but just not right now. Where do you think my mind is going to go? What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Oh God no," I gasped, putting my free hand over my mouth. I moved closer to him, sitting in the space between his legs and wrapping my legs around his waist.

Staring into each other's eyes only intensified the moment and I felt everything he felt. It broke my heart that he had spent hours thinking I was having second thoughts about having his child and was considering not carrying our child to term.

His body was rigid as he silently chewed his bottom lip. I could feel the anxiety radiating off of him. “I don’t know where you are or what’s going on in that head of yours. But I know I can’t lose...”

I lifted my hands and placed them on his bare chest. The warmth of his skin against mine conflicted with his cool, guarded demeanor. Underneath the tight pectoral muscles, I could feel his heart beating faster than normal against the palm of my hand.

“I’m so sorry I left you with that impression. I’m sorry you thought that was what I was saying. That is so far away from what I meant. We are having this baby. Julian, God...” Rasping over each syllable, I struggled to get the words out before the sob I kept pushing down fought its way back up. “I love this baby, our baby. I love you. I love that we created life together. I love the idea of this child being the product of me and you. I would never do anything to jeopardize that.”

Julian wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me closer to him. His forehead rested against mine and his warm breath tickled my face. He was silent, but I could almost hear the relief in each intake of air.

I put my arms around his neck and separated our faces fractionally. “For the last three weeks, our family is primarily all I’ve thought about,” I started.

I opened my mouth to continue, but he responded.

“Which is why I’m confused. Before our friends came you were all about our family and then the moment they leave, you say you need to figure out what you want.”

His voice wasn’t harsh, but it was exasperated. He didn’t yell at me, but he was louder than the whisper we had been using. It was blatantly clear that he wasn’t angry; he was hurt.

“Listen to me,” I pleaded with him. My heart pounded in my chest and I felt this out of control feeling swirling inside of me. “Listen. I don’t need to figure out what I want. I want you. I want us. I want our baby to be happy and healthy. I want to grow old with you. But...”

I saw the shift in his face and I held on to him tighter. Hearing the word ‘but’ had instantly made him tense.

“But,” I continued, locking my legs in place. “I also want my career.”

Julian looked at me blankly for at least thirty seconds. “Okay...?”

I lifted my eyebrows. “That’s all I was trying to say. I want to be a wife, a mother, and an attorney.”

“Yeah...?” His shoulders slumped as if he were trying to process what was going on. I knew his eyebrows had furrowed in apparent confusion because I could make out the crease between them. “Why wouldn’t you have your career? I don’t...what?”

“You’ve made comments about me not having to work over the last couple of weeks, but last night you told me about Italy—and it sounds amazing, but since I took this three week period off originally just to spend quality time with you, I don’t have any more vacation time. When I said that, you said it didn’t matter.”

Julian still looked at me blankly.

He doesn’t get it.

“Julian, it does matter! My career matters. I can’t just go to Italy for two weeks, and when I told you that, you kind of shrugged it off like it didn’t matter—like my career didn’t matter.”

“That wasn’t how I meant it at all.” He shook his head. “But your firm doesn’t appreciate you and all that you do. If you were to leave, you wouldn’t have to worry about money or anything. I’ll take care of you and you would be fine until you found something else.”

I let my hands slip from around his neck and I unlocked my legs from behind his back. I crawled to the edge of the bed and turned on the bedside lamp. Kicking my feet off the side of the bed, I spun around and stared at him.

Maybe with the lights on he’ll be able to understand what it is I’m saying.

He squinted against the light and dropped his head down. After a few seconds, he brought his eyes back to me. His gaze lingered on my exposed thighs in the short shorts.

Because of my frustration, I was only momentarily distracted by his shirtless state.

“Julian, that’s what the issue is for me. I appreciate the sentiment. I do. But you saying that proves my exact point. Leaving the firm so I can extend my three week vacation to five weeks is not a good look. Regardless of whether I have to worry about money, I love being a lawyer. I love the work that I do. So when you make it seem like it’s nothing to just not work, it makes me feel like you don’t think what I do is important. Do you understand where I’m coming from?”

He scrubbed his face with his hands and made a noise in the back of his throat. “Zoe, you’re killing me here.” He propped himself up on his knees and looked at me with the most sincere look in his eyes. “What you do is important. I am your biggest supporter. I know what you put into everything you do so I’m not dismissing that, but there are going to be things you will have to take time off for. You’re going to miss work.” He shrugged. “That doesn’t take anything away from the importance of what you do.”

I couldn't do anything but blink. I wanted to scream in exasperation.

He's missing the point completely.

I took a deep breath. "My love," I began, keeping the irritation out of my voice. "Being able to help people who feel voiceless take on industry giants makes me happy and makes me feel like my best self. I feel fulfilled by helping people in that way."

"And I feel fulfilled by taking care of the woman I love." He moved across the bed until he was directly in front of me. He sat down, feet flat on the floor and legs on either side of mine, and looked up into my eyes. "I just wanted to make it clear that I'm here for you. I wanted you to know that I'm not going anywhere and that you can depend on me."

Although I tried to stay firm, I melted. "I know and I love you for it," I whispered, resisting the urge to touch him. "But think about this: if I told you that the label isn't respecting you and you should leave them. And once you leave, you couldn't release any more music until you got another deal—but don't worry because I know you'll get another deal from somewhere else soon. In the meantime, I'll take care of you. How would you feel?"

Silence settled around us. The seconds ticked by as we held each other's gaze. With his chiseled jaw locked and his full lips in a straight line, his face gave nothing away. But the way his grey eyes burned into me, I felt my resolve weakening. The storminess I saw in them mimicked the turbulence within me.

Stay strong. He's getting it. He has to get it.

My mind raced as seconds turned to minutes because I knew Julian not understanding that one fundamental thing about me would be a huge obstacle for us to overcome.

Possibly insurmountable.

I pushed the thought out of my head, not allowing it to settle.

“I feel the same way about my work as you do yours.” My voice was soft and shaky as I further explained. “You wouldn’t be you without music. I wouldn’t be me without law and I’m scared I’m going to lose myself if I am not working.”

I’m scared I’m going to be so consumed by what I already feel that I’m going to lose myself.

The words I couldn’t quite say added to the silence and I felt stifled by it. He looked away from me as if he could read my thoughts and he, too, was stifled by it.

The moment I felt his fingertips on the outside of my knees traveling upward, my entire body reacted and a sigh escaped my lips. He stood, not letting his fingers leave the outskirts of my body until he had a firm grip on my rounded hips.

We were close, but the only parts of our bodies that touched were where his fingers gripped the waistband of my shorts. The raw attraction between us held me hostage as he quietly looked me over. The love I felt for him overshadowed the argument, the misunderstanding, and everything else. Just being around him was intoxicating.

Consciously, I knew Julian needed to hear that his words, whether he meant it like I took it or not, dredged up a fear in me. He needed to hear that even though I wanted to have his children, of the two of us, the pregnancy impacted my life more significantly. He needed to know I was scared.

Subconsciously, my body reacted to Julian’s closeness as if nothing mattered but him. My emotions spiraled out of control whenever he looked at me with that heady combination of love, lust and reverence.

When his hands slid across my hips and rested on my lower back, I couldn’t help that my back arched into him. I closed

my eyes and took a deep breath, inhaling his scent.

I wasn't sure if he pulled me into him or if I naturally gravitated to his warmth, but when my cheek rested on his bare chest, tears burned behind my eyes.

"Zoe, look at me," Julian demanded. He waited until they opened before he rested his forehead against mine. "I just wanted to take you to Italy while it was still safe for you to fly. I wanted to spend those moments together, just the two of us, before it became the three of us. I wasn't trying to be dismissive of your career, but I'm sorry it came across like that." His hands slipped under the tank top I wore and he rubbed my back. "I get it now. I didn't at first, but I see where you're coming from and I get it. I'm sorry."

"Thank you," I murmured weepily. Relief forced a tear from my eyes so I buried my face into his chest. I squeezed him, digging my fingers into his skin. "I'm sorry I'm so emotional. I know you meant well, and I want the same things you want. The Italy trip sounds amazing. You are a blessing and I love you so much." I let out a little cry-laugh. "I'm seriously losing it."

"It's okay, Zoe." He kissed the top of my head. "You don't have to be strong all the time."

He pulled away from me and cradled my face in his hands. The gentleness of his touch caused a rattling in my chest. My emotions were all over the place and I knew if I'd opened my eyes, the tears would fall. Swallowing hard, I leaned into the palm of his hand and the words just tumbled out of my mouth.

"I'm scared," I admitted so quietly I wasn't sure he heard me.

"Look at me," he ordered coarsely.

My lashes fluttered open until our eyes locked.

“Do you think I’m not scared?” Julian’s eyebrows furrowed as he gaped.

I didn’t know how to answer the question so I remained quiet. I knew it wasn’t something we’d planned, but he’d been so sure and so ready. I assumed he was completely unafraid of this huge life changing event that was going to happen to us. He had an answer and a solution for anything.

He’s been so great about everything. Whenever we’ve talked about the baby, he’s been so prepared.

I searched his face. “You’ve been like super-dad for the last two weeks.”

“That was for you!” Julian’s voice elevated as he let my face go. He moved around me and started pacing across the room. “That was for you, Zoe. I’m scared shitless.”

My mouth opened and closed a couple of times before I choked out a single word. “What?”

“This wasn’t my plan! This isn’t how I was expecting things to go down. Marrying you as soon as possible, that was part of my plan. I’ve been holding on to that ring, counting the days until New Year’s Eve because that’s when I was going to ask. That was my plan! But a baby? I wasn’t planning on that. I wasn’t planning on being a dad so soon—” He stopped in his tracks. His chest rose and fell at a rapid pace as he ran his hands down his face. Letting out a deep breath, he looked at me apologetically.

“Oh thank God,” I breathed before he could say another word. I put my hand to my chest. “I’ve been trying to push the fear down because you were so ready. I thought any doubts or fears I had made me a bad mother.” I sat on the bed and grabbed my pillow, hugging it. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

His breathing seemed to return to normal as he watched me from the other side of the room. “Because the moment the test

said you were pregnant you freaked the fuck out.” He walked back to the bed and sat beside me. “I’m your man. I’m supposed to be here for you and protect you. If I told you I was scared...” He shrugged with a shake of the head. “I couldn’t afford to be scared because I saw in your eyes that you were terrified. The weekend you took the pregnancy test, you didn’t want to talk about it...and then you spent the next week obsessing over it.”

I let my head fall into the pillow that was clutched to my chest. My muffled groan was loud and mournful.

I thought I was doing a better job of keeping it together. I should’ve known he could see through me and because he saw me internally freaking out, he didn’t feel like he could tell me his fears.

Julian wrapped his hand around my wrists and then pulled me close to him, tossing the pillow to the side. “Hey, come here.”

I crawled into the space between his legs. “I’m scared of how huge this is, but more than that, I’m scared of how much I’d be willing to sacrifice for our family. I freaked out about the whole work comment because for the last two weeks, being your wife and the mother of our baby has been the only thing I can think about. The only time I thought about work was in relation to the contracts for the wedding.” I put my head on his shoulder. “I love being a lawyer, but being your wife and the mother of our child are so much more important to me. And that scares me because I don’t want to lose being an attorney because it’s one of the things that has defined me my entire life.”

“I understand.” His arms tightened around me and I melted into him. Julian’s mouth was against the shell of my ear as he spoke. “I was going to give up my tour for you and the baby

and the moment the words came out of my mouth, I panicked.”

My eyebrows flew up. “You did?”

“Hell yeah!” He kissed my neck and then moved his head, forcing us to make eye contact again. “I didn’t even think about it before the words just came out, and I meant it when I said it. It was automatic. I don’t know how to explain it, but giving up the tour for you, for us, was my only option and I was ready to do it. But then, when you told me I couldn’t bail on the tour because the contracts were already in place, I felt two things. I felt relief. I hate to say it, but I was relieved that I didn’t have to give up the tour. I also felt thankful that I fell in love with a strong woman.”

“Really?” I looked at him in awe, a deeper, stronger appreciation for him resonating in my spirit. “That makes me feel so much better because when I saw your willingness to give up the tour to be here for me, I felt like a selfishly horrible mother for wondering how our careers would be affected and thinking about how I didn’t want to derail my plans.” I shook my head slowly. “Our lives are going to change, our priorities are going to change and that’s scary. I love that you’re so strong. I love that you take such good care of me. But if you’re scared too, you can always talk to me about it. We will just be scared together and we’ll get through it, together, because that’s what marriage is all about: having that one person that will always have your back.”

The corners of his mouth turned upward, a smirk developing. “Our lives are changing. Our priorities are changing.”

I nodded. “And I don’t know what to expect. I’m scared of the unknown, but the only thing I know for certain is how much I love you, how much I want this life with you and how much I want to create this family with you. That scares me

because if I had to choose between all of that and my career, I'd choose you and our family every single time. I just don't want to lose me because I'm so consumed in us."

"I know what you mean. My schedule will change and my commitments outside of L.A. will decrease, but for me to do what I do, I have to meet artists where they are. I need to tour to promote albums. I need to be mobile." Bringing his forehead to mine, he stared into my eyes, peering into the depths of my soul. "But, little by little, it won't matter, because my entire world will center on you. And that's scary because if I don't create sounds, if I don't write lyrics, if I don't make music, I'm not me."

My heart hurt at the thought of that. "You would be miserable if that happened. I don't want that for you. I don't want you to give up that part of you. I got to know you through that part of you. I wouldn't let you sacrifice your music. It's who you are and I love you way too much for that to happen."

Julian's lips grazed mine, sending chills through my body. "And I love you way too much for that to happen. Your dream is my dream for you. I don't want you to give up law. I don't want you to have to choose." He kissed me again, but this time, it was shorter. He pulled back, pushing loose tendrils of hair away from my face. "So we figure out how we handle it all."

"But our family comes first," I stated definitively as my fingers brushed against his warm skin. "Always."

"Always and forever. We will coordinate our schedules to make sure we are still following our dreams, but our priority is always each other—"

"And our child."

"Our family."

My heart fluttered as our lips met again. “I’m glad we talked this out. I hate when we fight,” I murmured against him.

He rose to his knees, but he kept his face close to mine, his lips were just out of reach. “I love when we make up,” he growled, placing his hand at the base of my throat.

I bit down on my bottom lip in an effort to not smile. “I love the way you look at me.”

He moved his hand slowly until it rested on my chest, above my left breast. “I love the way your heart beats faster when my hands are on you.”

My back arched slightly and my core clenched in response to his words. “I love the way your hands feel on me.”

I swallowed hard as his hands moved downward. Cupping my breast, his forefinger gently traced circles around my hardened nipple. “I love the way your body responds to my touch.”

I looked down and saw the goosebumps covering my skin. He tweaked my nipple and a soft sigh escaped my lips. He took that opportunity to capture my mouth with his, devouring the sound of my pleasure.

I was so hypnotized by the way his mouth teased me that I didn’t realize my tank top was being removed until our lips parted for Julian to pull it over my head. Once it was off, he tilted me backward, lowering my head onto a pillow. He settled himself between my legs before putting his hands on my shoulders and sliding his fingers down my body. My breathing became labored as he played with the waistband of my shorts.

With him positioned where he was, my line of sight lowered to the tent he was making in his shorts. Desire swept through my body and my hips rolled instinctually.

He’s such a tease.

“I love and hate that you tease me when you know how badly I want you,” I breathed, another involuntary shiver coursing through me.

My eyes lingered on his hardness for a second longer before taking in the way his abs tightened with each movement. His chest expanded and his muscular arms flexed as he lifted my legs and pulled my shorts off of me.

I lay naked before him and he eyed me hungrily. His tongue moved from one side of his mouth to the other. I slithered against the sheets under his gaze.

“Please,” I mouthed to him.

The soundless plea seemed to be exactly what he was waiting for as his grey eyes burned into my brown ones. Slowly a smirk appeared on his lips. He ducked his head and trailed kisses from one hip bone to the other. “I love to hear you beg. Now close your eyes.”

I moaned as he kissed a slow, sexy path past my belly button and between my breasts. He took his time as he kissed my collarbone and my neck. The slow, tortuous process forced contented sighs out of me.

Balancing his body above me, he finally kissed me. Teasingly exploring my mouth, he used the hand that wasn't propping him up to travel down my body. He started at the base of my neck and moved through the valley between my heavy breasts. I thought he'd bypass them completely, but his fingers paused at my ribcage before massaging their way over each nipple.

My nipples were so hard they hurt. I knew what I needed to sooth the pain, but I didn't want him to stop kissing me. I reached up and grabbed his head. My body rolled against his. I didn't want him to rush, but I wanted him inside me. His teasing had me ready.

So ready.

I felt him smile against my lips. He kissed his way over to my ear. "I know what you want," Julian breathed hotly against my ear.

His hand skated across my belly and his fingers dragged down my smooth skin. He slid his finger along my slit, dipping into my wetness before toying with my clit.

The noise that erupted out of me was primal, but it was muted when his mouth covered mine.

He spread my wetness around and rubbed me rhythmically. It didn't take long for my body to be on edge. I rolled my hips against his hand. He returned my eagerness by parting my lips and slipping his finger inside.

I moaned into his mouth and the kiss became almost desperate. His tongue played with mine and I felt it everywhere. Something deep in my gut tightened. The buildup of my orgasm was fast and just when I thought I was going over the edge, he slowed down, calming my overheated body. He alternated between bringing me to the edge and just barely stoking the fire. I rolled my body to meet his hand as he moved in and out of me. His teasing had made me so wet and so ready for him that it drove me insane.

"Do you hear how wet you are?" Julian growled as he pulled out of the kiss.

I could feel his dick through his shorts as it pressed against my hip. I tried to grab it but he moved down my body.

"Where are you going?" I hated how needy I sounded, but Julian brought it out of me. My eyes closed, focusing on the way he rubbed my g-spot.

He didn't say a word and then suddenly I felt his breath tickling my smooth skin as he settled between my legs. His fingers hooked upward and my hips lifted again.

“Oh, yeah...that’s—oh shit!” I groaned as Julian’s mouth wrapped around my clit as he added a second finger inside of me. He swirled his tongue around and then sucked. I saw stars.

My body stiffened as I let out a noise that was part gasp and part moan. “Julian.”

The sensation of heat exploding from my core and coursing throughout my body consumed me. I’d been hanging on the brink of orgasm for so long that when it finally came, I felt it everywhere. I closed my eyes tightly, relishing in the feel of him. My heart was pounding in my chest and my eyes were still clamped shut.

“Holy shit,” I panted as Julian kissed his way back up my body.

He pressed his lips against mine. “You. Taste. So. Good.” He punctuated each word with a kiss.

With our mouths connected and our tongues exploring, I sat up, rolling Julian onto his back. His hands were everywhere as my naked body slithered against him sexily. I wanted to tease him. I wanted to kiss all over his body and drive him crazy. I wanted to massage his body and worship him with my mouth, but after what he’d just done to me, my priority was to make him feel the same pleasure he’d just delivered to me.

I climbed to my knees and sucked on his bottom lip while he helped me push his shorts down. As soon as his swollen dick popped free, however, I was immediately distracted.

“I’ll be back,” I whispered against his mouth.

“Where are you going?” He smirked as I wrapped my hand around his shaft. “I can’t hear you.”

“I’m about to speak into the mic,” I deadpanned as I pulled his shorts all the way off.

He snickered until I started stroking him. His gritty laugh ended in a sharp intake of air.

I watched him watching me with lust-fueled interest. His eyes flickered down my body as I sat on my knees between his legs. While I had his undivided attention, I leaned down and licked the head of his cock before lifting off of it.

The guttural groan that rumbled from deep inside of him turned me on. I teased him, enjoying the way his body twitched as my tongue flicked across the sensitive skin. Wrapping my hands around the base of his cock, I licked him like a lollipop and then smirked.

“And you called me a tease,” Julian whispered as he reached out, grasping my hair.

“I haven’t even started teasing you yet.”

“What do you—shit,” Julian groaned, stretching the curse word out as I took him all the way to the back of my throat.

I glanced up and if my mouth hadn’t been full, I would’ve smiled. His eyes were shut tight, his mouth hung open, and his abdominal muscles flexed.

His grip tightened on my hair as I bobbed my head up and down the entire length of him slowly. When I pulled up, I ran my teeth gently over the head. Swirling my tongue around, I worked my way down his shaft little by little, taking my time, and then I slurped him up. I let his width stretch my mouth and throat as I strained to breathe. I waited until I heard that sexy rumble deep in his chest and then I started the entire process all over again.

“Yes. Fuck, yes,” Julian moaned, guiding my head back down.

The unapologetic need deep inside me spurred me on and caused me to increase my speed. Julian’s moans became rough and more insistent each time I suctioned my mouth and

swallowed. His fingers tightened their grip on my thick curls as he let out a string of expletives under his breath.

“Zoe,” he hissed as my lips struggled to make it to the base of his shaft. A chill ran through me when I felt him shudder.

His balls tightened in my hand and Julian let out another tortured grunt. Without warning, he tugged my hair at the root, forcing me off of his dick and onto my back.

Before I had a chance to close my mouth, Julian’s thumb skated across my clit.

Closing my eyes, I moaned loudly, rotating my hips. My heart raced.

“Even if you think it makes you sound like the worst person in the world, you need to talk to me anyway. Do you understand?” Julian’s voice was soothing and sexy as if he were trying to control my mind the same way he was controlling my body. “Do you understand?”

I tried to respond to him, but he slipped a finger inside me and my answer was compromised.

“I couldn’t hear you.” His wet finger made contact with my clit again. “Let me hear you.”

He rubbed me methodically. It was a slow, circular movement that always drove me crazy.

“Yes,” I murmured dizzily.

He lowered his voice as he added a second finger inside. “Listen to that,” he grunted. The soft, wet sound mixed with our panting breaths and my lurid moans. “Do you hear that, Zoe? Do you hear how fucking wet you are? Do you hear how bad you want my dick?”

His words set something off inside of me and my hips lifted off of the bed. I cried out.

“Yes,” I gasped.

“Look at me.”

I forced my eyes to open into little slits, but the sensations he was stirring up made it difficult to keep them open. My eyes raked his powerfully masculine body before honing in on his handsome face. Seeing the way he was devouring my body with his eyes as he ran his hand over his dick caused me to cry out for him.

“Shit, just watching you might set me off.” Julian groaned as if he were in pain.

Hearing his desire took my breath away.

He licked his lips. “Tell me you understand that you need to talk to me no matter what.”

I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice. “I-I understand. I’m sorry.”

“Good.” He hooked his fingers upward, causing my eyes to shut tight and my body to quiver.

My arms slammed against the mattress and gripped the comforter in my fists. My orgasm was building to the point of no return. I was so keyed up, I was completely under his control. His fingers carried me to the brink of my second orgasm of the night before backing off.

“Now can I apologize for walking out of the kitchen the way I did?” His whisper was strained as he took his fingers away from me.

“Please.” The desperation in my voice was clear as my body still hummed with a wanton lust for his touch. I felt like I was on fire. My eyes fluttered open. “Please.”

He spread my legs as wide as they’d go. I felt his hardness pressing against my soft wetness. “I’m sorry,” he moaned as he pushed the head of his dick into me.

My eyes closed, my back arched, and my head jerked back, burrowing into the mattress. I didn't recognize my own voice when the lustful whimper exploded from the depths of me.

With only the tip of his dick inside of me, Julian leaned forward, caging my head with his strong arms. He dipped his head down and moved his soft lips over mine.

I reached up, letting my fingers run over his hard body before tweaking his nipples. I grabbed his face and changed the tone of the kiss from reverent want to reckless need. As the kiss became sloppier, my patience wore thin. I rolled my hips upward, forcing another inch of his long, thick dick into me.

Julian pulled out of the kiss, causing me to freeze. His grey eyes flashed as he hovered millimeters above me. His warm breath tickled my face as he breathed the words "I love you."

"I love you, too."

Julian sat up a little more, moving his hands from the bed to my neck. Between his closeness taking my breath away and the pressure of his hands, my chest started heaving with each gasp of air.

"Don't move." He dragged his hands from my neck to the fleshiness of my breasts. He kneaded them and pinched my nipples. When I opened my legs wider and he slipped in an inch farther, his eyes shut tightly and his breathing became erratic. "Let me take care of you."

His hands slid down my torso and landed on my hip bones. Shifting his weight, the position of his hands made it impossible for me to move.

"Please. I need you. Julian, please," I begged, pinching my nipples and clenching around his dick.

His eyes looked like they rolled into the back of his head as his fingers dug into my skin.

“Please fill me up. Please... I need it. I need it, Julian.”

“Fuck... Zoe. You know I can’t resist you when you do that.” His voice broke sexily as he inched his way in. “Fuck!”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. I couldn’t speak. I was completely stretched out and full. Once he was as far inside of me as he could possibly go, we both let out a euphoric sigh.

“I love you,” he groaned faintly as he pulled himself all the way out of me.

Before I could respond, he plunged back in with the same slow, measured movement that was building my release. I was so wet that each time he drove himself into me, he seemed to go deeper, harder. I knew he was taking his time on purpose. I could feel his restraint. He was torturing me with pleasure. It was the epitome of pleasure and pain.

Every nerve ending on my body was awakened. His dick was stirring things within me physically while he uttered words that stirred my emotions.

“You are beautiful.” Leaning forward, he caged my head with his arms and his nose brushed against mine. “Your hair... your skin...your lips...your eyes...your body...your heart... all of you. Every single part of you is so fucking beautiful.” He groaned as he pulled out and then buried himself in me again.

From the look in his eyes and the way his racing heartbeat matched mine to the way he was making sure his dick massaged every single inch of me, I was reduced to a puddle of feelings.

I felt loved. I felt wanted. I felt desired. I felt safe. I felt taken care of.

“I love you. I love—oh!” I whimpered, clenching around him.

I shuddered as the unexpected orgasm rippled through my body.

I moaned into Julian's mouth as the sensations of pleasure rolled my body into his. My heart thumped loudly in my chest and my skin tingled.

"Oh God," I cried out as the final aftershock flowed through me.

I didn't immediately understand how I still felt so turned on after that, but as the smoke cleared from my mind, I realized Julian was still hard and still inside me.

Julian sat up, not letting his cock slip out of me. His voice was hoarse when he asked, "Do you know how sexy it is to watch you come apart like that?" He slid in and out of me gently, giving me an opportunity to regroup. "I didn't see it coming until it was too late."

"I didn't either," I murmured, touching my tingling body. "That felt so good."

Julian increased his speed. "You like it when I make love to you?"

My eyes closed as he slipped in and out of me. "Oh yeah."

"Look at me."

With each hoarse word, he was reigniting the fire in my core. I opened my eyes immediately.

He increased his speed with each stroke. "You like it when I fuck you?"

Moaning, I let his words skate across my body and absorb into my skin. Staring into his stormy grey eyes, I started working my hips harder. "Yes, yes... I," I began, unable to get the rest of the words out as he thrust into me. "Oh God yes!"

Using his thumb, he toyed with my aching clit as he continued to pound into my wetness. The sound echoed and

mingled with the primal grunts that were coming from him. My eyes fluttered closed as each of my moans grew louder than the one before it.

Julian's knowledge of my body and what I liked was mind-blowing. I was on edge and it wouldn't take him very long to put me over my breaking point, but I wanted us to climax together.

Rocking my hips, I reached up, pulling him forward. With his new angle, he was hitting a deeper spot and I almost came.

He felt it too. "Oh shit," he cursed under his breath as my body started moving faster.

I grabbed his face and pulled his lips to mine. Our kisses were hot and chaotic as we continued letting our bodies collide.

"Please don't stop, Julian. Please don't stop," I begged, even though he showed no signs of stopping. My eyes closed and I dug my fingers into his back. "Holy shit."

Hearing his deep guttural moans spurred me on as I feverishly gyrated against him.

"Let me feel it," he growled. Hitting a spot deep inside me, I clenched tighter, causing him to groan loudly. "Fuck! Yes, that's it. Give it to me, Zoe."

Each of his strokes was more intense and frenzied than the one before it. He was losing control and as much as I wanted to hold on, to wait for him, I didn't think I could hold out much longer. Julian kept taking me to my threshold and I kept trying to fight it.

"It's mine. It'll always be mine. Don't try to keep it from me," Julian uttered in a raspy whisper that went straight from my ear to my clit. "Give it to me, Zoe. Give me what's mine. Let me feel it."

I exploded.

“Oh God,” I panted as I pulsated and stiffened around his cock.

Julian grunted my name and then a string of unintelligible words erupted from him as his body became rigid.

We climaxed together.

Kissing.

Thrusting.

Shaking.

From the tremors that wrecked my body to the words that gave my heart palpitations, there was no question that I belonged to Julian Winters. And he belonged to me.

Chapter 9

“I couldn’t fit into my jeans when I woke up this morning so...”

“The day I’m out of town would be the day you find your wedding dress and develop a baby bump,” Koko complained over the phone as I drove up the driveway.

Good. No one’s here yet, I thought, seeing no cars in the driveway. *I need to hurry.*

“I want to see it! You probably look so cute with a baby bump. Send me a picture! And seriously, I want to know who goes wedding dress shopping on Christmas Eve?” Koko continued playfully.

“Well,” I started as I parked in the garage. “I went to the apartment to pick up Julian’s Christmas gifts and while I was out, I popped into Urbane Bridal. You would be amazed at how empty bridal boutiques are on Christmas Eve. Everyone was getting last minute gifts elsewhere so I basically had the store to myself.”

“Well, I get back in seventy-two hours and I demand to see this dress in person.”

“And you will.” I grabbed Julian’s gifts out of the backseat and propped the biggest one on my hip. “But you need to stop trying to change the subject. What happened with Bryce?”

Koko sucked her teeth loudly. “We talked.”

I waited for her to elaborate. When she didn’t, I asked, “So where do the two of you stand now?”

“I don’t know, Zoe.” She sighed dramatically. “I guess we’re somewhere between he’s not dead to me anymore and I’m answering his calls now.”

The unexpected response caused me to giggle as I entered the house. “Well I’m glad he’s not dead to you anymore.” I paused as I hoisted Julian’s gift to the island in the middle of the kitchen. “But how do you feel? And wasn’t he supposed to go on the trip with you?”

“He was. He was uninvited. As far as how I feel, love sucks.”

I smirked on my way out the door to get my wedding dress out of the trunk. “Yeah, sometimes, but when it’s real, it’s always worth it.”

“Speaking of real love, you get married a week from tomorrow! You finally have a dress. I got a call from the wedding planner extraordinaire Peri Moore yesterday. She has pulled everything together so fast. I guess when you have unlimited money and resources, you can do anything.”

Hmm. I thought she said she was sending an email so that no one would forget anything.

The itinerary was extensive and what we were asking our friends and family to do for the sake of the wedding special was definitely intrusive. I wanted to be sure they knew exactly what was being asked of them so they could make fully informed decisions.

The corners of my mouth turned down. “Oh, I didn’t realize she was calling the wedding party. I had an entire breakdown of the activities Robert Brady is forcing on us as part of the wedding so you knew what you were getting into. I asked her to attach a brochure of the resort, too.”

“Yeah, she did, and I got it, but she wanted to verbally confirm that we received and opened the email. She said you

were concerned about the number of filmed activities and wanted to make sure we knew and were sure we wanted to commit.”

I smiled as I cradled my dress in my arms like a baby and entered the house. “Wow, Peri’s even more thorough than I thought!”

“Yeah, she’s good, Zoe. So you need to stop worrying. We all know what we’re getting into. The wedding weekend will be a good time no matter what, but I’m still amazed at how she pulled it off so fast!”

With the phone balanced on my shoulder, I rushed upstairs and hung up my wedding dress in the closet in my office. “Well, it’s truly amazing how many doors an unlimited budget, courtesy of *The One*, can open. Between our wedding being on a Sunday and it being New Year’s Day, it was already going to be difficult to find a venue, but a few calls from *The One* and the venue was locked down. And Peri just focused on securing décor and handling invites and all of that other stuff. We met with her on Thursday and my mind was blown.”

Our wedding was being held at the Riviera Villa Resort, a resort so exclusive, I’d never even heard of it before. The brochure blew me away with its interior and exterior beauty. From pools to wineries to hiking trails, Riviera had it all. When I saw that it was an all-inclusive resort and all food and drink were included, I was sold. But once I saw the price tag associated with having an event there for one evening, let alone an entire weekend, I balked. Regardless of how much money Julian and I could pull together, I wouldn’t have been okay with spending that amount of money on a wedding.

I don’t know if Robert Brady is trying to make it up to us because he’s keeping us from having the wedding we want... but Riviera Villa Resort is a good start!

Once the location was decided upon, Peri Moore focused on the details and had arranged for us to finalize those details all week. We firmed up our real guest list and selected stationary on Monday morning. By Monday afternoon, invitations were mailed out. We completed the food and beverage tasting on Tuesday. We participated in the cake tasting on Wednesday. On Thursday, we had a long lunch meeting with Peri to review and confirm details after an extensive meeting with Julian's lawyers and the show's lawyers regarding filming and the actual ceremony and reception. On Friday, we went to the courthouse to get our marriage license and then we went to buy wedding bands. It was a busy, but productive week.

"You did the food tasting on Monday, how was it?" Koko asked.

"Absolutely delicious," I gushed. "I mean, every single thing was good. There wasn't a bad dish in the bunch and the cakes were so good we couldn't decide on one flavor so we're having a bunch of different flavors made into cupcakes in addition to a cake."

"My mouth is watering already." She lowered her voice. "Aunt Suki has this big dinner planned for tonight but her cooking skills are...lacking. If breakfast was any indication, I'll be starving by the time I get back."

I stifled a laugh. "Stop it! She's trying. This is her first time doing the Christmas Eve celebration. Your mom always does it. Aunt Suki is probably feeling the pressure. Give her a chance."

"Yeah, easy for you to say. You didn't pull an eggshell from your eggs this morning."

"Yuck!" I gagged.

Koko's high-pitched squeal of a laugh echoed through the phone. "Sorry," she apologized through her giggles. "I forgot your stomach is sensitive. Everything okay with that?"

“Everything is good.” I smiled, running my hand across my belly. “And are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Confused and conflicted, but I’m fine. My relationship goal is something kind of like what you and Julian have. You two are so...healthy.”

I’d never thought about it like that, but she was right.

We are a healthy couple.

I’d only been in one real relationship before my relationship with Julian and it had operated so differently. We didn’t communicate well at all and whenever disagreements or arguments would arise, we fought dirty. We would threaten to leave each other and although we cared about each other, it almost seemed like an automatic reflex to threaten to end the relationship.

In my relationship with Julian, we were on the same page and, most importantly, we worked to keep it that way. I’d always hoped to find a relationship like my parents. I didn’t know if it was something that would actually happen for me because I had been in love, but it hadn’t been anything like what they had. With Julian, it made sense why nothing ever worked out with any other man. Julian was the one and he was absolutely perfect for me.

Julian and I argued, but we were both determined to resolve our issues as soon as possible. Julian and I communicated about everything and trusted each other completely. Our commitment to one another created a space of love, loyalty, and devotion. Even when we were at our maddest—the Lillian Pierce incident from earlier in the year—breaking up was never an option. We knew we would work it out and we worked together to figure out how. We were a team in every way.

I looked at my wedding dress hanging in the closet and smiled. “This is the only healthy relationship I’ve ever been

in.”

“I know,” Koko agreed. “Just a few days ago you guys went from fighting to figuring it out to fucking in a couple short hours.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “And this is why I can’t tell you anything!”

“I’m serious,” she giggled. “That ‘don’t go to bed angry’ shit works and it’s clearly working for you guys. I’ve been going to bed angry for weeks and I’m angry when I wake up and I’m angry when he calls and texts and pops up at my trailer.”

“You know why that is, right?” I didn’t wait for her to respond to continue. “Because you won’t talk to him, Koko.”

We talked for a few more minutes and then got off of the phone with promises to text after our respective dinners.

As I made my way back downstairs, I heard the door leading to the garage open.

“Oh what’s this?” Julian said in a loud, booming voice.

My smile grew as I ran down the rest of the stairs. “Don’t touch it!” I yelled as I bounded into the room.

There were three big bags sitting on the island next to my gifts, but I barely got a good look at them as I launched my body into Julian’s open arms.

“Merry Christmas Eve, my love,” I greeted him as I hugged him tightly.

“Hi Beautiful. Merry Christmas Eve,” he breathed, nuzzling his face in my hair. I heard him inhale deeply. “I love this stuff you put in your hair.”

Tilting my head backward, I grinned up at him. “You should. You bought it.”

He smirked. “What can I say? I have good taste.”

“That you do.”

I lifted myself on my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his. He tasted as good as he smelled. I put my arms around his neck to give me leverage and I allowed my tongue to meet his, deepening the kiss.

Julian groaned in response. His hands flexed against my lower back and then slid over my ass, gripping as much of it as he could in two handfuls.

I moved against him sexily as arousal started to take over my body. “Our families will be here at six. We have a little more than two hours. Let’s utilize our time wisely,” I murmured against his lips.

“You read my mind,” he growled back.

As if on cue, the buzzing of Julian’s phone vibrating against the marble counter interrupted the spontaneity of the moment.

I pulled out of the kiss and looked over at the device.

“Ignore it,” Julian mumbled as he kissed and sucked his way down my neck.

God that feels good.

I closed my eyes for a second, enjoying the way his lips sparked an electric current through my body. I sighed, running my hands over his head, scratching at his scalp. Just as quickly, I forgot about the phone completely. I just relished being in his arms, having his lips on my body. Our lips met again and I was completely sucked in.

The phone buzzed again, somehow louder than before—or maybe I was just so wrapped up in the kiss that it just seemed that way. I considered that possibility as I pulled out of the kiss.

“You should get that,” I whispered begrudgingly.

His hand slipped between my legs. “I’m more concerned about getting that.”

The chuckle that erupted out of us burst our sexy bubble. I pushed him playfully. “You are hilarious! Get the phone. It could be your parents.” I checked my back pocket and I’d remembered I left my phone upstairs. “Or my parents because they couldn’t get in touch with me. Or Beverly.”

He let me go reluctantly. “True, true.” He walked to his phone. “But you’re going to wish we got it on one last time before we are overrun with family for the next few days.”

“Don’t remind me,” I wailed, throwing my hands up dramatically. “We won’t be free to play until we get to the resort.”

“You were right. It’s Beverly. She’ll be here in the next ten minutes with the food.”

“See...” I narrowed my eyes at him as I grabbed his gifts to put under the tree. “You were trying to start something we couldn’t have finished. You’re the real tease.”

Julian chuckled. “Are those heavy? Let me take them.”

“No, no, no. They aren’t heavy and I know you just want to shake them to see what they are.” I gave him a look. “You worry about your own gift situation.”

His laughter followed me out of the room.

“Oh!” I turned around and walked back to the kitchen. “Any word on Chele King?”

Julian had been working on trying to get the R&B artist to perform at our wedding. I knew I had to make concessions to marry the man I loved—there was so much bullshit and back and forth with the show—but as long as I was able to marry Julian while wearing my dream dress in front of our closest

family and friends as I walked down the aisle to Chele King's song "Always The One," I was good.

"Yeah..." He stretched the word out and I knew it wasn't good news. He made a face. "I did hear back. She's working on an album right now and isn't doing live performances."

A small swell of disappointment washed over me before it quickly receded. "Well, I get that. I know how you were when you were finishing your album." I smiled at him before an idea hit me. "Andre! Your intern! Since he's DJing the reception, maybe he'll be able to find an acoustic version. Oh! Or maybe someone can do a cover of it!" I started to get excited again.

"These are good ideas, Beautiful. I'm going to work some things out." He flashed his endearing smile. "When you walk down the aisle toward me, it will be to that song."

"I love you," I sang as I walked out of the room for a second time.

Adding Julian's big gift to the others in the formal living room, I stepped back and took everything in. The lush pine tree stood tall in the corner. Gifts for our families and friends were strategically placed. White candles and string lights lit the room, making it look festive without being overdone.

Simple. Elegant. Beautiful.

Before heading upstairs to get ready for dinner, I went around checking all the guest bedrooms on the first floor. I had enough time to spend ten minutes with Beverly when she arrived since she was going to visit family and we wouldn't see her until the wedding weekend. When I finally made it to the bedroom, I felt exhausted.

This is going to be a long week.

My hot shower revitalized me. Dressing in a short-sleeved eggplant purple dress and comfortable black pumps, I felt

some of my energy coming back. But when I heard the doorbell, I excitedly scrambled downstairs.

In a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt that combined eggplant purple and indigo blue, Julian stood by the door waiting for me. He flashed me a huge smile. “That dress looks great on you.”

I hadn’t been dressed when he’d gone upstairs to take a shower. Instead, I was sitting on the bed thinking about the nap I should’ve taken.

“Thank you.” I reached him and wrapped my arm around him. “I picked this dress because you have on that shirt.”

Julian chuckled before kissing my forehead. “Well, what can I say? I have great taste.”

Holding him a little tighter, I nodded. “I would agree with that.”

Reaching forward, he grabbed the front door knob and swung the door open.

“We’re here!” Susan Winters sang with her arms up in the air.

Brian Winters had gift bags in hand. “I would sing, but... I really don’t want to.”

We laughed as we embraced the couple. They insisted on seeing the ring before even coming all the way into the house. Once they’d had their fill, Julian grabbed the bags from his dad and they walked toward the formal living room. I looped my arm with Susan and we followed behind the men. Before she finished telling me about the two week camping trip they’d been on, the doorbell rang again.

“Excuse me,” I said, patting her arm before turning back toward the door.

“Excuse us,” Julian corrected, slapping me on my ass as he started jogging toward the door.

I laughed, picking up my pace as I chased him down.

He waited until I was next to him before opening the door.

“Hey!” we all yelled at the same time.

Hugging my mom and dad first, I was confused when I didn't see my brother.

Since my dad was whispering with Julian, I turned to my mom and asked, “Where's Zach?”

“He's been seeing someone and they are spending their first Christmas together. They will be flying in in time for the wedding though,” Mom answered, smoothing her short hair down on the side. “And I know you're wondering: he has his tux.”

I giggled and squeezed her again. “That seriously was what I was thinking.”

With her hands on my shoulders, she looked at me. “You are glowing, Sweetheart.”

I grinned. “I'm happy. I'm really happy.” I held out my hand, causing my mom to gasp. “It looks even more beautiful on your finger. Zachary, look.”

Dad patted Julian on his back. “I don't need to tell you to take care of my little girl. I know she's in good hands.” He marched over to me and put his hands on my shoulders. “And I don't need to tell you that I'm sorry for calling you little girl because you will always be my little girl. I don't care how old you are.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I mumbled into his shoulder as I hugged him.

“Okay let me take these,” Julian said, grabbing their luggage. He looked at me. “Zoe, you want to take them to the

living room?”

“Of course,” I replied, winking at him. “Mom, Dad, follow me.”

“It smells delicious in here,” Dad commented as we walked down the hallway and into the living room.

Elise and Zachary Jordan and Susan and Brian Winters were like best friends whenever they were together. They got along well and seemed to talk nonstop. For the entire hour before dinner, raucous laughter throughout the house as Julian and I moved in and out between the kitchen and dining room areas and the living room.

“Dinner is served!” I announced as I beckoned my parents and soon to be in-laws.

Christmas Eve dinner was consumed with wedding talk. We ate delicious food and dissected every part of the weekend. Although we’d been telling them information as we got it, it was a lot of information all at one time. They were excited for what they deemed a romantic getaway, but they were all a little hesitant about being on camera.

Especially Elise Jordan.

I promised I would get the contracts for her to read over so she could have a better understanding of what they could and could not do to set her mind at ease.

“So just to be clear,” my mother began, looking from me to Julian. “Thursday evening, just family and close friends are permitted to arrive at the Riviera Villa Resort. Friday morning the crew from *The One* arrives. Friday evening, the wedding guests arrive, both your invited guests and the guests of the show, and that night will be a meet-and-greet. Saturday, New Year’s Eve, is a bridal brunch, and that night is the private rehearsal and rehearsal dinner, neither on air. And then there’s an after party that is on air, but we don’t have to be there.

Sunday we don't have any on air obligations until the ceremony begins at five o'clock." Her perfectly arched eyebrow lifted. "Right?"

I sucked on my bottom lip and nodded. "But like we said before, anything you don't want to do, you don't have to do."

Everyone was quiet.

"That's a lot of activities," Susan pointed out, touching a napkin to her lips.

"That's a lot of activities on air," my dad added, looking at my mom.

Brian chuckled under his breath. "Our students will be watching."

Susan looked at Brian. "It'll either give us credibility or..."

Our parents fell quiet again.

My eyes landed on Julian, who was chewing on his bottom lip contemplatively. His eyes widened a little as if asking me if I had any comments that might help.

I didn't.

My mother broke the silence. "We're not obligated to do any interviews and we never have to have microphones on us." She looked around the table to the other parents. "It shouldn't negatively impact our careers or our lives, but I'm going to review the contracts just to make sure no one tries anything sneaky, thinking we don't know our stuff." She looked at Dad. "I think everything will be fine."

"So you're all still in?" I asked nervously.

"There is nothing that would keep me from watching our amazing, beautiful daughter marry their amazing, handsome son." My mother brought her glass of red wine to her lips.

My dad lifted his glass and waited for us all to lift ours in the air too. “To our children.”

Brian looked at each of us and smiled. “To the joining of our families.”

Susan giggled. “To love.”

We finished dinner and cleared the plates. I rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher while Julian served hot cocoa with gigantic marshmallows to our parents. After I hit the start button, I gripped the counter and let my head fall back. A slow deep breath eased from my lungs.

Time for the Christmas Eve gift exchange. They are going to freak out.

The moment I felt Julian’s presence, I turned around. With his hands in his pockets, he strolled over to me. Without having to say anything, he tangled his hands in my hair and rested his head against my head.

I stared into his grey eyes, emotion welling up inside me. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” His voice was as soft as the kiss he placed on my lips. “How are you?” He pulled his head away and wrapped his hands around my neck. “You look tired—beautiful, but tired.”

I closed my eyes briefly. “I’m so tired.” The corners of my lips turned up. “But I’m so excited to tell them.”

He smirked. “Let’s do it.”

Taking his hand in mine, we strolled into the living room.

“This is the best hot chocolate, Julian,” Susan complimented as soon as we walked in the room.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Julian shook his head with a laugh. “You always say that. I promise you, it’s just gourmet chocolate. I’m not doing anything special to it.”

I snickered behind my hand because we’d had that exact same conversation last Christmas and his only contribution to the recipe was that he added water.

Once they finished marveling over his specialty cocoa, I asked, “So who’s ready for gifts? And who wants to go first?”

While my parents gifted books and Julian’s parents gifted personalized mugs, I anxiously awaited Julian to finish passing out his gifts.

“And for you, Beautiful.” Julian smiled as he handed me a rectangular box.

“Thank you,” I replied, opening the box. I laughed as soon as I moved the tissue paper out of the way. “It’s perfect!”

“Since it’ll be your turn to write when I go on tour, you can use your quill pen and make it pretentious,” Julian explained, grinning.

I leaned over to kiss him before pulling out the quill pen and three inkwells full of ink to show the group.

“Okay, my turn,” I announced, rubbing my hands together.

“The grand finale,” Dad cheered.

I gathered my gifts from under the tree and stacked them in my lap. I handed our parents their gifts as I said, “You have to open these at the same time. But first...” I turned and gave Julian his gift. “You have to open yours first.”

He opened the box and smiled. Reaching in, he pulled out the leather bound notebook. “Wow... Thank you, Zoe.” His fingers traced my favorite love lyrics from each of the songs on his album before he held it up to show everyone. Kissing my shoulder and then my lips, he whispered, “I love this.”

“What are the words on it?” Susan asked, leaning forward and squinting her eyes.

“Some of my favorite lyrics from his album,” I answered. “And all the blank pages need to be filled with the words for the next album.”

Julian kissed my shoulder as our families cooed. “Aww.”

I took a deep breath as we made eye contact. My heart skipped a beat.

It's time.

I smiled at our parents. “Okay, now it's your turn.” I slipped my hand into Julian's and he squeezed. “On the count of three, take the top off of the box and grab your gift.”

They made jokes about the drama and anticipation for a minute and I could tell the wine had them in high spirits.

“On the count of three,” Julian announced.

“One, two...” My voice shook a bit. “Three.”

All four of them ripped open their boxes and pulled out black t-shirts. In thirty seconds, confusion swirled into excitement as the *‘Only the best parents get promoted to grandparents’* t-shirts were read. Everyone leaped to their feet as hugs and crying commenced. They all started shouting at once.

“Oh my God! I'm so happy!”

“Congratulations! This is amazing!”

“What?! Seriously! You're pregnant?”

“Thank God! I can't stop crying.”

For fifteen minutes, we were swarmed with love and enthusiasm.

Once we were all seated, the room still buzzed with the news. They were beaming as they waited for us to answer their

endless stream of questioning.

“How far along are you?” my mom asked as all four sets of eyes zoomed in on my belly.

“You’re not showing at all,” Susan interjected, dabbing her eyes with her fingers.

“Fourteen-ish weeks. Dr. Maxwell said because it’s my first, I could start showing any day now.”

“When did you two find out?” Dad asked, scooting to the edge of his chair. He looked between us as he sipped on the whiskey Brian had poured for the men.

“Three weeks ago,” I answered.

“Why didn’t you tell us before now?” Susan questioned weepily. “I feel like I’ve been waiting on this forever. This is the best Christmas gift.”

Julian put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into him. “Because we wanted to tell you all at the same time and with the wedding and everything, we knew we wanted it to be a Christmas gift.”

“But no one else knows. We aren’t telling anyone,” I explained. “We want the focus to be on us as a couple and not on anything else.”

My dad nodded. “That makes sense.”

“So is this why the wedding is happening so soon?” My mom’s voice was thick with emotion as she wiped the corners of her eyes.

I smiled. *When was the last time I saw Elise Jordan cry?*

“Aww Mom...” I put my hand over my heart.

She waved her hand in the air, shooing me and my delicate tone away.

I giggled in response. “Actually, Julian proposed to me before we knew for sure that I was pregnant.”

Julian jumped in. “And since I’d planned on proposing on New Year’s Eve anyway, it just made sense for New Year’s Day to be our wedding day.”

I bit my lower lip as I eyed him. “We just wanted to start the new year off as husband and wife and then when the little one comes, we’ll already be married.” I looked around the room at our beaming parents and let out a contented sigh. “We’re happy. We know it’s been a whirlwind and it seemed to come out of the blue, but—”

“Oh no, we knew he was going to propose soon,” my mom corrected, her youthful face breaking into a wide smile.

“Yeah, we just didn’t know when,” my dad added.

“I was hoping to help plan an engagement party,” his mom mentioned. “But we knew about the New Year’s engagement plan.”

“Julian has been searching for the right ring for months,” his dad laughed.

I looked down at the gorgeous diamond on my finger. Just hearing how he’d been searching for the right ring for me for months made me love the ring he’d given me even more. It made me love him even more.

“Julian could’ve just asked without the ring and I would’ve accepted,” I admitted, still staring at the ring.

The chorus of ‘awws’ made me roll my eyes and fight the smile that played on my lips.

“They remind me of us when we first met,” Julian’s mom exclaimed excitedly.

“Us, too,” my mom agreed.

“You all are still like that,” I argued with a laugh.

Julian chuckled. “Our bar for romance is pretty high because of you four.”

After the room settled down, my father took another sip of his whiskey. “Looks like we have a lot to celebrate this week!”

“Here, here,” Brian agreed, lifting his glass in the air. He turned and looked at Julian. “You’re going to be a father soon, son.”

The look on Julian’s face made my heart skip a beat. His smile was genuine and stretched from ear-to-ear. “I’m going to be a father,” he repeated. “Fortunately for me, I have two great men who can teach me a thing or two between now and then.”

My smile grew as I looked at the profile of the man I loved.

Such a sweet talker.

About thirty minutes later, we all said goodnight and Julian and I headed upstairs. I freshened up while he worked on something in the office. By the time he returned from his office and showered, I was moments away from falling asleep.

The bed dipped as he climbed in behind me. His warm body pressed against my back and he kissed my neck and shoulder. His arm draped over me and his hand found its way underneath my tank top. He dragged his fingers over my skin, causing a tingle to run through me.

“Do you feel that?” I whispered into the darkened room.

“No, what? Did the baby kick?” His voice was low and his breath tickled my neck. “Did the baby kick?” He moved his hand below my bellybutton.

“No, no, no... no kicking yet. Do you feel the bump? I have a bump now. I meant to tell you earlier, but with everything going on, I forgot to mention it.” I yawned. “You feel it?”

His hand moved over the fleshiness of my belly. After his third pass over the bump, his fingers flattened against the

swell. “Right here?” he asked quietly. “I think I feel it... barely.”

I placed my hand on top of his. “Well this barely there bump was enough for my favorite pair of jeans to not button up this morning.”

He started moving our hands in a soothing circular pattern over the slight bump that had appeared out of nowhere.

“That just makes it even more real.” His statement was soft and full of wonder.

I felt myself dozing off as I replied, “That’s what I was thinking too. Soon, we won’t be able to keep it a secret.”

“Soon, everyone will know because you won’t be able to hide the fact that our baby is growing inside of you.”

His lips pressed against my neck and an unexpected sigh escaped me.

As I started to succumb to sleep, my heart fluttered. It wasn’t just because Julian’s lips always caused my body to react; it was because with his lips on my neck, his hands on my belly and my hand covering his, I felt connected in a way I’d never felt before.

Connected to both Julian and the baby.

It wasn’t the first time I’d thought of the three of us as a family; I’d been thinking about our family from the moment I found out I was pregnant. For the last three weeks, I’d planned and focused on how we were going to move from a duo to a trio. It was always in a future tense, but in that moment, right before I drifted to sleep, it was the first time I thought of the three of us as a family in the present tense.

I’m not going to be a mother. I am a mother.

Chapter 10

I recited *Drunk as Drunk* by Pablo Neruda as I stared at Julian's profile. I didn't mean for my thoughts to take a sexual turn, but they did. I tried to focus on something else, anything else, but I couldn't concentrate.

I wasn't just a little aroused; I was horny as hell.

Julian and I had sex on Christmas morning after we exchanged gifts. He loved the Gibson Adirondack Spruce acoustic guitar I gave him, alternating between strumming the guitar and strumming my body. I cried when he gave me a poem he wrote for me and had painted on a ten foot canvas. In addition, he told me there was another gift, but it was a surprise to be given later. We thanked each other with massive orgasms. The struggle to be quiet mixed with the appreciation of our gifts added to the love we felt for one another.

Although I was physically exhausted and thoroughly satisfied after our Christmas romp, I didn't know it would be the last time we'd have sex until our wedding weekend. Monday, Julian was taking care of things that ordinarily Beverly would take care of, but since she was visiting family, he did it himself and it took the majority of the day. On Tuesday, I spent all day shopping with my mother and future mother-in-law. By the time we returned, I passed out from sheer exhaustion. Wednesday, we spent the entire day with our parents; however, once Julian and I stole time to be alone, an evening round of morning sickness ruined whatever mood was starting to develop. So Thursday morning, as we parked Julian's car at the Riviera Villa Resort's hilltop, I felt like I was going to combust.

Especially with Julian looking like that.

Julian had on jeans, a white t-shirt, and his black leather jacket. He wore aviator sunglasses and had allowed a sexy beard to cover his jawline over the last several days. He bit down on his full bottom lip as he looked around.

“This is nice. I wish we could see over the shrubbery, but that privacy is a good thing. I don’t know—” His words stopped abruptly when he took the key out of the ignition and finally looked at me. A slow smile crept over his face. “Don’t look at me like that.”

I licked my lips. “Like what?” My voice was purposefully breathy as I moved my hand over to his side of the car.

I was a few inches away from his thigh when the blaring noise of a horn startled me. I snatched my hand away and looked out the rearview mirror. I’d been so focused on seducing Julian that I didn’t even see his best friends had arrived.

Julian and I looked at each other and tried not to laugh as we opened our doors to get out of the car.

We walked to the center of the cul-de-sac and took turns hugging. Before we could finish asking about their drive, Koko and Lenny pulled up with Keisha following behind. They parked their cars in the middle of the road and ran over to the group.

“This place is amazing!” Koko yelled as she hugged me and Julian at the same time.

Another round of hugs and pleasantries were exchanged before I quieted the group down.

Unfolding the papers in my handbag, I glanced down at my itinerary and map. I grinned as an excited burst of energy rippled through me. “Ahhh! We’re getting married!”

They laughed in response.

Julian put his hand on my ass and patted gently as he dropped a kiss on my lips. “Finally.”

My heart swelled.

“So this is where we are staying.” I gestured to the five villas that sat on the hilltop in a circle. Because of the height of the shrubbery, we could only see the tops of each of the villas.

Keisha looked impressed. “This isn’t some normal vacation spot. This is why we don’t see people like Oprah on a regular vacation. She goes to places like this.”

We all nodded in agreement.

As we drove through the property to get to the only villas on the hill, everything from the landscape to the buildings looked opulent and over-the-top gorgeous. We were told by the event planner that they referred to the hilltop villas as a private oasis.

“They call this up here the Hilltop and even though it’s five villas with five bedrooms each, they only rent this area as one collective unit. Don’t worry about having to share a room since each of the five villas has five bedrooms.” I gestured to the pathway on the other side of where Julian parked his car. “We take this path and we’ll be secluded in our own little oasis.”

“Well if it’s an oasis, I hope the email from the event planner was just a gross rumor...but she said the boys and girls will be separated,” Omar joked, folding his arms across his chest. “What gives?”

As everyone laughed, I rolled my eyes.

Pointing to it on the diagram, I continued, “This is where Julian’s family will be. Next one is where my family will be.” Going back to the diagram, I dragged my manicured finger to

the next villa. I narrowed my eyes at Omar. “Ladies, this is where we will be, and next to us, you fellas will be there. Just for right now, Beverly and her husband will be in this one right here.” I turned around and pointed to the villa we were standing in front of, the only villa able to be seen from the cul-de-sac.

“Wait a minute! So Bev gets the place to herself and I have to stay with you guys?” Omar joked.

I glared at him, but after a few seconds, I couldn’t help but giggle. “Omar, stop! My cousin will be here on Saturday before the rehearsal and she’ll be staying there,” I replied with a shake of my head then I looked at Julian for help, gesturing to Omar.

“And both of my cousins will be here tomorrow night and they’ll be staying in there too,” Julian followed up. “You know Beverly hates when you call her Bev.”

Omar chuckled. “Bev loves me!”

I rolled my eyes dramatically. “So park in the carports on this side of the cul-de-sac, grab your stuff, and follow the path. Let the wedding weekend begin!”

The women cheered happily and started jumping up and down, hugging one another.

“I’ll hop on the grill and break out some beers so we can get the party started,” Julian shouted, causing the men to mimic us by jumping up and down and squealing.

Everyone dispersed slowly as a playful, borderline flirtatious argument broke out between my best friends and Julian’s. Since Julian and I had already parked, we grabbed our stuff from the car and headed down the path.

The villa we could see was beautiful, but walking around the shrubbery, we were in the midst of a circle of five uniquely different and gorgeous glass and bamboo vacation homes with

an enormous pool situated in the center. There was also a complete grilling station and outdoor eating area near a large veranda positioned in the exact position to take in a beautiful view.

“Wow,” I breathed, my eyes wide. “The brochure did not do this justice.”

“Not at all,” Julian agreed as we gaped at our surroundings.

I could still hear our best friends giggling and talking loudly as they unloaded their cars. Julian and I walked into the villa where I would be staying first. With my wedding dress cradled in my arms like a baby, I swiped the card to enter the tallest of the five structures.

We already knew what the layout was so we made our way to the only bedroom upstairs. It took up the entire second floor and had access to a rooftop patio.

I hung my dress up in the closet and then looked around in awe. The floor to ceiling windows, the view of the ocean in the distance, the crisp white linens on the bed, the billowing sheer white curtains and the exposed bamboo beams in the ceiling gave the room a sexy island vibe.

“This is beautiful,” I gushed.

Julian put my suitcase on the hardwood floor. “It is.” He turned and looked at me, sliding his sunglasses on top of his head. “Yet somehow, it’s still not as beautiful as you.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he pulled me close. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“We are getting married in three days.” I let my mouth hang open for a second before I mouthed the word days again.

“How do you feel?” His grey eyes conveyed a nervousness his voice didn’t.

“Ready,” I answered honestly.

He smiled before bringing his mouth to mine, kissing me sweetly. As soon as his lips parted, the fire that burned deep inside me reignited. I ran my fingernails against his scalp as I deepened the kiss. His hands roamed over my back and dipped to my ass, pulling me flush against his him.

“Holy shit!” Lenny’s voice carried as she entered the villa. The sound of our friends reacting pulled us out of our kiss.

I made a whiny noise as I shut my eyes tightly.

I just want some alone time with my future husband!

I pouted. “I want you so bad.”

He slipped his hand between my legs. “After we get everyone settled, I plan on coming back and taking care of you.”

I moaned. “I’m holding you to that.”

“I’ve been thinking about getting inside—”

“They’re up here,” Koko’s voice erupted from the hallway, just outside the open door.

We startled apart, creating a few feet of space between us as she strolled into the room.

“Well, well, well...” She looked between us and put her hands on her hips. “What do we have here? A little afternoon delight?”

I threw my head back and laughed, but didn’t deny it.

“You know I’m not one to cockblock, but the guys can’t get into the villa without your key.” She slowly backed out of the room. “There’s too much sexual tension in here. I’m going to meet you downstairs.” She flipped her blue tinted hair over her shoulder and ran away.

“Thanks Koko,” Julian yelled after her with a laugh.

We went downstairs and found the group talking loudly in the spacious living room that looked out to the Olympic-size pool.

“Where are your parents? I thought they were right behind us,” Scott questioned as soon as he finished teasing Keisha. Although she didn’t respond, the smile she gave him said a lot.

“All four of them are with Beverly, meeting with the wedding planner and the venue coordinator,” Julian answered quickly. “Can we talk to you for a minute?”

Everyone was already seated aside from Lenny and James. They stopped whispering by the glass door that led to the patio, the interconnecting pathway to the next villa, and the outdoor bar and grilling area outside the veranda. When they sat on the beige couch next to Koko, I noticed they were extremely close.

Hmmm. I smiled. Interesting.

“So, while our family is handling last minute wedding stuff, we have an announcement to make,” I stated, clapping my hands together.

We had their undivided attention. I looked over at Julian and his facial expression was so cute. He looked like he was about to burst.

Putting my hand in his, I grinned. “You know what, my love? Why don’t you make the announcement?”

He lifted our intertwined hands to his lips and kissed the back of my hand. His eyes were closed and as the kiss lingered for a few seconds, I knew how much that moment meant to him.

My stomach fluttered.

He opened his eyes and looked around the room. “Zoe and I are happy you’re here.” He squeezed my hand and I squeezed

back. “And we want to let you in on a secret.”

They were waiting with baited breath. I actually saw Lenny move to the edge of her seat.

“Zoe and I are going to be parents,” Julian informed them with pride lacing his words. “She’s three months pregnant.”

Every single one of them jumped to their feet. We were bombarded with hugs and stomach rubs.

“I knew it!”

“What? Are you serious?”

“You’re having a baby? That’s amazing!”

The room filled with a shocked excitement that gave me chills. After the immediate yelling, we were enveloped in some sort of eight-person hug and I loved it. After a minute or two, the men wiggled their way out of the group hug. After a few more minutes, the rest of us disengaged.

There was a lot of love and support in the room.

“No one knows except for the doctor, our parents, and you so do not say anything to anyone—especially this weekend. Don’t even talk about it amongst yourselves. Once the producers get here tomorrow, they will probably try to get you to spill anything juicy just for ratings. We don’t want anyone to know yet.”

“I’m so happy for you—both of you! That baby is going to have the coolest parents,” Koko enthused.

I put my hand over my heart. “Love you,” I mouthed to her.

“When are you due?” Keisha asked, cocking her head to the side and staring at my belly.

“Mid-June,” I answered, putting a hand on my miniscule baby bump. “June sixteenth to be exact.”

She nodded. “As long as everyone can keep their mouths shut, no one will even know. You do not look three months pregnant at all.” Keisha shook her head. “My sister is pregnant and she started showing immediately.”

“Yeah, my doctor said that because it’s my first, it may take a little longer, but I don’t care. As long as I can still fit into my gown on Sunday, my belly could pop out on Monday and I’d be good to go.”

“I can’t wait to see that dress,” Lenny threw out as she stepped over someone’s suitcase. “And then I can’t wait to see that baby. Seriously, that baby is going to be gorgeous.”

“Then he or she will take after their mother,” Julian replied smoothly.

Warmth filled me as I wrapped my arms around him. I opened my mouth to respond, but Omar cut me off.

“Okay, okay, you already got her to say yes. You don’t have to show us all up,” Omar teased, as he walked closer. He looked between us, sincere happiness and maybe a little pride emanating from his eyes. “You two are the real thing. I’m proud of you, man.”

I let go of Julian so they could do their intricate handshake-hug thing.

“This calls for a toast,” James announced in his serenely deep voice.

We relocated to the kitchen. Scott made his notoriously strong drinks with alcohol in the fully stocked bar. Everyone lifted a glass except for me; I lifted a bottle of water.

James tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. “To Zoe and Julian, and of course, the ba—”

“Knock, knock!” Beverly said as she walked into the villa, interrupting James’ toast.

As our friends greeted Beverly, I whispered to Julian. “Did you tell Beverly yet?”

“I didn’t want to tell her before our parents and she was on vacation so I was waiting until today,” he answered in a hushed tone.

I nodded, but didn’t reply as Beverly walked over to us. The room cleared out as our best friends carried the party out of the kitchen.

“You look nice,” I complimented the older woman as she kissed me on my cheek.

“So do you,” Beverly returned. “And I can’t wait to see you in your dress. I couldn’t get the full effect from the text message you sent me.”

I grinned. “I can’t wait to put it on.”

She gestured to the mess Scott had made with bottles littering the counter. “I’m going to let you kids get back to your party, but I wanted to let you know that a security guard will be stationed at the bottom and the top of the hill. The crew arrives at eight in the morning and between me, Peri Moore, and the resort staff, your privacy up here will be protected.”

“Thanks for taking care of that, Beverly.” Julian scratched his beard contemplatively. Lowering his voice, he continued, “There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Good, because there’s something I need to discuss with you as well. I know we aren’t focusing on business this weekend, but...”

“How about you two talk business and I’ll take the keycard and get everyone settled?” I offered, bumping Julian with my hip.

He dropped a kiss against my lips and then gazed at me. “Thank you, Beautiful.”

He handed me the keycard.

With a wave, I followed the sound of uncontrollable laughter and people trying to outtalk each other on the patio.

I strolled by them and called over my shoulder. “Get your stuff. We’re heading to the man cave.”

The villa the men were staying in looked almost identical to the one we were in. I noticed that the master bedroom, the one that would presumably be Julian’s room, did not have roof access as mine did.

We’d been in the men’s villa for twenty minutes before Julian marched in with his bags.

Announcing that it was time for ‘girl talk’, we left the guys to unpack. The four of us sat in the living room of the villa with wine and popcorn, dressed in comfortable clothing, and we just talked nonstop. We discussed the things we needed to get off of our chests: our wants, fears, desires, challenges, and happy moments. Any and everything we hadn’t gotten a chance to catch up on over the phone over the last few months, we chatted about. The sun had started to set by the time we started wrapping up the conversation and it really sank in how important it was to have close friendships with like-minded, yet completely different, women.

I love my crew.

When we saw the guys strolling out with speakers, alcohol, and food, we knew our cookout was about to take place. Sparking up the fire pit, we spent hours enjoying each other’s company. Our parents and Beverly came out to spend time with us for a little while, but soon, it was just the eight of us.

I was the first to head to bed. Julian insisted on coming with me, but he was having a good time, so I made him stay. I didn’t tell him my back was tired or that all the excitement and running around wore me out because I knew he would

abandon everyone to be there for me. I loved him so much for it, but I wanted him to have a good time.

I retreated to the bedroom and jumped in the shower. The hot water relaxed my body to the point that I barely had enough energy to slip into the silk shorts and camisole set I'd packed.

Sleep came quickly and easily and then I was dead to the world. It wasn't until I felt my back being massaged that I slowly eased out of my unconscious state. I inhaled deeply and could smell Julian's soap.

"Mmm?" I moaned in question as my eyes remained closed. With the sheets pushed off my body, I felt the slight chill in the air.

Slipping his fingers under my camisole, he moved across my skin, massaging muscles I didn't even realize needed to be massaged. "How does that feel?" he whispered.

"Really good," I murmured sleepily. My body heated immediately.

"I noticed you touching your back. Does it hurt?"

I smiled against my pillow. "I thought I felt better after the shower, but this, this is exactly what I needed."

"I need to get to your lower back," Julian explained as he slid my shorts down. He moaned appreciatively when he saw that I wasn't wearing anything underneath.

I cleared my throat as his intentions woke me up and revitalized the tension I felt deep in my core. I lifted my body from the mattress to help him take them off. "Oh really?"

"Yes." His fingers danced across my skin. His voice deepened as the pressure of his hands intensified. "I just want to be able to get to the spot that needs the most attention—you know, just to make it easier to massage you."

“Yeah,” I giggled softly as he groped my ass, flexing his fingers against the rounded flesh. “To massage me.”

I felt the bed move as he put his arms on either side of my head. His body heat warmed my skin as he hovered above me, not touching me. My eyes opened and the room was illuminated with the soft lights from the pool and patio areas.

Or maybe the sun is starting to rise.

I wasn't able to see around his arm that was caging me in.

“Zoe?”

He breathed my name and sent a chill through my body. He was close. I could tell he was leaning over me from my left by the way his arm was bent, but I didn't know how close he was until the warmth of his breath made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

My heart drummed in my chest. “Yes.”

I felt his lips brush against my nape and then the back of my shoulder. Returning to the middle of my back, he kissed down my spine, stopping at the small of my back. He licked his way back up until his mouth was against the shell of my ear.

“You're going to have to be quieter than that for me to finish your massage,” Julian whispered before kissing my cheek and then my lips. He pulled away before I could turn my head to face him and lose myself in the kiss. “Do you think you can be quiet?”

My breathy answer was more of a reaction to him nibbling on my earlobe. “Mm hmm,” I moaned my confirmation.

He shifted, spreading my legs open and relocating from my side to the space he'd created between my limbs. “I want you to say it, Zoe.” He palmed my ass. “Tell me you can be quiet.”

“I-I can be quiet,” I stammered.

With my legs opened, I knew my arousal was apparent. Something about the idea of him eyeing my body and knowing how turned on he made me made my lower body clench. I braced myself for him to touch me where I needed him to.

I sucked in a sharp breath as he approached the apex of my thighs and then retreated. Filled with a mixture of desire and disappointment, a whimper escaped my lips.

Julian groaned, leaning up and caging my head with his arms. I squirmed as he hovered over me.

Yesss...

When he'd caged me in the first time, he'd been leaning from my left side. This time, from his new position between my legs, his dick rested against my ass.

His mouth was against my ear as he whispered, "You know what it does to me when you make noises like that." He rubbed his hard cock against the crack of my ass.

"Then you should give it to me." My voice was weak with want. "Please."

He swore under his breath in a growl as he sat back up.

I lifted my head and peeked over my shoulder. The sight of him running his hand up and down his shaft as he stared at me caused me to moan. The sexy sight was too much.

Why is he such a tease? He knows I've wanted him all day.

"Let me help you with that," I offered softly, attempting to roll over.

Because he was between my legs, it didn't take much for him to grab my hips and keep me pinned down.

"Oh you will," he grunted, sliding his hands from my hips to my back. "But first..."

He started with my lower back and worked his way up. Making slow, deliberate circles, his strong hands caressed my skin. He alternated between going hard and deep, releasing the tension built up in my muscles and swiping his hands, letting his fingers flutter across my skin, intensifying the tension between my thighs.

“Julian...” The deep ache I felt in my core was driving me crazy. I wanted him in every way.

Julian worked his hands up my calves and slowly made his way to my thighs. His fingers grabbed just below my ass and focused all his attention there. Kneading the area that was so close to where I wanted him, the anticipation made my hips rotate involuntarily. Even though I was exasperated, I couldn't help letting out indecipherable noises of approval.

He cleared his throat. “Is your back okay?”

I closed my eyes. “Yes. Yes.”

I felt his thumbs get closer and closer to my clit. Just when I thought I was going to get touched where my body begged to be touched, Julian moved up and massaged my lower back.

“No,” I whined wantonly. The sexual frustration had reached its peak. “Please.”

He groaned. “Please what?”

I couldn't tell if it was my body or his hands that were shaking.

“Julian, please...” My entire lower body clenched. “I need you.”

“What do you need?” The rough desperation in his voice mimicked how my body felt.

“I need you inside me.”

His fingers stilled and his breath sounded ragged. “Roll over.”

He helped, adjusting my legs as I rolled onto my back. The soft light that eased into the room illuminated Julian as he spread me open wide. I was captivated by the way he looked at me, but I could barely keep my eyes on his face. His dick was hard and thick and pointing directly at me.

If I just lift my body up...

Letting his hands coast down my thighs, he pulled me where he wanted me.

I gasped.

A smirk haunted his lips as his eyes devoured my breasts. It wasn't until then that I noticed how hard my nipples were. I shifted my body, causing my heavy breasts to shake, and his eyes snapped to mine. Rubbing and gently pinching my nipples, he caused my body to hum from the sensation.

My chest rose and fell as the seconds passed.

Falling forward, his lips latched on to my nipple. The warm heat and wet suction of his mouth was almost enough to send me over the edge. He'd teased me for so long and I wanted him so badly that when he sucked and flicked and toyed with my nipples, I was primed for him, ready to get off.

I groaned, scratching my nails against his back.

He kissed up my chest and neck until our lips met. The need, desire, and anticipation exploded as we moaned into each other's mouths. Our tongues touched and I felt it everywhere.

Pulling out of the kiss, Julian rested his forehead against mine. He grabbed the back of my thighs and pushed them back, exposing me.

I opened my mouth to beg him to stop teasing me, but instead, I cried out as the head of his dick met my wetness.

"Oh, God," I wailed.

It wasn't quite a scream, but in the quiet villa, it might as well have been.

Julian froze. The corners of his lips turned up. "I knew you couldn't keep quiet."

I didn't want him to stop, so I quickly tried to get my mind to think straight in order to explain and promise to be quiet from that point forward.

"Th-that was just because you caught me off guard. I can be —" My raspy words cut off abruptly and transformed into a noise that was part gasp and part grunt as he sank into me. Trying to keep it together, I clamped my mouth shut as he filled me up and stretched me out inch by inch.

"Fuck," he swore gruffly, extending the word out. His head fell against my shoulder as I locked my legs around him, pulling him in to the hilt. With his mouth only inches from my ear, he whispered, "You are so fucking wet, Zoe. Shit..."

He pulled almost all the way out before thrusting almost every inch back inside of me. His slow, measured movements felt as if he were strumming my body.

"Oh, right there. Right there," I panted soundlessly, chest heaving.

He kissed his way from my shoulder to my mouth and then brushed his lips against mine. His pace increased as the kiss deepened and when he ended it, he slowed his momentum.

Heavy breathing and swallowed moans were the only noises coming out of us as our bodies collided.

I whispered his name over and over again as my orgasm kept building.

"Let's see if you can keep quiet," he teased softly before withdrawing himself and then slamming into me unexpectedly.

I groaned, arching my back and constricting around him. My body shook uncontrollably as my orgasm took over. My arms fell from around him and hit the mattress hard. I tried with everything in me to not cry out, but it was too good, too intense. I panted loudly and my heart beat out of my chest.

He swore under his breath, but waited until I stopped convulsing to pull his rock hard cock out of me.

“I have a confession to make...” He tangled his fingers in my hair and kissed me sloppily. His voice was low and hoarse. “I love the sound of you coming apart because of me...” His voice dropped even lower as he eased into me again. “And I really don’t give a fuck if your friends hear you,” he concluded, grinding himself into me deeper, harder, faster than before.

His words did something to me as the primal noises I made alternated between lustful and guttural moans. I felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. From the low grunts that seemed to come from deep in his chest to the sound of him pumping in and out of my wetness, I was being pushed to my limit for a second time, and it wasn’t going to be long before I imploded.

He shoved my legs back, opening me wider, and stroked my clit with his thumb. His touch jolted me and burned through my body.

“That’s it.” He groaned under his breath, ramming into me. “That’s it.”

He had one hand playing with my clit and the other pinching a nipple as he continued to drive himself into me.

“Look at me,” he demanded in a gruff tone.

My lashes fluttered open and our eyes locked. I could see my effect on him, but more than that, I could see how badly he wanted to take care of me.

Keeping my lips together, I hummed noisily, swallowing the moan that threatened to echo across the entire hilltop.

He licked his lips and smirked before delivering a powerful thrust that caused my mouth to fly open and a purr to come from the back of my throat.

He owned my body and he knew it.

Julian let out ragged breaths as his strokes became less restrained. His grip on the root of my hair tightened as he lost himself and his inhibitions. The suctioning sound of him slipping in and out of me reverberated through the stillness of the villa. The ache deep inside me became unbearable as he started to lose control.

I clenched my muscles, letting the wet heat clamp down around him. He sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth.

The small sound of his impending freefall ignited mine. My eyes shut tight and I bucked feverishly against him as I gave in to my orgasm.

“Zoe...Zoe...shit,” he groaned as he briefly stilled. As pleasure ransacked his muscular body, causing him to twitch and jerk, his mouth opened, yet no sound came out.

We climaxed together. Hard.

Chapter 11

Poem Within A Poem
Rhythm and beauty
Poetry in your words.
Creative and expressive
Few lines, all curves.
Melodic words flow
Out of me, into you.
The harder the beat
Brings the ballad out of you.
The contents of my heart
Will move you spiritually.
Ode to you, this duo,
I declare it lyrically.
New rhymes breathe new life;
Unexpected, but meant to be.
Verses, either blank or free
Poem, part you, part me.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” Keisha asked as she, Koko, and Lenny tiptoed into the room. “Are you okay?”

I looked up from the poem I’d read twice an hour every hour since I’d found it. With meetings with Robert Brady and other staffers for *The One*, I didn’t expect to see Julian until it was time for the meet-and-greet. He’d said goodbye to me after brunch and I’d returned to my room to take a long hot shower. When I got out, I found the poem on my pillow.

He came back and left the poem for me. My heart fluttered just thinking about it. I love him.

“Of course,” I replied, tucking the poem into the notebook in my hand. “Well rested now.”

After the workout Julian gave me in the wee hours of the morning, I needed rest. And I needed to spend some time with my family before they went to explore the grounds as well.

“Good. I’m sure pregnancy is taking a lot out of you,” Keisha empathized, smiling sweetly.

“So is Julian,” Koko quipped, pumping her arms and thrusting her hips in a sexual manner.

“What am I missing?” Lenny asked, confusion creasing her face.

Koko slapped Lenny on the ass, ignoring the question. “How’s the family?”

“They’re well. Cousins got in this afternoon so we all hung out and caught up with my brother and his girlfriend. My dad, brother and I called Nana and Pop since they couldn’t fly. Grandma baked a cake. It was good.” I smiled at the memory. “By the way, you guys look nice.” I eyed my best friends with a nod of approval.

“Between your grandma and Julian’s grandma, I’m ready for old age,” Lenny declared with her hands on her hips. “They are both so cute and so stubborn! I wanted to take them shopping with us.”

After the big brunch on the veranda, my best friends had left the safety of the hill to explore the rest of the Riviera Villa Resort property. I’d slept and spent time with my family instead.

“Did you have fun?” I sat back in my chair and waited.

They all seemed to start talking at once as they described the beauty of the reservoir that separated the golf course from the ballroom. Three restaurants were grouped together near the

spa, two small wineries operated in two separate corners of the expansive land, and the recreation center was located somewhere between the two. The hiking trails were closer to where we were on the hill and on the other side, opposite the hill, there was access to a private beach. The Riviera Villa Resort had a little something for everyone.

“And people are pouring in,” Lenny commented. “I’ve never seen so many B-list TV celebrities and models at one place, at one time.”

I shook my head with a dry laugh. “People from the show’s guest list, of course.”

Koko plopped down beside me on the loveseat. “I’m trying to rebound with a hot rock star or sexy rapper or even a former boyband member turned solo pop star. I know Julian keeps his circle of friends small, but I know he’s friends with some A-listers. I need a hot A-list hookup to clear my mind.”

I bumped her with my shoulder, knowing Koko’s sudden interest in a high-profile hookup was directly related to the fact that Bryce Wilson was likely somewhere on the resort. As much as she tried to seem unaffected by the fact that she would see him this weekend, she was clearly bothered.

“Did you see him?” I asked, analyzing her movements.

“See who?” Koko asked, running her hands through her hair as she avoided eye contact.

“Yes,” Keisha and Lenny answered in unison as soon as I looked at them.

Koko rolled her eyes. “Fine! He may have been walking toward the pocket of villas right at the bottom of the hill.”

“Hmm...so he’s close?” I tapped my chin. “Interesting...”

“Ugh!” She shoved my shoulder playfully and stood up. “Don’t we need to get ready for that meet-and-greet cocktail

party?”

I pulled out my cell phone and looked at the time. “We still have a couple hours before we need to be there.”

“Nope.” Koko jumped to her feet. “It’s definitely time to start getting ready. They were done setting up at the golf course club house. And—”

“And it looked great, by the way,” Lenny interjected, leaning against the wall.

“Really great,” Koko agreed. “But we saw something and we didn’t know what to make of it.”

I felt my eyebrows come together in confusion. “What do you mean? What did you see?” My stomach turned as I looked at each of their faces. “Does it have something to do with Julian?”

“Not necessarily,” Lenny answered slowly, looking at Keisha.

Keisha sighed. “So, we’re almost positive we saw Lillian.”

I blinked. “Lillian who?” I snapped.

As soon as the question was out of my mouth, I heard the attitude in my own voice. My friends looked worried, but calm.

“Lillian Pierce,” Koko responded. “But—”

“It couldn’t be her.” Frowning, I shook my head. “She wasn’t invited. Maybe you saw Leah and thought it was Lillian. They look a lot alike.”

Even though I didn’t want Leah to be at the wedding, Robert Brady refused to budge on her invitation. As a former contestant and finalist, he felt as though her presence was essential—especially because Julian had picked me over her. Although he assured me Leah would be on her best behavior,

the only compromise he'd made was that Leah wouldn't be at the ceremony.

Koko rolled her eyes. "I know that bitch when I see her."

I tried not to laugh, but as soon as the gasping screech of Koko's giggle burst out of her, I couldn't help it.

"Listen," Keisha started, amusement still in her voice. "Maybe it was Leah, but either way, we just wanted you to know that Lillian...or Leah is walking around. And also..." She looked between the two of us. "Don't forget that at the end of the day, your men want you and not Leah."

"She's right," Lenny added, walking over to me and extending her hand. "Now let's get up and get dressed. You're fucking hot and you need to remind everybody who the real star of this weekend is."

I grabbed her hand and she pulled me up. "I love you guys so much." I hugged them all. "You're right. I was pissed about Robert inviting Leah, but like you said, it doesn't really matter. I'm marrying Julian. She's only here because Robert wants drama." I turned to look at Koko specifically. "And if Robert invited Leah to my wedding, we both know it's likely he invited her to that dinner meeting. You need to talk to him."

Koko sighed dramatically. "I'm not making any guarantees, but since I'm going to have to see him at some point this weekend, I promise to try to behave. I love you too much to make a scene."

I laughed as we started to part ways to get dressed. I'd just put my foot on the first step when I heard my name being called.

"Oh! Zoe!" Lenny yelled.

I walked down the hall and around the corner to find all three of them standing there.

“So...we may have gotten you a gift.” She crinkled her nose as she handed me big box. “It’s from all of us.”

“Aww thank you so much! You guys didn’t have to do this!” I took the box and opened it right there in the hallway. “Wow...this is beautiful.”

The white dress had a sheer lace top with a corset styled bodice and a short satin skirt. It was elegantly beautiful—formal yet informally short.

The lace pattern looks similar to my wedding dress, but where am I going to wear this?

“Thank you.” I hugged it to my body before gently putting it back in the box. “What’s this for guys? This is so sweet of you.”

Koko spoke up quickly. “We just wanted you to feel like a bride all weekend long, so when we saw how much this dress looks like your wedding dress, we knew we had to get it for you.” She smiled excitedly. “Now go try it on so we can see if it fits!”

“Do we have time? We need to get ready,” I pointed out.

“This is true,” Keisha agreed. “But as soon as we get back, you have to try it on for us.”

“Deal!” I embraced each of them, hugging them a little tighter than I had before. “Thanks again.”

I grabbed the box and bounded upstairs. I stripped and before I could pull out my wardrobe options for the meet-and-greet, I received a text message from Julian.

I’m sorry these meetings have taken so long. I’m about to meet the tailor to pick up the tuxes and then I’m heading back up the hill. Do you need anything?

I stood naked in front of the mirror. Turning to the side, I slid my hand over the slight bump.

“Do we need anything from Daddy?” I whispered. I thought for a moment and then uttered the words as I typed them. “The only thing I need is you. I’m glad your custom silk suit arrived on time. Starting to get ready for the meet-and-greet. Call when you can. I love you.”

I tossed the phone onto the bed and walked to the closet with the white dress in my hand. I had a few different dress options to wear for the weekend. My eyes kept gravitating to the white one, but for some reason, it didn’t feel appropriate. My eyes flitted around until landing on the clear winner for the night.

Pulling out a fitted white top and my black leather skirt, I knew it was the outfit I wanted to wear. Picking out the kind of heels that I’d have to soon retire for the rest of the pregnancy, I dressed and spun around in the mirror.

Nice.

Putting my thickly coiled hair in a ponytail, I twisted and pinned it into a giant bun. I put in my large diamond hoop earrings and turned my head from side to side with a smile. Even though I loved the earrings, I only wore them on special occasions.

My phone had vibrated off and on the entire time I was getting dressed. After slipping on a red and black blazer, I went to my phone. Just as I picked it up, it started ringing again.

“Hello?” I answered, slipping the villa keycard into my blazer pocket.

“Hey, come downstairs so I can do your makeup,” Koko directed, slightly out of breath.

“Why are you breathing like that?” I asked, taking one last look at myself before heading out the door.

“Just finished Keisha’s makeup and I may have told her that she should have a threesome with Omar and Scott since they are clearly into her.”

I grabbed onto the railing as I walked down the steps, laughing hysterically. “What?”

“Yeah, she started trying to splash water on me so I had to run.”

By the time I made it to her room, I had calmed my laughter down a little, but the moment I opened the door and we made eye contact, I started laughing all over again.

“I can hear you!” Keisha yelled through the wall, leaving us in a fit of giggles.

“Okay, okay, okay,” Koko said once we finally let the joke die. “Let me get you TV ready.”

Ten minutes later, I looked like I was in high definition. Between the smokiness of my eyeshadow and the heavy liner, my light brown eyes were striking—even I couldn’t stop looking at them!—and the red lipstick on my full lips gave my pout added sex appeal.

I leaned close to the mirror. “You are talented, my friend.”

Koko changed from her oversized t-shirt with makeup smudges on it to a sexy black dress with blue pumps. Her makeup was flawless and her hair was pulled back, away from her face. When she turned around, the blue portion of her hair contrasted beautifully with her black dress.

When we walked into the living room, I let out some catcalls. Keisha had on an emerald green dress that covered her body completely, but fit like a second skin. Her shoulder-length hair was curled prettily, framing her face. Lenny had on a navy blue, 1950s style pinup halter dress that fit her body like a glove; she looked hot.

We openly admired each other's style choices and threw around sincere compliments. We didn't just praise each other physically as we sat around the living room. We reminisced about old times, sharing stories and memories as we appreciated what each of us brought to the table as individuals.

"Well damn..." Lenny gushed as three spectacularly handsome men walked out of the house next door.

We all silently gaped at Omar, Scott, and James as they made their way over to our villa. They looked good. All of them wore black pants, but their styles were so different.

"If you don't want that threesome, I'll take whichever one you don't want," Koko muttered to Keisha just before the patio door opened. "Hey guys!" Koko's cheery tone didn't even slightly indicate the sexual comment she'd just made.

"Hey," I added, trying to contain my amusement. "You guys look nice."

"Thanks," Scott said with a grin. "You four will be the most beautiful women at the meet-and-greet."

"You can say that again," James uttered in a low tone. His eyes were glued to Lenny.

"Is Julian still getting ready?" I questioned as I rose to my feet.

"Oh, I thought he got in touch with you," Omar replied, his forehead crinkling. "Right after he finished getting dressed, Beverly banged on the door, saying it was urgent. He didn't call you?"

I checked my pocket for my phone and didn't feel anything except for the keycard. "I can't find my phone." I looked around the room. "Can someone call it?" Focusing back on Omar, I lifted my eyebrows. "What else happened?"

“He said he was calling you. I don’t know what she told him because by the time I came into the room, he told me to tell the fellas he’d meet us at the meet-and-greet, and then he said he was calling you and ran out of the villa.”

My mouth went dry. “He ran?”

“Fast as hell, too.” He pulled out his phone. “Now that I think about it...” He put his phone to his ear and we all waited.

When he hung up without reaching Julian, my stomach knotted.

Where the hell is my phone?

“It probably had something to do with filming,” Koko guessed, calling my phone again.

No one seemed worried or panicked, but I knew Julian and he wouldn’t just take off running or abort our plans to ride together for just anything.

I glanced over at Omar and I could see the wheels turning in his head.

I’m not crazy. Something is clearly up.

I started to rush upstairs, but as soon as I got up three steps, I realized I’d had my phone in Koko’s room. I turned quickly and headed that way. When I entered, I could hear my phone vibrating.

My eyes swept the room, but I couldn’t find it. It wasn’t until the subdued vibrating noise stopped and then revved up again that I spotted it.

“Got it,” I yelled out to the others as I yanked it from the bed.

Nine missed calls. Three text messages.

I read the messages first.

I love you too, Beautiful. Can't wait to see you.

I'm back. I'm going to hop in the shower and then get dressed. See you soon.

Call me as soon as you get this. I need to take care of something and we are going to have to ride separately. I'm going to find Robert at the meet-and-greet. Call me when you get this and I'll see you when you get here. I love you.

My hand trembled as I called him. It didn't ring. It went straight to voicemail.

"Hi Julian," I greeted him, my voice shaking with nerves. "I'm so sorry I missed your calls and texts. I left my phone in Koko's room so I've been without it for the last forty-five minutes. Call me as soon as you get this. I don't really, um... I'm worried. I know it could be nothing, but Omar said you ran out..." I let out a breath as I walked out of Koko's room. "I'm about to leave the villa now and head to the meet-and-greet. Call me. I love you."

I squared my shoulders and entered the living room.

Spotting me first, Keisha asked, "Did you get in touch with Julian?"

"No, but he's at the meet-and-greet," I answered, attempting not to sound as anxious as I felt. "So we should head out."

Everyone seemed relieved and satisfied with the knowledge that Julian was at the meet-and-greet already, but I was unsettled. I didn't mention it as we made our way to the carports, but I felt an uneasiness that sat in the pit of my stomach like lead.

Lenny walked up beside me, lowering her voice as we climbed in the backseat of Koko's car. "What's wrong?"

I gave her a tight smile and waited until we were all in the car to respond. "Julian wouldn't have just run out if everything

was okay. We talked all day about going together.” I looked down at my phone and the screen showed no missed calls or new messages. “It’s probably nothing,” I stated as confidently as I could.

Something in my gut nagged me though.

Koko backed out of the parking spot and followed the car with the guys in it. While my friends’ excitement started to build as we approached the golf course, I just felt off.

I tried calling him again and it again went straight to voicemail.

We parked and entered through a service door in the back. The red carpet was for those individuals who wanted to see and be seen. My childhood and college friends weren’t able to afford a night at the villa so they weren’t going to be at the party. Everyone I knew and loved who was able to make it to the wedding on short notice was staying on the hill. Julian’s industry friends weren’t going to subject themselves to the madness of twenty-four hour filming so they were only attending the actual wedding. The bulk of people in attendance at the meet-and-greet—and really, the wedding—were invited by the masterminds behind *The One*.

I just need to find Julian and everything will be okay.

I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply as we approached the ballroom. I could hear the sound of people enjoying themselves and classical music being played before we actually saw anyone. Once we turned a corner, we almost ran into a camera crew. Since I was in the back between Omar and Scott, no one in the crew noticed me.

We passed them without incident.

Around forty or fifty people stood around the corridor outside the ballroom with drinks in hand, talking. None of

them looked familiar. The double doors were open and it was clear that at least two hundred people milled around inside.

“That’s a lot of people,” Lenny muttered under her breath.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I replied.

I checked my phone and didn’t see a missed call or text message from Julian, but I did have one from my mother.

“He hasn’t gotten back to me either. It keeps going to voicemail,” Omar stated quietly.

I looked up at him. Omar looked more perplexed than worried. “That’s a little weird, right?”

He kind of shrugged his shoulders in a noncommittal way, but his eyes said something different. He looked down and hit the call button again and put the phone to his ear.

“My mom said they have a few tables saved for us. We might as well head in and get this over with.”

And it starts all over again, I thought as we headed toward the double doors.

I plastered a small smile on my face as I moved from around Omar. At first, no one noticed us as we crossed the threshold into the room, but as we traveled through the crowd, they spotted us. Although I didn’t explicitly see a camera on me, I could feel it. Some of the attendees spoke or waved as I brushed by them, but I didn’t see anyone from my session or anyone I remotely recognized. Finally, I saw Julian’s mom walking to a table and for the first time since we’d arrived, a genuine smile creased my face.

My entire family, soon-to-be in laws included, looked so nice.

“Hi!” I yelled. I went around and hugged every single person.

“My, my, my! This is a good-looking group!” my grandma complimented, kissing me on my cheek.

“I would’ve sworn they were another bunch of movie stars. Did you know the woman from the soap opera, *As the Days Get Restless* is here? You kids look good enough to be on a soap opera!” Grandma Pearl pointed out.

My grandma and Julian’s grandma started talking to one another about *As the Days Get Restless* as if they hadn’t initiated a conversation with me.

Ummmmm...okay, I thought with amusement.

Those two were trouble and I loved it.

I looked between my parents and Julian’s. “Have you seen Julian?”

“Earlier,” my dad answered. He looked at Julian’s dad. “Brian, when we went out for fresh air at the start of this thing, he was headed to the other side of the building, right?”

“Yeah, he seemed to be in a rush,” Julian’s dad replied. He looked back at my dad. “Zachary asked him why he was moving so fast and he said he had something to take care of. I asked if he needed help and he said no and disappeared.” He shrugged. “Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen him since then.”

“I saw him...” Julian’s mom spoke up. “He was too far away to talk to, but when I was coming back from the restroom, he was talking with some man who looked like he was part of the production crew or something. He was near the big stairwell next to the restaurant. Maybe he’s in an office near there.”

“Okay, I’ll try there first,” I replied.

“Oh, I went up those stairs earlier today when I was looking for the bathroom. It’s really nice up there. It might be locked

by now, but this afternoon it was open. Well, until I was kicked out for a meeting or an interview or something,” my mom added. She assessed my outfit with a nod of approval. “And you look beautiful as always, Sweetheart.”

The corners of my lips turned upward. I felt undeniable happiness having my family in town and having my family and Julian’s family get along so well.

“Thanks, Mom. So do you.” My eyes moved around the table. “You all look great.”

I told them I was going to find Julian and then bobbed and weaved my way through the crowd. I saw three camera crews. I was pretty sure there was supposed to be four total, but I didn’t see the last one. Once I left the ballroom, I reminded myself not to let my guard down.

The fourth camera crew could be anywhere.

I walked down the hallway toward the restaurant and the stairwell. Every few steps, I received well wishes from people I didn’t know who were going to be attending my wedding. Each stop between the meet-and-greet and the other end of the corridor made me wish Julian and I had waited until the contract had ended.

It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate people congratulating me. I just didn’t know them and I was going to be sharing my special day with them. It felt wrong.

“Hello, Zoe,” Robert Brady said smoothly as he walked out of the restaurant area.

I gave him a tight smile. “Hello Robert. I’m looking for Julian. Have you seen him?”

His walkie-talkie beeped and he lifted his forefinger up in the air. “Please hold for a second.” He grabbed the walkie-talkie with the other hand and held down the button. “Brady,” he answered in a clipped tone.

A brief moment of static and then a man's voice broke through the airways. "Team B here. We are on the golf course and have a situation developing. We'd like your guidance. Ron and Caroline from Season One Session Three are currently hooking up on the golf course as we speak."

Robert Brady's eyes flashed with excitement. "Didn't Ron arrive with Sophia from Season One Session Four?" He patted his pockets. "I don't have my phone on me, but Ron and Sophia have been in a relationship for a while now right?"

Static. "Yes sir. Would you like one of us to try to locate Sophia and lead her to the golf course? Or would you like us to capture what we have here and just hope for a different storyline to develop?" The disembodied voice asked with general disinterest.

Cheating is wrong. Whatever this Ron character is doing is a problem, but to go get Sophia specifically to hurt her on camera for entertainment value as opposed to telling her or letting her see the footage privately so she can deal with it privately is fucked up.

My face apparently broadcasted my disgust.

Robert looked at me for a full thirty seconds before he put the walkie-talkie back to his lips. "Just keep rolling for now. I'll be out there in one minute." He lowered the walkie-talkie.

"Oh, don't make that face, Zoe." Robert's voice was patronizing. "Better the drama is with someone else than with you, am I right?"

"I don't know any of these people, but it seems pretty cruel to break Sophia's heart on camera like that."

Robert rubbed his hands together. "I can't control what Ron does and I would never advocate for someone to cheat, but I have to capture what's happening and I know what sells: Sex and drama. Here's what my inexperienced new producer

doesn't understand." He took a step closer to me. "I don't have to tell her a thing. Once the seed of doubt is planted in her head and rumors start, the friction between the couple will be the most profitable outcome. It'll stretch the drama out. I take Sophia to see her boyfriend having sex with someone and she may make a scene in the moment. We may get one good clip, but it'll be a lot of cursing which we'll have to bleep out. If a fight breaks out, there's only so much we can film without stepping in to end it. But, if we let the information slip, magic will happen."

I was truly disgusted by the glee in his voice. I didn't want to entertain the conversation anymore. "Have you seen Julian?"

Robert's smile dimmed a bit before his thin lip curled upward. He threw the answer over his shoulder as he walked away. "Check upstairs."

I watched him pull the walkie-talkie out again to bark directions before jogging down the corridor and toward the main entrance.

When I approached the stairwell, I looked around and didn't see or hear anything. Although there were two hundred or more people at the meet-and-greet, it was oddly quiet. My stomach knotted as I climbed the stairs.

With a deep breath, I tried to shake off my encounter with Robert Brady. I reminded myself that I just needed to get through the obligatory event for Julian's sake.

I'll find him, I'll hang out with my family, and then I'll leave.

Instead of mixing and mingling with reality TV stars and others I didn't know, I wanted to return to the heated pool, or the hot tub, or the double-headed shower of the villa with my man.

If I can find him.

When I got to the top of the stairwell, I noticed there was only one door. I stood in the doorway of what appeared to be a sun room of sorts. I couldn't see the entire room due to the short wall that blocked my complete view, but from my vantage point, what I saw was gorgeous. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows allowed the lights from the golf course, the moon, and stars to illuminate it. The recessed floor lights beautifully lined the room, providing an added glow.

What is this?

I backed my head out of the room and looked around for a sign. I didn't want to walk into someone's office and I didn't see or hear anything. I was about to leave when I heard his voice.

"You need to leave," Julian barked harshly.

I froze, my heart pounding in my chest.

I just stood in the door and listened for a response.

Is he on the phone? I wondered, holding on to the doorjamb for support and balance. *Who would he be talking to like that? What—*

"I just needed to see you," said a woman's voice, interrupting my thoughts.

That's definitely not on speaker-phone. Julian is in a dimly lit room with some woman.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions. I didn't want to make assumptions based on what the situation looked like. Julian had never given me a reason to doubt him or his loyalty. He never made me feel like he was anything less than totally in love with me and committed to me. So, when the little seed of jealousy attempted to plant itself in my gut, I pushed it down.

If I wanted to shut the entire conversation down, I would've just strolled into the room. I had no question about who Julian would choose if I walked in there. I trusted him. I trusted our relationship. Even so, something compelled me to remain standing, listening, in the hallway.

I'm just going to wait and see what this is about.

“Well, you saw me. Now you need to leave before anyone else sees you.” His tone was gruff, borderline angry. “And if you—”

“And if I what?” she snapped. “Tell your little girlfriend?”

The silence that followed felt like thunder as jealousy rippled through me.

Tell me what? What could it possibly be that he couldn't tell me?

“You need to leave. Now.”

“Here's where I think you have this situation confused. I did something for you, now you do something for me.”

My chest rose and fell as the heavy pit in my stomach churned. If I wasn't holding myself up with the wall, I would've doubled over in pain.

“I paid for your services. We have no more business.”

Paid for services. What the fuck am I listening to?

The dull ache of disappointment made my brain hurt. I'd been calling and texting him and he was tucked away from everyone with some woman—a woman he'd 'paid for services' from and was trying to get her to leave before anyone saw her.

“Are you going to stand there and say you don't miss me? You wouldn't have called me if you didn't want me here.” The sound of heels dragging across the floor made me feel like

she'd moved to be closer to him. "Admit it, Julian. You miss me."

"Lillian, our business is done."

Lillian?! So that wasn't Leah they saw. It really was Lillian. And she's here. With Julian. And there's something he paid for, something he doesn't want me to know about.

I felt sick.

"Our business doesn't have to be done though. You and I were good together and we could be good together again."

"We didn't work out for a reason, and that reason was so I could meet the woman I am going to make my wife. Listen to me carefully: this is it. We work in the same industry so we may have to see each other professionally, but we don't have a personal relationship. If we happen to be at a studio at the same time, that's one thing, but do not try—what the hell are you doing?"

Julian's voice went from gravelly to fuming.

"Just come here."

"Try that again and I'll have your crazy ass arrested. You got your money. Go home and don't fucking come back."

"You're just saying that because you're drunk."

"Oh I'm not drunk. I'm saying it because I don't want you here. Do you understand me?"

"Has the stress of the wedding driven you to drink? Is that what this is?"

"No, I'm drinking because you're still here."

"How about this...you kiss me, and if you don't feel anything, I'll drop it and I'll leave."

"How about this...you leave here right now or I'll have security remove you from the premises."

“You expect me to believe you’re going to call security and risk your precious Zoe finding out you called me and you—”

“I swear to God, Lillian.” He let out a vulgar noise before I heard angry stomping. “The money was for your silence. If you can’t provide that, then I will sue you for breach of contract. Leave. Now.”

She cackled like a villain. “Come on, Julian! You had to expect that this would happen. You reached out to me. You said you needed me and I delivered for you. Yeah, you gave me money, but now I want more. Ah ah ah...before you say something you’re going to regret, let’s look at this for what it is. You want me to keep this secret. You don’t want Zoe to know. You don’t want anyone to know. Now what are you willing to do to keep me quiet?”

I sucked in a strangled breath. My eyes shut temporarily as I waited for Julian’s response.

“I’ve done all I’m going to do. You will keep this to yourself. You will carry your ass out of here. And I will marry the woman I love. Period. This is it. It’s over. Done.”

So something happened between them? For something to be over, it had to have started...

Even as I thought it, I didn’t believe it. It just didn’t add up. It made no sense at all.

The biggest fight Julian and I had ever had was about Lillian Pierce.

Julian needed to meet the pop-country superstar Juliet in Nashville to record a remix of her biggest hit with R&B sensation Bella. Lillian’s Black Heart Studios were some of the best studios in the country so I knew Julian would cross paths with her at some point, but he did everything in his power to utilize other quality studios. Unfortunately, if an

artist committed to a studio before he was brought on to produce, there's nothing he can do about it.

Julian told me he was working at Black Heart Studios. He told me that when he got there, Lillian was there. He even told me that Lillian had crossed the line and tried to proposition him, but the night before he was supposed to return home, he said he was about to head to his hotel room to relax. I told him goodnight and finished prepping for a case. When I woke up the next morning, photos of Julian out at a club with Lillian surfaced.

Juliet had invited him out for her birthday and he didn't know Lillian was going to be there. He ended up drinking and hanging out with everyone—including Lillian. I felt disrespected that he would spend time with a woman who openly disrespected me and our relationship. The argument went from bad to worse before he made it back to California, but eventually we were able to resolve it.

He swore he wouldn't have any further contact with her unless he happened to be working at one of her three studios. I closed my eyes as the betrayal made my eyes sting. Yet here we are.

“Because I'm willing to do whatever it takes,” Lillian reiterated, desperation in her voice. “And you know I'm good at whatever.”

As I heard Lillian pleading with Julian, I felt nauseated and heartbroken at the same time. Overwhelmed, I couldn't stomach anymore. I turned on my heel and fled down the steps. I walked as quickly as I could, not letting my heels touch the ground. I didn't stop until I got to the open doors of the ballroom.

A chirpy voice interrupted my thoughts. “Hi, hi, Zoe. Excuse me, can we um...can we speak with you? Just for a second. Please?”

I debated for a second before I turned and looked at the jumpy producer. I was contractually obligated to give one one-on-one interview per filmed wedding event. Because I knew I was going to leave as soon as I said goodbye to my family and friends, I figured I might as well get it over with right then and there.

I turned, mustering up a smile. “Sure.”

“Oh thank goodness!” The woman turned and waved a camera crew over toward us. “I wasn’t getting anywhere in there. The other producers are like vultures! I’m Pam.”

“Hi Pam.” I reached out and shook her hand. “I’m Zoe.”

“Oh, I know who you are! You’re the reason I applied for this position in the first place. I wanted to work with real people and wanted to focus on documentaries, but when someone on social media posted a video clip of you leaving *The One* and then Julian coming back for you, I realized there’s a real chance for real stories to come out of reality TV. You inspired me.”

Oh wow. I was genuinely delighted by her words. *That’s so sweet.*

It always took me by surprise when people said something about my reality TV stint impacting them. It was usually at a public event with Julian and it was usually about our love story, but on rare occasions, someone would speak about how they appreciated my authenticity. That never failed to fill me with pride because if nothing else, I wanted to come across as me—not as a stereotype, not as a caricature, not as a token, just me.

For a brief moment, my bruised heart and twisted stomach was appeased by the sense that my stint on reality TV was meaningful and impactful.

“I appreciate that. Thank you,” I graciously replied to her words.

“And you look fantastic. You have a glow. Maybe it’s love...” Pam declared with a wistful look in her brown eyes.

My stomach plummeted at the mention of the word love. I heard Lillian’s voice threatening to tell me whatever it was that Julian was hiding.

He’s not messing around with her. He’s not. I don’t know what’s going on, but he’s not cheating on me. I don’t want to rush to judgement, but I can’t discount what I heard. He’s keeping something from me.

“Zoe?” Pam queried, her forehead wrinkling in confusion.

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts. I blinked repeatedly, shifting my gaze from her worried look to the cameraman’s blank stare. “I’m sorry, what was your question?”

“I was just asking if you were ready. We’re about to start rolling,” Pam said slowly.

I smiled. “Ready.”

“First, congratulations on your engagement.” She turned and signaled to the cameraman who gave a thumbs-up to indicate he was rolling. She turned back to me and smiled. “Can you tell us a little about this weekend? Can you tell us about how you’re feeling? You are two days away from your wedding!”

I thought about the question for a moment. “This weekend is overwhelming,” I admitted slowly, knowing I had to be careful with my words. “There are a lot of events scheduled and I’ve never been completely comfortable with that aspect of this weekend, but I’m also excited knowing that at the end of all this, I will be Julian’s wife. That makes it all worthwhile.”

“This meet-and-greet event is supposed to be an opportunity for all of your attendees to get to know each other. I know the party just started thirty minutes ago, but so much has happened so far. Do you think that momentum will carry through the wedding weekend?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Most of the people in attendance were invited by Robert Brady and—”

Pam’s button nose scrunched in apology as she interrupted. “I’m so sorry. Um, I don’t think we can use that answer.”

I crossed my arms. “It’s the truth. I know a handful of people here. My friends who aren’t in the wedding party can’t afford this place so they aren’t driving in until tomorrow or Sunday. The people here are here for you guys. They aren’t here to celebrate my union with the man I love. They’re here for the party and publicity. I’m not saying they don’t wish us well; I’m sure most, if not all of them do. But there’s a distinct difference between people who are around you to celebrate you and people who are around to celebrate.”

She nodded profusely, a spark in her eyes. “Cut, cut.” She waved her hand at the camera guy. Looking at me, she grinned. “I agree with you, but I think we both know that’s not going to air.”

I lifted my hands, palms up. “I don’t know what you want me to say. It’s the truth.”

“Okay, we can roll again. Action.” She paused for a few seconds and then said, “A lot of relationships that develop on this show don’t last. A lot of relationships with celebrities don’t last. What do you think are the reasons you and Julian have not only lasted this long, but are taking the leap into marriage?”

Without thinking, I started listing some of the reasons. “A genuine commitment to love, trust, loyalty, respect and

friendship. There's a lot more to our relationship than that, but those are the principles we built our relationship on."

"Perfect. Thank you." Pam handed her clipboard back to someone I assumed was an assistant.

The cameraman turned to enter the ballroom and the assistant followed. Pam's nervous demeanor endeared me to her. I knew I needed to keep my guard up with producers and really everyone who worked for *The One*, but Pam just seemed charmingly sweet and truly kind.

"You're welcome. I hope you got what you needed." I started to walk off when she started speaking again.

"I really appreciate you taking the time to talk. I know you don't want to be involved with this." She gestured to the ballroom behind her. "We were all briefed on the conditions of your participation and..." She looked around and stepped closer, lowering her voice. "I'm really impressed that you stood up for yourself and what you wanted. I struggle with asking for what I want, but I-I'm really inspired by you."

She was so sincere that my spirit actually felt lifted by her genuine kindness.

"Thank you, Pam. And I hope you start asking for and going for what you want." I started to walk away, but added, "Just remember that what you want and what you need matters and if you don't fight for you, who will?"

"Thank you!" She almost squealed as she bounded away in the direction of her camera crew.

I pulled out my phone to send a text message to Koko when I felt someone staring at me. I looked, skimming the area around me and not seeing anyone. I went back to typing my message and didn't look up again until I was about to hit send.

"Hey Zoe," his deep voice sounded so familiar that it cut through the thoughts in my head and the music in the air.

It couldn't be...

My eyes snapped up and I froze. It was who I thought it was—standing three feet in front of me.

You hurt me and then just appear out of nowhere with a 'Hey Zoe' like we're on the up and up.

“There you are,” Julian exclaimed as he walked out of the ballroom. “I’m supposed to give this welcome toast or something Robert sprung on me and I told him I couldn’t start it until I found you.” He slipped his arms around me and pulled me into him possessively. A quick alcohol-infused kiss was dropped on my lips. “My phone died earlier while I was taking care of business. What are you up to?”

My mouth opened and closed twice as I felt thrown for a loop. I shifted my eyes to my fiancé and licked my lips. I was reeling. “Hey,” I responded slowly, my voice strained.

I was acting weird and I knew it. I could feel my discomfort radiating from me. I wasn’t nervous at all, because I had nothing to be nervous about, but everything that had taken place over the last fifteen to twenty minutes was throwing me and my brain off. I could tell by the look in Julian’s eye and the clench in his jaw that he was trying to figure out what was going on and the silence wasn’t helping.

I swallowed hard. “Julian...this is Tate. Tate, this is Julian, my fiancé.”

Julian stared at Tate for a second before taking his arm from around me and extending it his way. “Tate, ex-boyfriend, New York Generals. Welcome to our wedding weekend.”

Tate let out a short laugh as he shook hands with Julian. “Thanks for having me, Julian, current boyfriend—“

“Fiancé,” Julian corrected him, his eyes narrowing a bit.

“Ah, yes. Fiancé.” Tate said the word like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

They didn’t say anything else, but were still engaged in a death stare while squeezing the life out of each other’s hands. I looked at how their skin reddened as they gripped each other.

I rolled my eyes, pushing at their clasped hands so they’d let go. “Are you two done with the pissing contest?”

Julian flashed me a smile. “I was just getting to know your friend. I didn’t know he was invited to the wedding.”

I know you’re not trying to give me shit for this when I caught your ass with Lillian and you did some shit with her that required you to pay her hush money to keep quiet.

I gave Julian a look as I bit back my words, reigning in my anger. “Yeah, me either.” I turned to Tate. “You weren’t invited so you shouldn’t be here.”

Tate looked between me and Julian with a smirk. “I just came to talk—”

Julian started to speak, but I held up my hand to stop him. With my eyes narrowed in confusion and irritation, I gave Tate an incredulous look. “I haven’t seen you or talked to you in five years. We don’t have anything to talk about and you need to leave. You showing up, uninvited, is disrespectful to me and to my soon-to-be husband. Please see yourself out or I will call security.”

Tate sighed, lifting his hands in defeat. “I apologize. I shouldn’t have ambushed the two of you like that. Have a good night.” Smoothing down the front of his suit, Tate exited the building.

“That guy rubs me the wrong way,” Julian remarked as the door shut behind Tate.

I turned and looked at Julian. “He’s my past, you’re my present. You get that difference, right?”

“Yeah, I know the difference. Do you?” He looked around before putting his lips up against my ear. “I saw the way you were looking at him when I walked up.”

“Are you kidding me?” I hissed, barely containing my composure. “You don’t even want to go there with me right now.”

“I’m just—”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but you both need to chill out. There’s a camera over there hiding, waiting for anything to happen,” Koko interrupted as she broke up our conversation in a firm, but hushed tone. She turned to Julian. “They came by the table three times looking for you. You’re supposed to do some interview and a toast so why don’t you go do that.” She turned to me. “And I just got your text. Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?” Julian asked, scrubbing his face with his hands.

“I’m leaving,” I answered, giving him a blank stare.

“Leaving to go back to the villa? Already?”

I glared at him before answering. “I don’t feel well. I saw something that turned my stomach.”

His eyebrows flew up. “Are you leaving because of what happened with Tate? I’m sorry I overreacted. It’s not even about him. It’s been a hellish night and I may have had one more shot than necessary. I saw you two together and—I’m sorry. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I felt myself on the brink where anger and sadness met. “We’ll talk later. Go handle your business.”

“Zoe, fuck them. I want to make sure you’re okay.” Julian grabbed my face and kissed me. “I’m sorry,” he whispered

against my lips. "I love you."

My emotions were all over the place and the last place I wanted to cry was in front of a bunch of strangers. I broke away from him. "I love you."

Chapter 12

Why must you flavor your lies with the salt of my tears?

The metallic taste of raw pain doesn't sit well on my pallet.

I swallow it anyway.

Fresh.

Rare.

Unprepared.

So fresh I still can hear the sound of it.

So rare I don't quite recognize it.

So unprepared I don't see it coming.

Tender, firm skin gave no indication of what was within.

But it's cooked-to-order so you knew.

The red, hot heat of hurt did not cook this pain through

Chef or butcher, who are you?

Raw pain seasoned isn't something to savor.

So don't use the salt of my tears to give it flavor.

As Koko loudly returned from a trip to the villa next door to grab margarita mix, I closed the pages of my notebook, hiding the poem I'd just written.

“Okay, I needed a refill for this. I did not see this coming,” she sat down in the lounge chair beside me on the rooftop

deck. “What do you mean by Tate is here? You mean, *here* here... like he’s here for the wedding weekend?” Her eyes were as big as saucers as she waited for an answer.

Koko and I had the place to ourselves while we lamented on the roof. As soon as Koko saw Bryce, she was also ready to leave the meet-and-greet. Julian had to do an on-air interview with Bryce. Lenny and Keisha stayed with Scott, Omar and James and planned to get a ride back with them. So Koko and I sat on top of the villa, overlooking the gorgeous property. She drank her emotions away while I stewed in mine. Even the water glimmering under the moonlight and the beautiful view didn’t alter our moods.

“I have no idea.” I shook my head. “It was seriously awkward. I mean, he was standing right there in front of me. I hadn’t seen him in years and then all of a sudden, he just strolls up as if he were an invited guest and says ‘hey!’ As if he didn’t walk out of my life five years ago and act like I didn’t matter.”

“Exactly! You loved Tate and he said he loved you. He was all set to spend his life with you until he knew he could get groupie love as a professional athlete so he leaves you and then just pops up at your wedding? That’s shady as hell.”

“Right? That’s exactly what I was thinking! I haven’t seen or talked to that man in five years. Why would he feel like this would be the time or the place to catch up? And who said I wanted to catch up?”

Koko crossed her long legs. “Okay so what happened after he walked up to you? And what did he look like?”

I let my head drop back against the cream pillow of the chair. “He looked like he always looked.”

“Hot?”

“Hot as hell.” I paused, taking a sip of water. “He had a navy blue fitted suit and a baby blue shirt that looked really good against his brown skin. He seemed taller and more muscular. He looked like a professional athlete and not like the guy I met outside the library a million years ago.”

“Were you tempted?”

My lip curled as I looked at Koko in disbelief. “What? You’re not serious.”

“One last ride before you become a devoted wife?” she teased, amusement thick in her voice.

I gave her a look. “Absolutely not. That would be like trading more for less.”

Even though Julian clearly had no problem trading something for money...something he paid Lillian for... something he said he wasn't going to tell me...something he's hiding from me. NO! No, I will not let myself go down that slippery slope. I'm just going to talk to him tomorrow. We are a healthy couple in a healthy relationship. We are honest with each other. We are—

“Zoe, I was kidding. I promise!” Koko’s wispy voice interrupted my thoughts.

I waved the thought off and looked over at her. “Oh no, I know. I started thinking about...” I shook my head knowing I needed to talk to Julian about what I’d overheard before I talked to anyone else. “So Tate is standing there looking like he was going to be a commentator on the NFL Network or something and before I could get over the shock of seeing him, Julian walks up.”

“What?” Koko squeaked, jumping from her seat. She paced in front of me. “What?! Is that what that was all about when I came up?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Julian comes out of the ballroom and immediately wraps his arms around me. He’s all apologetic for being busy and for his phone dying, and then he kind of looks at Tate like ‘who the hell are you?’ So I introduce them and it doesn’t go well. Julian was a little drunk and Tate was a little bit of an ass so I kicked Tate out. You came up maybe two minutes later and you know Julian had to do that on-air interview thing with Bryce.”

Koko made a noise that sounded like a cross between a cat with a hairball and dry heaving. “And since Julian went to be interviewed by Leah’s boyfriend, you didn’t have a chance to talk about it?”

I stifled a giggle. “Okay, first and foremost, he’s not Leah’s boyfriend, he’s your boyfriend. But yeah, we haven’t talked about it. And even if I would’ve stayed, we wouldn’t have been able to talk there. There’s always someone with a camera around. In the contract, they aren’t able to approach me for comment more than once an event; however, if we are together, they can, mainly because Julian is required to talk to them. It sucks because if I’m with him and I don’t speak or acknowledge the camera, I look like a bitch.”

She sat down, tucking her legs underneath her. “But won’t you be with Julian most of the weekend?”

“Exactly.” I rolled my eyes. “That was their plan all along, I guess. If I want to spend time with my fiancé at one of the activities for our wedding, I’m inevitably subjected to Julian’s contractual obligations.”

“That sucks!”

“Yeah, it does.” We sat in silence for a minute before I stated, “Now, please tell me you came face-to-face with Bryce tonight.”

Koko sighed loudly. “Yeah, for a second. We talked. He said the same thing he said before.”

“So...what’s the problem?”

She was quiet for a long time. “When I saw him with Leah, it wasn’t just the fact that I hate that bitch. It was the fact that it hurt. I mean, it really hurt, and I don’t know if I’m ready to give him that much power over me. He could really hurt me, Zoe.”

I reached over and grabbed Koko’s hand. “You’re in love.”

She nodded slowly. “And that scares me.”

“It can be scary,” I admitted, squeezing her hand once more before letting it go. “It’s always scary when you’re vulnerable, but when you’re with the right person, you also feel safe.”

“Well I just feel scared. There’s nothing safe about feeling scared for your life.”

I laughed. “You’re going to be fine. You just need to tell him that you love him.”

“And what if he doesn’t say it back?”

“He wouldn’t still be trying to plead his case to you if he didn’t.”

We sat in silence, lost in our own individual thoughts, hers presumably about Bryce and mine completely focused on Julian.

I wish his phone hadn’t died. Then I would just call him and tell him to come over tonight so we can talk.

Minutes passed and then we heard voices. First it was my family and Julian’s family talking outside their villas before going inside. Ten minutes later, the loud, boisterous conversations between my brother and his girlfriend, my cousin, Julian’s cousins, Keisha, Lenny, Omar, Scott, and James shattered the solitude. They were talking about taking a midnight swim in the heated pool.

Koko stood, folding her arms over her chest. “Let’s go down and party. We need to shake off the stench of our past with a nice stiff drink.”

I pulled my jacket tighter around me and rubbed my stomach. “I’m tired so I’m going to head to bed. Besides, I won’t be having a nice stiff drink until maybe next fall.” I stopped my hand mid-rub. “Oh, wow...that’s a long time.”

Koko laughed as she pulled me to my feet and embraced me in the tightest hug. “I’ll drink enough for the both of us. Don’t worry. I got it covered.”

Chuckling, I squeezed her back. “I’m sure you do.”

Walking through the rooftop door and down the steps to the patio outside my bedroom, we entered the darkened room quietly. “I still can’t believe Tate is here,” Koko said in a stage whisper. “And I can’t believe I missed him and your interaction with him.”

I closed and locked the patio door behind us. “You didn’t miss much. He’s a good-looking guy in a nice suit; there were a million of those running around tonight.”

“Well, if he’s at the rehearsal party, I’m going to punch him in his handsome face. We’ll see how much groupie ass he’ll get with a bloody nose and a black eye.”

I flipped on the light. “I don’t want you to go to jail. Maybe just a bloody nose.” My voice broke from amusement. I pulled off my jacket and she balled her hands into fists as we crossed the room to the bedroom door. “I’m kidding. Don’t hit him. I’m so over him and that whole situation. I have Julian so I’ve clearly moved on. I was just shocked to see him.”

With her hand on the bedroom doorknob, Koko turned to look at me. “I would’ve been shocked too—especially with how you used to melt when Tate wore suits.”

“No, don’t get me wrong. Tate’s definitely hot—”

Although she was still looking at me, Koko opened the door to leave. I stopped my sentence abruptly as I saw Julian's muscular frame in the doorway.

Shit shit shit shit shit! Did he just hear that? I was going to say 'Tate's definitely hot, but not hotter than Julian.' Shit! This looks bad.

Koko turned her head to see what had captured my attention and screamed.

“Julian! You scared the shit out of me!” She fell into a fit of giggles, her gasping breaths raining down over the quiet room.

Julian stood firm, seemingly unaffected, but I noticed his chest rising and falling quickly indicating that we startled him as well.

The sound of Koko's laugh was usually enough to send me spiraling into amusement, but something about the way Julian was staring at me kept me from feeling anything but tense.

Sensing the mood, Koko collected herself and told us both goodnight before fleeing the scene. We didn't even get a chance to reply because she ran away so fast.

Julian walked into the room soundlessly and closed the door behind him.

“I've been calling you,” Julian said simply.

I couldn't read his expression and it rubbed me the wrong way. My eyes raked his body. He was still wearing his black pants, but his white dress shirt was untucked and his bowtie was hanging loosely around his neck. He was sexily disheveled and unnervingly calm. I wanted to kiss him and yell at him at the same time.

It would make for an unproductive conversation, but one hell of a fuck.

My eyes narrowed a little. “You said your phone was dead so I left my phone on the charger while I sat on the roof.” I put my hands on my hips. “So which is it, your phone is dead or you were calling me?”

“Both.” He walked toward me, something burning in his grey eyes. Grabbing my hand, he pulled me to the oversized chair in the corner as he continued, “My phone was dead. Bryce had a charger so I charged it during the interview and then I called you.”

“Well my phone was on the charger so I didn’t get your call.” Even though I was behind him, I gestured to the phone plugged in and sitting on the nightstand. “So...how was the rest of the party?”

“Everyone seemed to have a good time.” Julian sat down and pulled me into his lap. “But I missed you. I didn’t want to be there without you and I hated that I didn’t have a way to get in touch with you...and how you left.”

From my position curled in his lap, I couldn’t help but melt into him. My body was made for his and without even thinking about it, I relaxed in his arms.

“I missed you too,” I replied softly, kissing his lips.

“I rescheduled our Italy trip. We can go after the baby is born. I was looking at our support system today and we can take a trip whenever. Between your parents and mine, your brother, our friends, we don’t have to go to Italy in January. We can do that in August or whenever you feel up to it. I’ve been thinking about this a lot and honestly, I just want to be married to you. It doesn’t matter what we do or when we do it. As long as I’m with you, that’s all that matters.”

He kissed me gently, sweetly. Allowing his lips to overpower mine, he controlled the tempo of the kiss and made me dizzy with want.

My heart exploded with a host of emotions. I inhaled deeply, the butterflies swirling inside me as the unexpected information and the sweetness of his words caught me off guard. I put my hand on my stomach to quell the quiver. I couldn't get caught up in my emotions. I needed to stay level-headed. Because I could smell the alcohol on his breath, I knew that getting answers would be easier.

Most people love to tell the whole truth when they're drunk...but I never worried that Julian wasn't telling me the whole truth before today. I don't want to think he changed our honeymoon plans to cover up or distract me from the fact that he was cheating with Lillian. Oh God! He can't be. He can't. I need to figure out how to ease into this conversation so it doesn't come off as accusatory and just see what he says from there. I can do this.

Before I could open my mouth, Julian looked at me thoughtfully. "Are you worried about if I heard what you said? Because I did and I don't like it, but I'm not mad."

My eyebrows came together in confusion. "What?"

"About being attracted to Tate. I don't like that asshole, but I'm not mad that you—"

"No," I cut him off mid-sentence. I sat up as much as I could with his arms locking me in place. "I'm not attracted to Tate. I said he was attractive, but I'm not at all attracted to him. You have nothing to worry about."

"I'm not jealous," Julian clarified as he tried to adjust me in his lap. "I'm sorry I was acting like that earlier. I'd had too much to drink and I was already in bad mood. I know what we have. I just saw the way you were looking at him when I came out of the party and I went off."

"I was shocked to see him. You didn't see me looking at him in any other way but shock, because that's all there was to it. Would I be attracted to him if I wouldn't have dated him for

so long and I didn't know his personality? Probably. But that's not the case."

Julian nodded, his hunched shoulders relaxing a bit. "I believe you. I just needed to ask." He cleared his throat. "Did you invite him to the wedding?"

"What?" My voice was louder than I intended as I pushed myself out of his arms and scrambled to my feet. "I hope you're kidding."

Maybe he had one too many drinks and isn't thinking clearly because that cannot be a serious question—especially since he was clearly in contact with Lillian and money was exchanged.

The look in his eyes let me know that he was uncertain. "I'm just trying to understand how he got here. I was asked on camera and I'm not going to lie, it threw me off."

My stomach dropped. "Oh no," I griped, my hands covering my face. Even though it wasn't my fault, I felt bad about him being blindsided with questions about my ex. I dropped my hands from my face and placed them over my heart. "I'm sorry they ambushed you like that, but no, I didn't invite him. I haven't talked to him since we broke up...which was why I was shocked to see him."

Julian stood, his face softening. "No, I'm sorry." He put his hands on my shoulders, rubbing them comfortingly. "I shouldn't have let them get in my head. I kept my cool when they asked me about it, but...they just got in my head a little. I trust you. I trust what we have. It's just the bullshit of the show that made me ask."

I swallowed hard as I looked up at him, choosing my words carefully. "I understand. It makes sense that you'd want clarification." I paused. "Speaking of...why did you leave so fast earlier? I was worried."

“I had to deal with something.” He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me into his body. “I’m sorry I worried you, but believe me, you have nothing to worry about.”

I leaned back. My heart felt like it was in my throat. “Oh really?”

“Really.”

Silence fell around us as he searched my eyes and I searched his. Seconds ticked by and it became harder for me to breathe.

“Where were you when the party started?”

He hesitated, fractionally. “I met with Robert.”

He lied.

My stinging eyes dropped to his chest as I tried to gather myself. I was in shock at first and that was why I didn’t hear what he said next.

“Zoe?”

I felt myself starting to shake a bit. I raised my head and our eyes met. I could see he was holding something back and it hurt me to my soul. I lifted my eyebrows in question. “I missed the last thing you said. I think I need to lie down.”

He walked with me to the bed and watched me as I peeled off my leggings. I sat on the bed and he kneeled down in front of me. He ran his hands up and down my bare thighs as I sat in just a tank top and panties.

“Look at me,” Julian pleaded, trying to catch my gaze.

I looked at him, but it made my eyes water so I looked away.

I wanted to call him on his shit. I wanted to just blurt out what I’d overheard, but the words wouldn’t come without

tears, and I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to show my vulnerability. I didn't want to believe that I was two days from marrying a man who lied to me, who was hiding stuff from me, who was having secret meetings with an ex and paying her not to tell me. I wanted to be more evolved than to cry over something as clichéd as that. I wanted to be the strong, independent woman my mother raised me to be.

I will sleep on it and with a clear, level head, I will ask him point blank what is his involvement with Lillian.

“Hey, what’s going on? Are you okay?” Julian inquired, concern etched all over his handsome face.

“I spoke to Robert when I arrived at the meet-and-greet.” My tone was curt, but calm. I resisted the urge to purse my lips even though I felt myself getting mad all over again.

Well, that lasted all of two seconds.

Unable to stop myself, I continued, “So I guess I’m trying to figure out how you were in a meeting with him and I saw him on his way out to the golf course.”

It was the hurt of being lied to and the insult to my intelligence that burned blazingly inside of me. I wanted to have a rational conversation, but I was hurt, tired, and hormonal. I knew if his response felt like a lie, I would snap.

Julian’s fingers flexed against my hips. “I met with Robert about a situation that came up and then I had to deal with the situation directly.”

“What was the situation?” My body was tense as I braced myself for his answer.

He took a deep breath, letting his head drop back momentarily. “I don’t want to stress you out...” He lifted his head. “But Lillian showed up.”

I nodded slowly. “So you met with Lillian?”

He chewed on his bottom lip. “Yes. I met with her. And I told her to leave. I didn’t invite her and I really don’t know why she would even be here.”

“Have you been in contact with her?”

Julian pulled me to the edge of the bed, closer to him. From his kneeled position, he had to tilt his head up slightly. He stared at me, his body rising and falling with each serrated breath, but he didn’t look nervous or guilty. He appeared calm as he firmly replied, “Yes.”

I felt better that he was honest with me, but it didn’t stop the hurt of him communicating with his ex behind my back. I swallowed hard. “Why?”

Silence followed. I could hear my heart pounding in my chest as I waited for him to answer the question.

“Do you trust me?” His grey eyes implored mine, seeking something more than a simple yes or no.

Yes, I thought immediately. I didn’t even have to think about it. My honest answer was quick and instantaneous. *Absolutely yes*.

I looked into his eyes and I felt so conflicted. I saw nothing but love and devotion in his eyes. I didn’t just trust him with my heart; I trusted him with my life.

But I know what I heard.

My mother always said to trust my gut. As I stared at Julian Winters kneeling down in front of me, my heart faltered. Weighing what I’d heard versus what I felt resulted in the extended silence that hung in the air between us.

“Yes, I trust you,” I uttered softly.

Julian grabbed my face, his thumbs stroking my cheeks. “I called her, but I swear to God that it was nothing

inappropriate. It was nothing that would disrespect our relationship.”

“Then why can’t you tell me? You travel a lot for work. I work late nights. In two years, I’ve never once thought you were sneaking around or lying to me about anything. I never doubted you, so please explain to me why you can’t tell me what you were talking about with your ex?”

I saw the struggle play out in the storminess of his eyes. I could tell he was wrestling with the decision to tell me.

“Please understand that I don’t want to keep anything from you, and just because I can’t tell you right now doesn’t mean I won’t be able to tell you soon.”

I swallowed hard. I hated not knowing. “Soon? What’s soon?”

“After we’re married.” He paused, a smirk playing on his lips. “Marital privilege and all.”

Did he seriously just make a joke? A lawyer joke at that!

I sighed, pursing my lips to keep from smiling. I tried to turn my face away from him, but he held my face steady.

“I love you, Zoe. I wouldn’t jeopardize you for anything.” His voice was low and gravelly as he moved his forehead to mine. “But if this is going to be a problem, if this is going to come between us, I’ll tell you now.”

Even though his eyes filled with disappointment, he opened his mouth to continue.

I stopped him.

I could see that he didn’t want to tell me, but more importantly, I could see that he would tell me. I didn’t know why he was keeping it from me, but his willingness to tell me pushed down the doubt that threatened to suffocate me.

“No,” I murmured, swallowing my suspicion and apprehension. “I trust you.”

When his lips touched mine, the uncertainty faded away. The force with which he kissed me made my entire body weak. I felt loved and cherished. With one kiss, he’d managed to fill me with so much of our love that doubt was forced out. In that kiss, I was reminded of what we had. When we finally broke away, we were both out of breath as we just gazed at one another.

“I promise...you have nothing to worry about. It’s nothing bad and nothing you need to worry about. On Sunday, as soon as you come down the aisle, I will tell you everything.” He planted a kiss against my lips. “There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you. I don’t want anyone but you. Remember that.”

I nodded and it occurred to me that I really did trust him. My gut told me I could believe him despite what I’d heard outside that room.

Feeling tired, I allowed Julian to tuck me in. He stroked my hair as he crouched beside the bed, staring at me. “Promise me that no matter what, you won’t forget that at the end of this weekend, when it’s all said and done, you’re who I’m spending my life with and I’d do anything for you,” he uttered so softly that my entire body reacted.

“I love you,” I whispered sleepily. “Go change and come back to sleep with me. We won’t be able to sleep together tomorrow night.”

A slow smile stretched across his face. “I love you too. I’ll be right back.”

Chapter 13

“Well, that was good,” Koko remarked as we approached the golf course clubhouse after the rehearsal dinner. She rubbed her belly. “Especially after a long day of swimming in a heated pool while the boys grilled and then walking down an aisle on Omar’s arm...and then the pasta at the rehearsal dinner.”

“This has shaped up to be an amazing New Year’s Eve. I mean, the pasta alone,” Keisha sighed as she linked arms with Lenny. “But even more amazing is the fact that our Zoe is getting married tomorrow.”

“I know.” I grinned. “Today made it all feel so real. In twenty-four hours, I’m going to be Mrs. Julian Winters.”

“Regardless of the cameras tonight, we’re going to have a good time,” Keisha reassured us, her voice definitive. “I can’t wait to finally meet the people who were on your session.”

“So you can see who’s really crazy in real life. I’ll give you a hint: all of those bitches are crazy,” Koko muttered in a snarky tone.

I laughed, bumping her with my hip. “Sounds like someone is frustrated with her job.”

She let out a grumbling noise. “I just need a break. It seems like as the show keeps going, the producers have become less concerned with what the guy is looking for and more concerned with what’s going to get ratings. I mean, the crop of women get more and more conniving and just plain mean. They feel like I work for them personally and not the show.” She shook her head. “We’re not getting into that tonight because I’m going to act like I don’t know half of those

bitches. It is not only New Year's Eve, but also Zoe's wedding eve!"

"And in preparation for a beautiful day tomorrow, we will party tonight. Bringing in the new year right!" Lenny shook her ass in front of us as she climbed the steps to the back door. "This is kind of like your bachelorette party," she realized as she opened the door for us.

"Bachelorette party!" Koko screeched, throwing her hands in the air and twirling into the clubhouse.

I laughed as my three best friends danced their way inside.

They really are the best. I smiled as I watched the women in front of me dressed in sexy club dresses and tiaras with the words 'bridesmaids' blazoned across the front. *After the day I've had, I don't think I even care that they're filming tonight.*

After some of the best sleep of my life, I'd woken up in Julian's arms. Once the two of us had played in the shower for nearly an hour, we'd walked downstairs to see the makings of a pool party. Older members of our families and Beverly and her family had worn jackets and were eating burgers from the grill. Our best friends had already gotten in the pool, my brother, his girlfriend, and our cousins were getting in the pool, and we were the last ones to join the party.

After a few hours, we'd gone back into our villas to get ready for the rehearsal and the rehearsal dinner. The rehearsal had been effortless. The fabulous Peri Moore had everything together so when we'd arrived, we just fell into place. We'd gone through the ceremony five different times—the fifth time resulting out of an argument between Beverly and Peri versus Robert Brady and the chief camera operator.

Once we'd finally finished, everyone, except for *The One* crew, had headed to the restaurant where we ate and laughed and talked. It was the perfect day. Our parents and

grandparents decided to call it a night, but everyone else wanted to party.

A creaking noise behind me caught my attention. I glanced over my shoulder just as I felt myself being grabbed from behind. “Julian!” I exclaimed as he lifted me briefly. “I didn’t even hear you come in.”

With his arms locked around my waist, Julian kissed my neck. “We saw you so we snuck in behind you.”

He let me go and I spun around to face him, kissing all over his face. Something about the rehearsal had made me incredibly giddy around Julian. I had been unable to stop getting moony-eyed around him at dinner.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were drunk,” he joked.

“I’m seriously surprised she’s not. I want to know when my sister stopped drinking,” Zach teased from behind Julian.

I quickly pressed my lips against Julian’s and then walked around him to stand in front of the others.

“Zach.” I glared at my brother, who looked exactly like our father. Smiling at the rest of the group, I gave Zach’s girlfriend a hug first.

“You should’ve ridden with us,” I whispered loudly, causing her to giggle shyly.

Slapping Zach’s arm, I narrowed my eyes at my brother. “What?! I don’t drink all the time! How dare you?!” My voice was comically indignant.

He laughed. “No seriously, I can’t remember the last holiday you didn’t have a new drink concoction you’d picked up from the bar that you wanted everyone to drink. It’s New Year’s Eve—better yet, it’s the night before your wedding and I don’t think I’ve seen you drink all weekend.”

If the look on Omar, James and Scott's faces were any indication, I was positive my best friends and Julian's faces were just as bad.

Way to keep it cool, guys.

I planned to tell the rest of my family after the weekend was over. The producers could be sneaky and I didn't want any of them to slip up and tell anyone.

"If you saw my dress, you'd understand why I can't afford the empty calories. Why don't you worry about your alcohol intake so you aren't wasted escorting Mom down the aisle?"

"It's New Year's Eve; I can't make any promises," he returned.

Everyone laughed but my cousin and her boyfriend laughed a little too hard as I hugged and then slapped their arms as well.

"Okay, let's do this," Julian called out, intertwining his fingers with mine.

We let everyone else in front of us so they could lead the way down the main corridor that led to the ballroom hallway. The steady beat of a pop song pulsed through the air. Julian's hand slipped from my grasp as he positioned himself behind me. He grabbed onto my hips and I started swaying to the music as we walked. We managed to avoid members of the camera crews until we crossed the threshold of the ballroom.

"Zoe!" Bailey Anderson screamed, inadvertently grabbing the attention of a crowd of people around her.

"Bailey!" I called back as she threw her arms around me. "I love your hair like that. You look amazing!"

She hugged me tightly. "It's been way too long," she said as we pulled apart. She eyed my low-cut, black metallic dress that showed off my curves. "You look gorgeous." She looked

over my shoulder and gestured to me. “Julian, your fiancé is gorgeous!”

He laughed. “I know.”

Throwing one of her two cornrowed braids over her shoulder, the blonde beauty made a face. “Oh and you look okay, too, I guess.”

With a laugh, they hugged and by the time they pulled apart, a camera crew was set up with cameras in our faces. Our friends and family were bumped out of the way as we were backed up through the door we’d just come in through.

“We’re going to head to the VIP area,” Koko screamed over the head of the producer who positioned herself in front of her.

The VIP area was literally a reserved section of tables that had a velvet rope around it. Only one camera crew at a time was allowed in that area so it wasn’t really as private as it had been presented to us before we’d agreed to it.

But tonight is about having a good time, ringing in the New Year, and then marrying the love of my life tomorrow.

I mouthed an apology to my friends and they waved it off and smiled. Julian’s friends and the rest of our family followed Koko.

“Hi! I’m Pepper,” the producer announced cheerily. She proceeded to introduce the rest of her crew. She smiled brightly at us. “It’s so good to catch you all together. We know you are just walking in and we already have you back in the hallway, but we have a couple of quick questions before the party really gets started. We’ll let you go as soon as we get a couple of things. Is that all right?”

“Fine with me,” Bailey replied quickly, adjusting her sexy, blue dress that matched the color of her eyes and showcased an ample amount of cleavage.

Julian's hand rested on my hip as he pulled me into his side. I looked up at him as he looked down at me. He lifted an eyebrow fractionally and I nodded indiscriminately. The corner of my lip quirked up and his slow, easy grin spread across his face. He looked at the producer and answered, "Yes, that's fine with us."

Pepper the Producer gestured to crew and then counted down.

"You three were the clear winners of your session. Congratulations on everything you've accomplished and the success you've had courtesy of the show."

"Thank you," the three of us said in unison.

Pepper the Producer looked at Bailey. "How does it feel to see your ex-boyfriend about to marry the woman who used to be your rival?"

I inhaled sharply. I was not only caught off guard by the question, but also by the purpose of the question. Turning my head, I looked up at Julian and saw his jaw clenched tightly, expression blank.

Bailey pulled at her braid and flashed a smile. "Zoe and I were never rivals. We're both busy, but we have a great relationship. I host Summer Fling and I also have a new movie coming out. Zoe is an attorney and thriving in her career."

I nodded in agreement. "We see each other at least once a month... well except for the last few months, but that's because of my schedule. But, the point is, Bailey and I are friends."

Pepper tapped her chin. "Sounds good," she murmured, even though she sounded skeptical. "But at one point in time, you two were competing for the same man. Doesn't that negatively impact your friendship?"

Before I could open my mouth to respond, Bailey started talking. “From the moment these two met, they were fated. Julian was never my boyfriend. He always belonged to Zoe. I mean, come on...look at them.”

The camera panned to just us and I was already grinning at Bailey’s words as Julian had me tucked protectively into his side.

“I dated everyone in the house per the game, but the heart wants what the heart wants.” Julian kissed me on the top of my head. “And my heart belonged to Zoe from the moment we met.”

Turning, I wrapped my arms around Julian and gazed up at him. “And Julian will have mine until the day I die.”

“You see what I’m saying?” Bailey pointed out. “They are the real deal.”

“I see.” Pepper smiled and nodded. “Well, Julian, do you keep up or speak to anyone who was on the show?”

“No...” His eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. “Why would I? I mean, besides Bryce, I didn’t spend much time getting to know anyone, but the women. And I am about to marry the only woman I needed to keep in touch with.”

Something in Pepper the Producer’s eyes looked sneaky and maybe even a little devious. “I just meant as friends,” she clarified.

“Zoe keeps up with Bailey and if I’m in the room when they are speaking, I say hello. But like I said, no, I don’t have a need or desire to keep up with any woman I’ve had a romantic past with.”

I discreetly squeezed his side to let him know that his answer was good and that I loved him.

Pepper's smile widened. "Good, good, this is good." She signaled toward me with her head. "So Zoe, a question for you: how do you feel about Julian being surrounded by so many women tonight?"

"Well I would hope the guests at our wedding wouldn't hit on the groom, but bottom line, I trust Julian, so there's nothing for me to worry about."

Pepper bit her bottom lip as she grinned. "That's good. Trust is good." She looked at Bailey. "Do you speak with anyone from the show besides Zoe?"

"No, but I'm looking forward to seeing how everyone is doing tonight," she responded diplomatically.

Pepper nodded, signaling to her cameraman to stop rolling. She cast her gaze over the three of us. "Do you mind if I find you a little later to talk more?"

"Okay," Julian responded.

"Sure," Bailey answered.

I just nodded because something felt off.

"Wonderful," Pepper cheered mischievously.

As soon as the camera crew scurried back into the ballroom, the three of us looked at each other.

"Did that seem off to you?" I asked, looking between them.

Before either of them could answer, the DJ made an announcement that I didn't completely understand and then the music pumped through the speakers louder. As the hip hop beat vibrated through the air, the few people still hanging out in the corridor ran inside the ballroom.

A good-looking man with a great smile wearing a nice suit waved at Bailey, inviting her over to where he was standing.

I looked from him to Bailey. Her eyes lit up and her pretty face flushed.

“I’m going to meet up with you guys in a little bit,” Bailey mumbled distractedly as she stared straight ahead.

I smiled up at Julian. “I think Bailey may have found—umph!” A yelp escaped me as I got bumped hard. “What the hell?” I snapped as Julian caught me, keeping me from falling into the door. My hand protectively covered my belly as I remained unsteady on my spiked heels.

“Who was that?” Julian barked to no one in particular as he eyed the people hanging around the doorway.

One of the security guards approached us. “Mr. Winters, can I speak with you for a second?”

“Yes. Give me a second.” He threw the response over his shoulder as he looked at me. “Are you okay?” He ran his hands up and down my arms. “Did you see who did it?”

I put my hand on my belly briefly and nodded. I lifted my foot and rotated my ankle in a circle. “I’m fine. It really just surprised me.”

“Who was it?”

I reached up and touched his hardened face. “I don’t know. I know it was a woman. I’m sure it was an accident though.” I gestured with my head to the anxious-looking security guard. “Handle your business, my love.”

Julian watched me for a second before dropping a kiss to my lips. “This won’t take long and I’ll be right here.” He turned around, taking maybe one step away from me to have his conversation.

My smile slipped after Julian’s back was to me.

Who pushed me?

I knew it wasn't an accident. It was a legitimate push in the center of my back and it felt intentional.

I whipped my head around to see who it was and my eyes narrowed at a woman in a backless, pale pink slip dress. Wavy, light brown hair cascaded down a bare back and long, toned legs ended in an expensive pair of shoes. She turned around dramatically and my eyes went from narrowed to a blatant glare as I recognized the woman before me.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't see you there," Leah Trotter shouted over the music. The smirk on her snobby face indicated that she wasn't sorry at all. Her eyes shifted to Julian. She took several steps closer to us, stopping with a foot of space between us. Her tone changed considerably as she eyed my fiancé.

"Did you push me?" I snapped, wanting confirmation before I had her tossed out.

Julian must've heard me because he turned and looked.

"By accident," Leah replied, shifting her body toward him and tossing her hair over her shoulder. "You know I would never do anything like that on purpose. You know me, Julian." She batted her eyes. "But how are you? You look good. Very, very good."

I gaped at her incredulously. She flirted like she didn't see him having a conversation with someone and didn't see me standing right beside him.

"He's great," I answered for him. "You're not welcome here."

Leah's eyes cut to me, flashing with unnecessary hostility. "I am an invited guest. Is this the way you treat invited guests? That's unbelievably rude and unbecoming of a celebrity's wife."

“Showing up to an event where you are unwelcome is unbelievably rude and unbecoming of a decent human being,” I retorted, my irritation rising. “But that’s to be expected. You proved you weren’t decent a long time ago.”

“It’s a shame you’re so jealous of me. I mean, the press said so. The—”

“Jealous?” I interrupted almost breathlessly as rage boiled under my skin. “You are crashing my wedding weekend in a desperate attempt to get attention and stay relevant. I have nothing to be jealous of.”

“Oh am I getting under your skin because you know deep down Julian will marry a girl like you because you’re safe?” She smirked. “He may marry you, but he won’t ever stop wanting a girl like me.”

“Leah, he chose me. This is desperate and sad. Grow the fuck up.”

Seconds passed as she glared at me and I glared right back.

In our silence, I heard Julian and the security guard exchanging goodbyes. Even if I didn’t hear it, I knew his conversation was over courtesy of the way Leah’s face transformed from snarky to flirty in a flash. I rolled my eyes.

His hand settled on the small of my back. “Everything all right?”

Leah twisted her body toward him, sticking her chest out. “I’m great.” She scrunched her nose up and tilted her head toward me. “But she’s aggressively angry for some reason. I mean, look how angry she is.”

“It’s time for you to go. You’ve overextended your welcome and your fifteen minutes of fame. Get the fuck out.”

She lifted her eyebrows and her shoulders. “And this is the type of woman you say you want to marry?”

My breaths were coming out in short bursts as Julian tightened his arm around me. I wasn't a violent person, but I wanted to launch my body toward her and knock that smug smile off of her face.

This bitch has some nerve! Breathe. Just breathe. First of all, I'm pregnant. Second, there are cameras everywhere. Third, the show and the media will twist it to paint me as "angry" and "irrational" while painting Leah as the victim. She's baiting me. She wants me to act irrationally because she wants to reignite her fifteen minutes of fame and that'll be exactly what happens if I put my hands on her. Just breathe.

I had to look away from her to calm myself down and I noticed a camera crew noticing us.

"...woman I will spend the rest of my life with and you won't talk to her like that again. I don't give a damn who invited you. You don't disrespect my girl or our relationship. I didn't want you then. I don't want you now. And we don't want you here. Period," Julian concluded, his full lips curled in disgust.

I was so consumed by my thoughts that I only caught the tail end of what Julian said, but what I heard of his words was enough to settle me down and compose myself.

I love him. She's jealous and trying to get under my skin. End of story.

I unclenched my fist and rubbed his back. As I gazed up at him, a realization hit me. I hadn't been mad enough to want to hit someone since being on *The One*. I didn't even dislike that junior associate who asked me to 'fetch' him some coffee during my first week at Parker, Lee & Associates as much as I disliked Leah. Being in the company of the one person in the world that I loathe riled me up and that was exactly what she wanted. She wanted me to get mad and cause a scene so she could get more airtime—and she was trying to get between

Julian and me. She probably hoped we'd call off of the wedding so she could snake her way in. So the most important question of the evening rolled around in my head.

Why am I even acknowledging her or this conversation?

Being on *The One* was such a horrid experience because of the way the women in the house acted. I realized the reason I felt like strangling Leah was because she brought me back to that mindset from the show.

I need to end this now.

"Leah," I said sweetly, smiling as the camera that was pointing directly at us fought through the crowd. "I know what you're doing, but it won't work. Good luck with your career though." I used air quotes to emphasize the word career.

The camera crew appeared just as Leah spat, "I give your marriage six months tops."

I glanced at Pepper as she silently directed the camera into a new position. I tilted my head and forced a pout. "We're sorry you feel that way, Leah, and because you have such strong negative feelings toward our impending marriage, you are no longer welcome here."

Leah flipped her hair over her shoulder and startled when she noticed the camera crew.

"Security will be showing you out," Julian added with a satisfied chuckle.

"I was invited here by Robert Brady and—"

Julian took my hand into his and walked off, pulling me behind him. My head fell back and I laughed as he led us through the crowd toward the VIP area.

"Where have you two been?" Koko called out as she danced with a drink in her hand.

I rolled my eyes as I walked around the velvet rope. “You don’t want to know.”

Julian chuckled. “We had a run in with your favorite person.”

Koko smoothed her hand over her hair. “I know. Bryce was just over here trying to talk to me.” She finished her drink. “I told him to leave so I could think. He said he was going to find you two.”

Julian shook his head. “No, not him, but that’s rough.” He lifted his hands in surrender when we both whipped our heads, giving him a look. “Not the time?” He frowned and backed away slowly. “Okay, I’m going to see what the fellas are talking about.”

Koko and I giggled as he rushed toward Omar and Scott.

She pointed at me and lowered her voice. “You just missed it! We’ve been here for less than an hour and so much shit has gone down.”

I wiggled my eyebrows. “Well, I already see one thing,” I whispered, gesturing with my head to Lenny and James as they talked. She was up against the wall and he was up against her. “They look like they are about to have sex.”

“About to? I think they are having sex,” Koko quipped.

My head lolled as I laughed.

“No, but there have been some crazy matchups on the dance floor. They’re people you wouldn’t know because you don’t watch the show, but the ones you would know are going to blow your mind.”

I playfully slapped her arm. “Well stop with the suspense and tell me!”

“Omar...and...Keisha!”

My mouth dropped. “Shut up!” I glanced over at Keisha who was standing beside Omar. “That’s awesome! They’ve had this fiery connection for the longest time. I’m glad they are feeding into that.” I poked my bottom lip out. “But at the same time, poor Scott. He had a crush on Keisha too.”

Koko pursed her lips and gave me a look. “I think Scott’s going to be okay.” She paused dramatically. “He actually ended up getting someone’s number and they were all over each other on the dance floor.”

I laughed. “Oh wow! Who is it?”

She bit her lip as if she were trying not to smile. “I was going to tell you, but now that she’s on her way back over here—don’t look!”

I had only turned my head a fraction of an inch, but quickly readjusted it so I was staring just at Koko. “Sorry! Where is she? You have me super curious now!”

“She’s coming!” Her words sped up and her voice lowered to a hiss. “I’m going to go over with them so you can chat with her. She’s on her way back over here and she’s walking up... now.”

Who could it possibly be? Please don’t be a hot mess. Please don’t—

I felt a tap on my shoulder and my eyes bulged at Koko before turning around.

“Mya!” I screeched in surprise as her big brown eyes widened.

“Hi, Zoe,” Mya squealed as we embraced. “You look beautiful, as always.”

I stepped out of the hug and gestured to the red mini dress and slim silver belt that covered her petite frame. Her dark brown hair with big soft waves brushed her shoulders.

“As do you! I love your dress.”

She lifted her arms out from her body. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Our smiles were still wide but an almost awkward silence fell between us.

“It’s been a long time,” I pointed out.

“Yeah...” Tucking her hair behind her ears, Mya looked down at her silver pumps before meeting my eyes again. “I know, I know.” Her voice trailed off.

As the live finale for *The One* had wrapped up, Mya told me she would need a couple weeks to deal with the heartache associated with not being chosen. I’d understood where she was coming from so I didn’t think anything of it. Once a couple months had passed and press surrounding our session of the show had died down, I’d reached out to Mya. She had declined my call and just sent a text message saying it was ‘too soon.’ I didn’t reach out again and as I’d suspected, I hadn’t heard from her again.

I looked at her blankly as she seemed to struggle with what she was going to say next.

She made a face. “I’m sorry.”

I nodded slowly. “Apology accepted.”

Mya shook her head and touched my arm briefly. “No, I’m sorry. I am really sorry.”

“What happened?” I asked, lifting my hands, palms up. “I thought we were friends.”

She closed her eyes and ran both hands through her hair. Letting out a sigh, she explained, “It sounds so stupid now, but I was jealous. I felt so rejected and embarrassed.” She started to wring her hands. “Once I got back home, I just...I wasn’t in a good headspace. I was lonely and my hometown is small so

everyone knew. The library had to replace me since I was gone for so long, so I went home to nothing—no job, no boyfriend, no life. I had a lot of time on my hands and I kind of just...fell into a depression or something.”

“Oh Mya.” I reached out and hugged her.

She hugged me back and when we released, she smiled. “I’m fine now, but I just kind of let myself get into this dark place. I don’t want you to think I wasn’t happy for you, because I was. I swear, I was and still am, Zoe. But I was too unhappy with myself to celebrate your happiness. It took me months of therapy to pull myself out of it. Then, I got a job in Phoenix and after moving and getting settled, I found my happiness again. But...a year had passed.” She looked down at her shoes again before giving me the remorseful look. “I felt like it was too late to reach out so I didn’t. I truly am sorry and when I was contacted to attend your wedding, I knew I had to be here. I may not have been there before, but I’m here now, because it’s your happy day and I am happy for you.”

My heart felt heavy, full of the sorrow in her words as she recounted what she had gone through, but I also felt uplifted that she had finally found herself.

And she finally looks at peace.

“Well, I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad you’re happy,” I said, meaning it from the bottom of my heart.

“I am. I really am.” She was beaming. “And tonight is looking like it’s going to get even better.”

I followed her eyes and found Scott grinning back at her.

This is a good match.

I nodded in approval. “Scott is a great guy.”

Her cheeks reddened. “I haven’t had much time to get to know him, but I can see that. I just get this feeling.”

A camera crew came over, interrupting our conversation. They wanted a quick exchange with Mya before they moved on to an argument that had popped up on the other side of the ballroom. The names of the women were stated over the walkie-talkie, but I didn't recognize either of them.

"What was that about?" I laughed as I watched the group surge through the crowd.

"Drama called." Mya rolled her eyes. "The two they said were arguing were on the spring session from this year. They were both basically the Tori of their session, but with a lot of Leah thrown in."

"So two parts aggressively mean and one part conniving manipulator?" I asked jokingly.

"Yes!" She giggled. "Lots and lots of drama. They made the final two and the guy ended up choosing one of them...and then changed his mind! It. Was. Epic!"

My eyebrows flew up. "What?"

"What was that about?" Julian asked as he snuck up behind me. His hands slipped around my waist, pulling me against him. "How's it going, Mya?"

"Hi Julian! I'm good. How are you?" Mya chirped happily. "Oh and congratulations!"

"I'll be better when tomorrow comes and I am able to make Zoe my wife," he answered, kissing my neck before letting me go.

A shiver ran through me as I gazed at him over my right shoulder.

"You two are truly meant to be together. I'm happy for you." There was sweet sincerity in Mya's well wishes. "And what you just witnessed was an interview with us that was

positive and loving and then the camera crew breaking away as soon as a fight broke out.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Mya was telling them how happy she is for us and then they got a call saying two random women were arguing and we were old news.”

Scott lumbered over to us with a goofy look on his face. “Mya, will you dance with me?”

“Of course,” she gushed as she took his hand and they practically skipped to the dance floor.

Julian draped his arm around my shoulders as we watched the pair move against each other to the beat.

“I hope that works out,” I murmured as I put my arm around him. “They’re cute.”

He leaned down, whispering in my ear, “Not as cute as you.”

With my eyes closed, I nuzzled against him. “You’re biased and a flirt.”

“We have to give a short interview at some point tonight.” He turned me around so I was standing directly in front of him. “The security guard from earlier was letting me know it’s going to be set up in a room upstairs.” He cupped my face. “At eleven o’clock, we do our last sit down interview for *The One*.”

I stared up into his grey eyes, letting my head nuzzle into his hands. “Just a twenty-minute interview and a wedding and then we owe them nothing.”

Julian licked his lips and my eyes immediately followed his tongue. “Well...”

“Well what?”

He allowed his lips to hover over mine. My breath hitched as the anticipation started to build. He held my head in place

as I started to lean in to connect our mouths. I wanted to kiss him. The need grew so strong that as my hands moved up and down his back, I had to forcibly resist the urge to touch him inappropriately.

It felt like an entire minute had ticked by before he pulled away. His tongue slid over his bottom lip again. “Well, I will forever owe them for one thing.”

“What’s that?” I whispered breathily. The uptick in my breathing was a direct result of the desire I felt for him.

He said nothing. The silence stretched between us and as the music pulsed, a throbbing began deep in my core.

“I will forever owe them because they brought you to me.”

I tilted my head up to maintain eye contact. My heart thumped against my chest cavity. “I love you.”

He leaned down and kissed me lightly. His soft, full lips only fleetingly grazed mine before he pulled away, pressing his forehead against mine. “I love you, too.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Julian’s mouth covered mine. He parted my pouty lips with his tongue and kissed me hard and deep. I fisted the back of his shirt as I tried to pull him closer to me and the kiss deepened. When he attempted to pull away, I whimpered and pulled him closer.

He groaned in response to my movements. One of his hands moved from my face to my hip. It slowly roamed over the curve of my ass and squeezed before settling on my hip. I could feel him beginning to harden beneath his pants. I moaned in his mouth.

A wave of heat coursed through my body. I forced myself to pull out of the kiss, raising my eyes to his. My heart stammered.

I put my arms around his neck and brought my lips close to his ear. “How much time do we have between now and the interview? I want you to take me somewhere and finish what you started.”

Julian’s grip on my hips tightened as a groan rumbled in his chest. “Are you saying you want me to take you to some dark corner of this place and have my way with you?”

I nodded, biting my bottom lip. “Yes please.”

“Say please again.”

I closed my eyes and made my voice sexier. “Please... please take me somewhere and stick that big dic—”

“Dude! Dude,” Bryce interrupted, slapping Julian’s back twice. “People are taking pictures of you two as you dry hump each other.”

Julian and I stepped away from one another, laughing.

“The one and only Bryce Wilson.” Julian greeted the host of *The One* with a handshake-hug combination. “Good to see you!”

“Good to see you too, dude.” Bryce looked over at me and smiled before planting a kiss on my cheek. “Zoe, you look great.”

“Thank you. You too,” I replied, taking in the way his blue shirt brought out his blue eyes. “Koko mentioned you two spoke...”

“Unfortunately, she asked me to leave.” He shook his head as he ran his hand through his blonde hair. Although he smiled nonchalantly, I saw the sadness in his eyes. “But I have to interview you two lovebirds at eleven so I’m going to try again.”

As I peeked over his shoulder at Koko and saw the longing in her sidelong glances, I nodded. “Go get her. You two belong

together.”

Julian looked at his watch. “And you have two hours before you have to interview us.” He gestured with his head. “Don’t come back until you get your girl.”

Bryce’s eyes lit up as he laughed us off.

Julian shifted so he was behind me. He wrapped his arms around me and I let the back of my head rest against his chest. As an upbeat pop song about love played, we watched as Bryce walked across the small area to Koko as she pretended to be enthralled in Omar’s story.

When Bryce approached Koko, she whipped around and put her hands on her hips. Omar, Keisha, James, and Lenny had all taken a step back, but they were still openly spectating.

“Uh oh...this doesn’t look good,” Julian whispered in my ear.

I shook my head. “No, if she didn’t want to be bothered, she would’ve walked off. She would’ve left when she saw him over here with us. Oh oh oh oh oh look!”

Bryce and Koko were having a stare off until finally he pulled her into him and kissed her. Knowing my best friend as well as I did, I saw the exact moment when she let her guard back down. She wrapped her arms around him and they went at it.

“Finally!” I turned around and looked up at the love of my life. Happiness radiated from me, not just for me, but for my friends as well. I reached up and touched his chiseled jaw. “I love you.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “And I love you.”

Over the next couple of hours, we danced, we ate and we had a good time. We were filmed a few times, but only actually interrupted for an interview once. We alternated

between spending time on the dance floor and spending time in the VIP area.

We were in the midst of a toast when a security guard approached us to let us know was time to get set for the interview. Julian and I headed up to the room where I'd overheard him talking to Lillian.

The floor-to-ceiling glass windows provided picturesque views of the golf course and the recessed floor lights illuminated the room. I'd only seen a small section of the room from my spot in the hallway, but being all the way in the room, I was able to take in the beauty of it all.

"Wow, this room is beautiful," I murmured as I walked in. I saw the love seat against the glass and a stationary camera set up in front of it. "Have you been here before?"

"Yeah, I had my one-on-one interview in here."

Hmmm...not exactly the answer I was hoping for.

"What was that like?" I whispered, glancing over at the camera crew setting up and adjusting the lights.

"It was good." He smiled fondly. "But it's usually good when I'm talking about you."

I smacked his ass. "Usually?!"

Robert Brady walked in with Koko and Bryce on his heels and called Julian over to talk. Koko touched up my makeup, and five minutes before eleven o'clock, we were set up and ready to answer questions.

Bryce took his seat in an oversized chair that was situated beside the camera across from the beautiful sofa where Julian and I sat. While someone set up the shot and someone else adjusted the lighting, another person held up the boom mic. There were two people sitting behind monitors, presumably watching the video feed. The female had on headphones and

the male was signaling to the producer. Robert counted down from five; the closer he got to one, the more flushed I felt myself getting.

It wasn't that I was embarrassed. I was proud of the woman I'd developed into and of the way I'd portrayed myself on television. I was proud to be Julian's fiancé and I was proud to have him as mine. I knew part of our relationship was open to the public due to the nature of how we'd met, but I wanted our marriage, our relationship as husband and wife to be different, to be sacred, to be ours.

After announcing the special and eliminating the word 'dude' from his vocabulary, Bryce turned on the charm and gave his introductory speech before directing his questions to us.

"You two will be the first in *The One's* history to make it down the aisle," Bryce started, his trademark smile in place. "How do you feel?"

Julian's arm tightened around my shoulders as his finger made languid lines up and down my upper arm. "I'm ready for Zoe to be my wife already."

"And I'm ready to be his wife," I agreed with absolute certainty. "I'm happy and incredibly blessed."

Bryce nodded. "As the only couple to make it to this point, tell the viewers how you knew this was real and that you wanted to vow to be together forever."

Just thinking about being with Julian for the rest of my life gave me butterflies. "Marriage takes love, trust, loyalty, and hard work and there is no one I love or trust more. There's no one who I feel is more loyal. And I know that no matter what happens, no matter what ups and downs may take place, Julian and I work well together. There's seriously no one who works harder than this man right here." I looked over at him to find that he was already looking at me. Under his gaze, my voice

became lighter, softer, as if I were under his spell. “I love him with everything in me.”

“And I love her the same,” Julian responded. His voice was husky as his grey eyes bore into me. “Everything I’ve worked for in my life, every decision I’ve made, every song I’ve written, every beat I’ve arranged, every move I’ve made was for Zoe. She is the one. She’s always been the one. She’ll always be the one.”

Bryce cleared his throat. “Wow. Ladies and gentlemen, I can actually feel the heat coming from the loveseat.”

Hearing Bryce’s voice broke the spell and Julian and I both laughed hard.

The rest of the interview was as laidback and relaxed as it could be. Knowing Bryce wasn’t looking to generate drama, Julian and I were able to get through the interview easily. We were ourselves without giving too much of ourselves.

Bryce ended the conversation and the director yelled, “Cut!”

The flurry of activity that happened after filming stopped caught me off guard.

“I forgot how hectic it can be,” I murmured to Julian as our microphones were unclipped from our clothes.

Once the assistant in control of sound walked away, Julian kissed me tenderly. “That was the last sit down we have to have, my love.”

I smiled against his lips.

“Julian, I need to speak with you for a second please,” Robert announced, gesturing to a back room.

Julian didn’t immediately respond. Instead, he kissed me again which made me giggle to myself. “We’ll be right there.”

“Privately,” he added.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll go check on our friends anyway.”

“No, whatever he has to say to me, he can say to you.”

Grabbing his face between my hands, I pecked his lips. “You’re amazing, you know that? But it’s okay. Just hurry back.”

“Ok Beautiful.” He turned his head, kissing the palm of my hand. “And what’s the final verdict on us kissing at midnight?”

I made a face. “I don’t know...it’s a slippery slope. If we kiss at midnight, technically, we’re also seeing each other on our wedding day, but at the same time, it’s New Year’s Eve, so we should kiss at midnight...”

He lowered his voice. “How about I kiss you now...and then again blindfolded at midnight?” His words rolled off his tongue as slowly as his fingers skimmed over my skin.

I giggled. “How about you kiss me now and then I head back to the villa? We shouldn’t see each other on our wedding day.” My eyes dropped down to his lips. “No matter how good your lips taste.”

Julian’s sexy little smirk made my stomach flutter. He licked his lips and dropped his voice to a whisper. “Not kissing you at midnight once is fine if I get to kiss you every day for the rest of my life.”

My heart stopped for a second before accelerating. “God Julian...” I let my eyes flutter closed. “Your words feed my spirit.”

“And yours, my soul,” he whispered in response.

I felt his lips hovering above mine and his warm breath on my skin. Everyone around us disappeared. It was just me and him.

Just me and—

“Julian,” Robert barked. “I need to speak with you.”

Our bubble burst and my eyes flew open. The annoyance was evident on Julian's face.

"I said I'd be right there," Julian growled.

"Hey." I ran my finger along his jawline. "This time tomorrow, we're done with the show." I kissed him. "Find me before midnight or the next time you'll see me is when I'm walking down the aisle."

He grabbed me and kissed me long and hard. "I'll find you before midnight."

"You better," I murmured playfully as we started to pull away.

"Goddammit, Julian!" Robert roared.

Julian and Robert exchanged heated words as I scampered out of the room and down the stairway.

Twenty-two minutes until midnight. I hope Julian gets done with Robert soon. I love—

"Hello Zoe," Pepper the Producer uttered oddly, interrupting my thoughts.

"Hello," I responded slowly. My eyes danced from her to the cameraman and back to her. "What's going on?"

"I just had a quick question. Can we get you on camera for a minute?"

I glanced up the steps and although I couldn't see anything, I knew Julian was going to be a while longer. "Sure," I answered, stretching the word out. "But I only have a minute."

Pepper gave me a sly smile. "I only have one question." She signaled for the camera to start rolling. Her assistant handed her a notepad as she counted down from three. "What are your thoughts regarding Julian sowing his wild oats behind your back?"

Although I had a great poker face, my lip curled in disgust. “What?”

“With Lillian,” Pepper clarified with a huge smile.

My face fell and it felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. “What?”

“Julian and Lillian have been seen hooking up all over the villas. Do you feel like now that he’s gotten it out of his system, he will be a faithful husband?” Pepper cocked her head to the side and looked at me innocently.

Shock hit me in the gut and my emotions were whirling. The surprise question and insinuation were both ruthless and ridiculous.

Julian would never cheat on me. I don’t know what he’s hiding, but he assured me he would tell me tomorrow...but what if tomorrow is too late? What if I marry him and then he tells me he’s been fucking Lillian—no, no, no. Julian would never do that to me. He wouldn’t...keep anything from me...right? Well he is currently doing that now...but he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me. He wouldn’t. This is just Pepper the Producer’s way to get to me so she can get a reaction. They just want to start some unnecessary drama for a storyline.

I swallowed the bile that had risen in my throat. My heart thumped against my chest as the seed of doubt rattled around inside my head.

Seriously, what is it that he’s not telling me?

I glanced at the camera and then back at Pepper. “I don’t entertain rumors and lies. Julian will be an amazing husband. I look forward to spending my life with him. If you’ll excuse me, I have to somewhere I need to be.”

I walked by the cameraman and down the corridor toward the ballroom. The sound of music, fun, sloppy hookups, and

good times vibrated out of the ballroom. Pulling out my phone, I looked at the time.

Seventeen minutes until the New Year.

Seventeen minutes until my wedding day.

I stood at the doorway of the ballroom and hesitated.

I'm not going to let anyone or anything distract me from what I already know. I know what kind of man Julian is. I know what I feel for him. I know what—is that Lillian?

Although they had similar features and even the same haircut, I knew the woman I was staring at wasn't Leah. I'd seen Leah earlier in the night and she was wearing a pink slip dress. The woman staring directly at me was wearing a sexy white mini dress. She lifted her drink in the air as she turned her attention back toward the camera that was focused on her.

I sucked in a sharp breath. My blood was boiling. I tried to shake it off, but her smug smile enraged me.

What is this bitch even doing here? Not just here in this room, but here this weekend. And why was Julian with her?

I felt myself shaking as I pulled out my phone to send a text to my friends. Instead of returning to the party, I headed toward the exit. As soon as I opened the door, I tried flagging down the Riviera Villa Resort shuttle service, but between my impossibly high heels and the distance from the front door to the shuttle stop, I wasn't going to make it.

“Shit!” I cursed loudly. The security guard near the shuttle stop turned my way.

I get blindsided by a question on camera about Julian possibly hooking up with Lillian and then a few seconds later I see Lillian. As mad as I want to be at Lillian, Julian is the one I'm really mad at. Lillian is an opportunist and a little bitch for going after my very taken man, but Julian is the one who

should've shut that shit down. Instead he's keeping something from me. And as much as I love and trust him, I shouldn't even have to worry about any of this bullshit on a regular day, but definitely not on my wedding day. I'm pregnant with his baby for goodness sake! What the hell? This is great. I sighed as I made my way down the well-lit path. *Just great.*

“Happy New Year, Zoe.”

The deep timber of his voice stopped me in my tracks and I regretted the decision to stop immediately. There didn't seem to be anyone else out since the party was going well. I was only two feet away from the shuttle stop and the security guard if anything unpleasant or inappropriate happened. Although... under regular circumstances, I wouldn't have acknowledged a man calling my name in the middle of the night unless it was Julian. But...his voice was familiar.

I turned slowly. Pursing my lips, I put a hand on my hip. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm here for you,” Tate responded, slowing to a stop a few feet away from me.

With tall, broad shoulders and a rich cocoa complexion, Tate Lewis was dressed in a black button-up shirt and a pair of dark burgundy pants. He looked good—really good—but as frustrated as I was with Julian, I wasn't interested in anything Tate had to offer.

“You definitely weren't on the guest list. Why are you here?” I repeated firmly.

The booming sound of his laugh sparked a sense of familiarity. “You've always had a smart mouth. I miss that.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. “Tate, I don't know why you're here. Honestly, I don't know how you were even able to get on the property because this is a private event.”

“Zoe, will you listen to me please?”

I looked behind me to see if the shuttle was on its way back. When I didn't see it, I sighed. “You have five minutes.”

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry for hooking up with that groupie when I went to the NFL draft. I'm sorry for ending things with you for what I thought was something better. I'm sorry for how I treated you. You didn't deserve that. Please accept my apology.”

I stared at him. His brown eyes and long dark lashes implored me, begging me to accept his apology.

“Apology accepted.”

His shoulders relaxed and he let out a sigh. Tucking his hands in his pockets and dipping his head a bit, he smiled. “I've never stopped loving you, Zoe.” He took a step forward and I immediately took a step back. He stopped advancing forward and lifted his hands in surrender. “I wanted to come here to ask for a second chance.”

“What?” I screeched, my voice echoing into the silent night. I shook my head and took another step back. “No. No.”

“I know it seems like this is out of the blue, but it's not. I got to New York and I had my fun, but it got old quick. I thought I needed to see what else was out there and there's a lot out there for professional ballers. Sex is sex, but love is love.”

I rolled my eyes and pursed my lips. “I could've told you that,” I muttered under my breath.

Tate continued, “I made a mistake. I realized that when—”

“When you got hurt this season?” I interjected.

He paused. “No. I realized I made a mistake two years ago. We didn't make it to the playoffs that year and I flew back to California at the end of January. I'd been thinking about you

and when I came across that book of Pablo Neruda poetry that I never read, I felt like it was a sign. It was at my parents' house and I was reading it and I couldn't stop thinking about you. Do you remember what you wrote in the inscription?"

Yes.

"No," I lied flatly.

"In search of my Neruda."

I looked behind me when I heard the shuttle turning onto the road. When I turned back to face him, I sighed. I dropped the attitude as I saw the sincerity in his eyes and the hope in his features. I'd forgiven Tate a long time ago, even though he wasn't sorry and didn't apologize, so I wasn't irritated by him in general. My attitude had more to do with his unwelcome attendance at my wedding weekend and his blatant disrespect for my relationship.

"You have one more minute."

He nodded. "You changed your number, you blocked me on social media, and your dad wouldn't even help me get in touch." He smirked and I felt the corners of my lips starting to pull upward.

My dad loved him some Tate, I thought ruefully. I wonder if he knows he's here. Wait did my dad...no, no. Dad wouldn't have invited him. He wouldn't do that.

Tate took a small step forward. "I wanted to reach out then, I wanted to apologize and see if you would just...I don't know, get dinner with me, get coffee with me, anything. I was asking around about you while I was in town and found out you were going on *The One*. I swear to God, I didn't believe it. I was like 'no, I'm talking about Zoe Jordan.'"

I swallowed my laugh and masked it as a cough.

“I kept up with the show and I saw that you won. I felt like I owed it to you to let you have your fun just like I had mine. I went to Arizona for training camp and then I went back to New York and I waited for this thing with Winters to end. I was patient and backed off. I didn’t want to disrespect what you two had going on, but then I got hurt and a few weeks later, I heard you were marrying him.” He opened his arms wide and looked around as if he’d had some great epiphany. “It was a sign. I wouldn’t be able to be here if I hadn’t gotten hurt.”

Wait, no... He doesn't think... He's not seriously...

I frowned. “A sign of what?”

“Right here and now. This opportunity. I want another chance. Zoe, I know I messed things up between us, but you and I both know what we had. We were good together. He’s not the one for you. I am. You and I—”

I've heard enough.

“Let me stop you right there,” I interrupted, putting my hands up in front of me. “Seeing as how I’m marrying Julian tomorrow and he quite literally is the one for me, there is no you and me.” I held up my hand, showing off the luminous diamond on my ring finger. “I’m completely happy where I am.”

“Even with that whole Lillian thing going on? Listen, I’ve never had anything close to what we had. We were good together,” Tate argued earnestly.

Just hearing Lillian’s name made me frustrated with Julian and that situation all over again. Hearing Tate lob Lillian at me like a relationship bomb felt like my past and my present colliding. My stomach twisted violently.

I heard the shuttle as it pulled up to the curb. I looked over my shoulder and then back at the man I used to date. I had

spent the summer months after college graduation and before law school wishing and hoping Tate would say those words. I hadn't shed any tears, but I had kept telling myself he would realize he'd made a mistake. I had kept hoping he would at the very least apologize for the way he'd handled things. Looking better than ever and seemingly more mature, Tate Lewis stood in front of me saying words the twenty-two year old version of me had longed to hear.

And I felt nothing.

My disinterest must have been evident because he quickly continued. "When I was invited, I told myself I was just going to come to see if you were happy. I told myself that if you weren't, it was the last of a series of signs that I needed to win you back. So when I saw Winters with this Lillian chick, I knew that was the sign I was looking for. I know I made a mistake letting you go, but I'm here now, owning up to it, because we were good together and we still could be."

"Tate." I lifted my shoulders in confusion. "We may have been good together." I backed away from him. "But Julian and I are great together. Have a good night."

I turned on my heel and made my way to the shuttle. As I stepped on the bottom step, I glanced over my shoulder. Tate was staring at me, his hands in his pockets and a look of regret in his eyes.

"You said you were invited..." I called out to him. "Who invited you?"

"Robert. Robert Brady."

Chapter 14

“Happy New Year, Beautiful! I’m sorry I missed you. I wrapped up the conversation with Robert as soon as I could, but I guess it wasn’t soon enough. I’m going to try to call you again, but I just wanted to tell you that I love you and I can’t wait to make you my wife. I love you so much, Zoe,” Julian declared while Omar sang loudly in the background. I smiled as I listened to the voicemail for the third time.

We had a text conversation after that message, but hearing his voice was something different. I melted a bit every time he spoke.

“You should just make him tell you,” Koko pointed out, hugging her knees to her chest as she sat at the foot of my bed. “Don’t wait until the wedding if it’s bothering you.”

“But that’s the thing...” I stared at the ceiling as my voice trailed off. I pulled my covers around me tighter. “He’s hiding something from me; I know that for a fact and that bothers me, but I trust him. It bothers me because I don’t ever want to think of Julian being deceitful. I don’t think he would ever do anything to hurt me—not intentionally. Whatever he’s hiding... I don’t know... I feel like he has his reasons, but he swore to tell me after I walk down the aisle. My main issue is Lillian.”

“Okay, I pretty much set you and Julian up, so you know I love him,” Koko started. “But he knows the rules. You don’t fuck with someone we don’t fuck with. Period.”

I laughed. “Right?! He knows the rules.”

“No, but seriously...I would be bothered, too. This is about principle. Women like Lillian are the worst. Any woman who knowingly tries to fuck a man who is in a relationship is a bitch who deserves the bad karma she gets.” She rocked forward onto her knees and leaned forward so I could see her better. “And Lillian’s karma is watching a good man she used to have marry the love of his life.”

“You’re right.” I eyed my best friend and sighed. “I hate that I even let Lillian get under my skin like this. It’s not like I think he cheated. No, correction, I know he didn’t cheat, but he is hiding something from me that he shared with Lillian. I don’t like that, and besides the fact that other people obviously know something is up with them, it bothers me that Lillian is even here. Anyone who openly tries to fuck my fiancé is not welcome at my wedding.”

“That’s an etiquette rule,” Koko noted.

“That’s right after not wearing a white dress.”

“The rules are clearly stated. Don’t wear white, don’t try to fuck the groom, don’t RSVP no and then show up anyway.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Common knowledge.”

“Common sense.”

Koko’s rasping giggles triggered my laughter and we spent the next few minutes unable to catch our breath.

“I know we already talked about it, but let me just say that the fact that Robert invited Lillian is typical reality show bullshit, but the fact that he invited Tate is fucked up.”

“Right?!” I shook my head. “Even though I can’t stand her, Lillian I get, but why dig through my past? Why contact Tate? That’s so...underhanded.”

“At least you got the apology you were looking for a million years ago.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess...way too late for it to make a difference, but sure.”

Koko was quiet for a minute. “I’m so happy for you. Tate did you a favor. You are exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

“And I’m happy you and Bryce made up. I know you two were playing it pretty cool except for that kiss in VIP, but I’m surprised he isn’t here.”

She put her hands to her face. “He is. But I told him to make himself comfortable because I needed to check on you.”

“Oh no...I’m sorry! I didn’t know. You two just made up and had to keep it under wraps at the party. Go consummate the make-up with Bryce! I’m fine.”

“Well there’s another reason I came up here, besides checking on you...”

I rolled onto my side. “What’s that?”

“So while you left us at the party, we talked about getting everyone together for a pre-wedding surprise for you. We have the morning and early afternoon free and you can’t see Julian anyway, so would you like to venture off the property for some pre-wedding fun?”

I gave her a look. “Doing what?” My tone was as suspicious as my mind. “The last time you surprised me, I was entered as a contestant on *The One*.”

“And look how that turned out!”

Our laughter was interrupted by my phone vibrating against the mattress beside me. Grabbing it, I looked at Koko. “It’s Julian.”

“Okay, you answer it. Talk to him, then set your alarm for eight o’clock.”

“Okay, thanks for the talk. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Zoe. Talk to him. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation.”

I had an idea.

“Wait!” I called out to Koko just as I answered the phone, “Hello?”

“My almost wife,” Julian breathed into the phone.

My face split into a smile instantly. “Hello, almost husband.” I glanced at Koko who rolled her eyes dramatically. “I need you to tell Koko what is going on with you and Lillian. Knowing she knows will put me at ease. She’s right here.”

Julian was quiet for a moment. “Put her on the phone.”

I handed Koko the phone and watched her facial expression. She stared at me blankly while Julian told her whatever it was he was telling her.

“Okay. Here’s Zoe,” Koko said simply. She handed me the phone. “You should still marry him.”

With that, she turned and walked out the room with no indication as to what was going on.

Dammit Koko!

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone softly.

“Zoe.”

The longing sound of my name on his drunken lips did something to me. My body was firmly on the bed as my heart soared. “Hi.” I bit my lip. “What are you doing?”

“I’m lying in bed, wishing you were next to me.”

“That sounds nice.” I longed for the same thing. “Everything okay over there? I told Omar to not let you get too drunk.”

“Yeah, I just needed to hear your voice before bed. I wanted to know you’re okay. How’s our poem?”

“Hmmm,” I hummed softly as my heart fluttered. I put my hand on my belly. “I’m okay, my love, and our poem is great. I was just...” My sentence trailed off.

“You were just what?”

“Worrying for no reason,” I said, reminding myself that I knew him and I trusted him. “I’m okay.”

“You’re not getting cold feet are you?”

“About you? No. Not at all.” I hesitated for a second. “Are you?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.” He was quiet. “This is about Lillian?”

Now that he’d told Koko, I felt better about it. But I didn’t want to keep my feelings from him and I didn’t want to carry any negativity into our wedding day. “I understand there will be times when you have a secret project you can’t tell me about for legal reasons just like I can’t discuss specifics about cases I work on for legal reasons. But not only is Lillian your ex, she wants you back. It’s not that I don’t trust you. That’s not it at all. I just...her presence makes me feel disrespected.”

“I understand and I don’t ever want you to feel disrespected. This situation is unique and you don’t have to worry about this happening again.” He paused. “Did telling Koko ease any of your doubts at all? Because if not...if I have to tell you, I will.” His voice sounded resigned.

“No, wait.” I took a deep breath. “Don’t tell me what it is. Just tell me why I have to wait until after we’re married. Because if you wait until our reception to say something like, ‘I just found out Lillian has a two year old and it’s mine,’ I will kill you.”

Julian started laughing and I continued, “Julian Evan Winters, I’m serious. It’ll go from *The One: Wedding Special*

to *The One Time That Bride Killed The Groom At The Reception: Special Victims Unit.*”

Julian’s deep, rumbling chuckle soothed me and erased the last of my worries. Something about his laugh made me feel at ease, like we were back at home with no microphones, no cameras, and none of the Lillians or Leahs of the world.

The sound of his laugh spread through me and I bit my lip as the smile stretched across my face.

“I swear it’s nothing like that at all,” Julian assured me. “I guarantee it won’t make you sad or mad. I can’t tell you yet, but it will not upset you. I swear.”

“Okay.” I breathed, feeling lighter. I curled up into a ball. “Okay.”

“Are you okay now?” Julian asked.

“I’m more than okay.” I nuzzled my head into my pillow. “I don’t know how you do it, but you make everything better.”

“You make me better.”

There was a tremble in my chest as I fell more deeply in love with him.

“God, Julian. I love you.”

“I love you, too. And I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait to see you tomorrow. Lenny chipped her nail so in the morning we’re going back to the spa so she can get that taken care of and then the ladies and I are headed off site, I’m assuming for brunch. Then we’re coming back to the resort so we can get dressed and I can marry the man of my dreams.”

“Say that again.”

“I’m going to marry the man of my dreams,” I repeated, amusement in my voice.

“I like the sound of that.”

We talked for a few minutes longer before we said goodnight. I fell asleep happy and when I woke up hours later, I had a grin on my face. After a long hot shower, I slipped on the white dress my friends had gotten me. I looked at myself in the mirror and admired the way the sheer lace top looked against my skin. The short satin skirt was a flirty length that showed off my legs. I felt elegant and beautiful.

We're probably going to one of those tea parties Keisha was talking about or a day party if Lenny or Koko had anything to do with planning it. I put my hand on my belly and turned to the side. Whatever it is, I'd rather be overdressed than underdressed.

“Bride-to-be!” Keisha yelled from somewhere downstairs. “We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

Deciding to try out my own version of my wedding hairstyle, I pinned my hair to one side. Instead of having my hair completely pinned up, I allowed my hair to just hang loose and free—not only because I preferred my hair down and flowing, but because I wouldn’t have been surprised if a penis tiara or some other bachelorette crown found its way onto my head over the course of the day.

I lined my eyes with black eyeliner and after glossing my lips, I smiled at my reflection in the mirror. I was going to have makeup on during the wedding so I wanted my skin to breathe and went with a natural look.

After slipping into sexy five-inch stiletto heels and a black cardigan, I was ready to go. I spun around slowly, pleased with my appearance.

I made my way downstairs and stopped in my tracks as soon as I saw them.

“You guys look great!” I cried as my eyes swept over them.

Koko, Keisha, and Lenny each had on a different black lace dress. All of the dresses were short, but they each had different cuts and styles that showcased their bodies.

“You look beautiful,” Lenny complimented me.

“If you look this good in this white dress, imagine what you’re going to look like later in your gown. You are so beautiful, Zoe. You’re glowing,” Keisha added.

Koko’s eyes watered. “You’re getting married today,” she murmured before running over to me and hugging me tight.

“Don’t cry or you’re going to make me cry,” I mumbled, careful not to get her flowing blue-streaked locks stuck to my lip gloss as we embraced. “Wearing this makes me feel bridal.”

“You look bridal,” Koko wailed.

I hugged Keisha and Lenny next and then shrugged my shoulders. “Are you going to tell me where we’re headed now?” I lifted my black clutch. “I only have my wallet and my phone in here. I hope we’re eating wherever we go. I’m starving!”

Lenny looked a little panicked. “We’re still going to get my nail fixed at the spa before heading out right?”

Keisha put her hand on Lenny’s shoulder. “Yes. Don’t worry.” She looked down at the cracked nail. “How did you do that anyway? We’ve had our nails done for less than twenty-four hours.”

Lenny’s eyes lit up. “You would not believe the position James put me in—”

“You know what?” I interrupted with a laugh. “I can’t hear any wild sex stories without something in my stomach.” I patted my belly. “Both of us are starving so hold that thought.”

They laughed.

“Okay while you do that, I’m going to call Omar and have him make sure Julian isn’t near any of the windows so we can get out of here as soon as possible,” Keisha offered.

Koko nodded. “Perfect.”

I grabbed a banana, a protein bar, and a bottle of water then followed my best friends out of the villa to Koko’s car. We heard all about Lenny’s wild night which had included once at the party on the golf course, once back at the villa in her room, and then again in the outdoor hot tub.

“Yeah, I won’t be using that anymore,” Keisha quipped as Lenny got out of the car.

She flashed us her middle finger with a laugh before disappearing into the spa.

The rest of us waited in the car. Keisha informed us that although Scott was really cute, Omar was sexy and he challenged her. They’d gotten into an argument about something she couldn’t even remember, and she’d realized how sexy it was that he challenged her and wasn’t intimidated by her.

Koko let us know what we already knew—she and Bryce were in love. She also told us what we didn’t already know—Bryce hadn’t left our villa until an hour before we were supposed to wake up.

“Well, I knew,” Keisha spoke up as we watched Lenny walk back to the car, staring at her fixed nail. “The walls are thin.”

“What?” Koko whipped her head around with a huge grin as she gripped the steering wheel. “We don’t mind an audience, but we were quiet!”

“Yeah...maybe...but I know I woke up to the sound of the headboard hitting the wall.”

Koko laughed. “Well after talking things through until we fell asleep, I needed some action before he left. Unfortunately, at the wedding, we’re still going to have to act like we’re not together so...” She made a face.

“All done!” Lenny announced as she climbed into the backseat.

“What do you think would happen if you and Bryce went to your bosses and came out as a couple?” I wondered aloud.

“Oh! Are you going to do that?” Lenny asked as Koko pulled off toward the resort exit.

“I don’t know. JJ knows. She said she could tell and she doesn’t care. She said as long as the relationship doesn’t negatively impact my work, it’s none of her business and my job is safe. But Robert Brady doesn’t know and he’s a wild card. I don’t want Bryce to lose his job,” Koko told us, sorrow in her tone. “But enough of that, we are going to have a beautiful brunch and then we are going to get our hair and makeup done and then we are going to watch our Zoe become Mrs. Julian Winters.”

Howls and catcalls rang out from the three of them as I grinned foolishly.

I am going to be Mrs. Julian Winters.

We arrived at some swanky restaurant thirty minutes away from the resort. We hopped out of the car and the valet drove off leaving us staring up at the building in awe.

“Wow,” I commented as we took tentative steps toward the reflective glass doors. We couldn’t see in, but we could certainly tell from the doorman that we were out of our usual element.

“Nice choice,” Lenny muttered under her breath.

Koko nodded. “This is going to be amazing.”

As we approached, the doorman opened the door for us. I was the first one to enter the building.

“Wow,” I repeated to myself as I looked at the marble columns, ancient Greek statues, and elaborate mural on the high ceiling. Paintings and sculptures were strategically placed along the walls while benches were positioned throughout the middle.

I hope they didn't have to pay to get us a reservation here. I looked over at them and noticed the wonder in their faces. Maybe they didn't even know how expensive this place is.

My friends were truly the best group of women. I loved them wholeheartedly and I appreciated the effort they'd put in to be there for me. But I could not in good faith allow them to spend whatever kind of money this place required.

I cast my gaze around once more before I stopped in my tracks. I had been so captivated by the beauty that I hadn't realized it appeared as though we were at a museum and not a restaurant.

“This way,” Koko directed as she strutted across the marble floor. Our heels clicked in the mostly silent gallery as we followed her to the desk.

“Hello, we have a reservation under Zoe Winters,” Koko told the female attendant.

I grinned as I heard my married name for the first time from someone other than me or Julian. “Zoe Winters,” I murmured.

Lenny heard me and grabbed my hand.

I squeezed it and she squeezed back.

“While you wait for your table, please feel free to take in our gallery. We have information packets here and we can send a text when your table is ready,” a male attendant spoke up.

With a tight smile, the female attendant corrected him. “Their table is ready now.” She turned back to Koko. “Your guests are already here. To get to our restaurant, please take our elevator to the second floor.”

As soon as we were at the elevator, I let my curiosity be known. “Our guests? Who are we meeting here?” I asked as Lenny and Keisha avoided eye contact with me.

“Who do you think?” Koko replied with her best poker face.

I talked to Mom and Dad this morning and they were going to breakfast with Julian’s parents... I texted Zach, but he didn’t answer...

“Probably an old friend from UCLA...?” I looked from Koko to Keisha, but then Lenny caught my eye. “Or someone from Breakers Bar?”

No one said a word, even though I scowled at them as they exchanged knowing smiles.

The elevator door dinged open to a posh restaurant with two glass walls and several marble columns. Crisp white tablecloths and glass tableware gave the entire room a heightened elegance. Even the waiters and waitresses wore solid white dress shirts and either black pants or skirts.

“This place is unbelievable,” Keisha remarked.

A waitress greeted us and once Koko gave her my name, we were taken to a table in a little alcove. A grin spread across my face as I saw who was waiting for us.

My eyes stung with happy tears. “I thought you said you were having breakfast with Julian’s parents,” I cried, throwing my arms around my mom and then my dad.

“We wanted to surprise you,” my mom said, stroking my hair.

“Are you surprised?” my dad asked with a stroke to my cheek.

“I’m so surprised!” I put my hand to my chest and then I went around them to hug the other members of my family. “Hi Grandma!”

After embracing my grandma, my brother and his girlfriend, my cousin and her boyfriend, and my aunt who I hadn’t even known was going to be able to make it, we all sat down. I noticed they all had on black and white.

“You all look great.” I looked at my best friends, my gaze focused on Koko for a beat longer than the rest. “Thank you for everything. This is amazing.”

We ate family style while we enjoyed each other’s company. We had loud group conversations. We broke off into separate, smaller conversations. We spent almost two full hours eating decadently and laughing heartily.

My mom looked at her watch. “Oh! We have to head back soon.”

I looked at the clock on my phone; the wedding wasn’t going to start until five and it wasn’t even noon.

I guess we should be back no later than two o’clock.

I was having such a good time; I didn’t want to leave right away. It had nothing to do with having second thoughts about being Julian’s wife—I wanted that more than anything. My hesitation was rooted in the fact that we were sharing our last real meal all together until the next holiday season.

The only thing missing, the one thing that would make the moment complete was Julian, but besides him, I had all my loved ones together in one spot for the first time ever. I didn’t make it back home to Virginia as often as my family would’ve liked. My family didn’t make it California as often as I would’ve liked. My friends and I were busy with work so we

didn't see each other as often as we should. Our brunch at the incredibly chic Greek-inspired venue would always be a treasured memory.

I used my dessert fork to clink my glass, getting my friends and family's attention. "First, thank you all for being here. You all look beautiful in your black and white. I'm glad I got to spend a few private moments with you. This surprise brunch was exactly what I needed before having to be on camera later. Speaking of that...you didn't sign up to do a television show and I apologize for you being subjected to the intrusion, but I will say I am thankful that Koko signed me up for *The One*." I looked at her and smiled before sweeping my gaze around the table. "Without the show, I wouldn't have met Julian when I did and we wouldn't be getting married today."

I cleared my throat before I continued. "I am incredibly blessed to have you all with me today to celebrate my marriage to Julian. In five hours, I will be walking down the aisle surrounded by all of you. Each of you has touched me and molded me into the woman I am so I just wanted to take a few minutes to say I love you, and I am so thankful and blessed to have you in my life."

While everyone clinked glasses, I ran the pad of my finger under my eyes to absorb any moisture. I felt so simultaneously happy and weepy, I couldn't be sure if I was crying or not.

Since I was busy hugging and saying goodbyes, I didn't pay attention to who paid.

I'm going to have to make them tell me on the way back to the villas.

We were all about to walk out when my father caught my arm. "Sweetheart, can I talk to you for a minute?"

I tilted my head slightly, studying his face. "Of course, Dad." Looking back at my friends, I said, "I need to talk to my dad."

“That’s fine,” Keisha replied. “Gives us a chance to check out the gallery.”

“Take your time,” Koko added.

Lenny blew me a kiss and then the three of them caught up to the rest of my family at the elevator.

Sitting back down at our table, I studied my dad’s handsome face. Even though I looked more like my mom, I had my dad’s eyes—although his looked troubled. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew whatever he said was going to make me cry. I could feel it.

“What’s going on, Dad?” I asked nervously.

He took his hand and covered mine, patting gently. “I just wanted to give you a little fatherly advice before you get married. When we get back, it’ll be go time. You’ll do all the primping and everything and then there will be people and cameras all around you and I won’t get this chance.”

My eyes watered instantly and I nodded in agreement.

“Marriage is hard, Sweetheart,” he started.

My freshly shaped up and arched eyebrows flew together in bewilderment as I hadn’t expected him to say that. “What?” I snickered, unsure of what emotion I was feeling since I was reeling. “You and Mom are the perfect couple. Your marriage is the kind of marriage I want.”

Dad chuckled as he leaned over to grab his glass from a couple seats down and took a swig of the sweet tea and lemonade combination. “Marriage is hard. Your mother and I work hard at this. We love each other. I love her more today than I did when we got married, but marriage is compromise, sacrifice, and forgiveness as much as it is companionship and love. Your mother and I are best friends and that’s the secret to marriage. You don’t get to thirty years of marriage on that ‘in love’ kind of love. That comes and goes as the years pass. It’s

only that real steadfast love that lasts. We put our relationship first and we communicate, and just hearing you talk about him just now..." His voice trailed off as he looked away and nodded. "You and Julian remind me of me and your mother when we were your age, except we already had Zach by then."

I rolled my eyes playfully. "Dad!" I swatted him.

"If I didn't at least mention it, your grandma would get on my case." He laughed. "But on a serious note, stay grateful and thankful for one another. Pray for one another. Build on what you have because when you have real, genuine love as your solid foundation and you are both committed to each other and to your marriage, nothing will stop you. When Julian asked me for your hand in marriage, I had no doubt in my mind that he would take care of my baby girl. You're in good hands and so is he."

"Thanks, Dad," I sniffled as I dabbed at the corners of my eyes. "You're going to make me cry and you know how I feel about that."

He stood up. "You are just like your mother," he teased, extending his hand to help me up.

I threw my arms around my father and clung to his body tightly. He held me like a bear holding his cub and I felt the tears about to spring from my tightly closed lids.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you, too, Sweetheart." He kissed the top of my head. "And I am so proud of you."

When I lifted my head up, my dad flashed me a crooked smile. "I know how you feel about crying in front of people so how about you run to the ladies room and wipe off some of that makeup that smeared under your eyes. I'm going to call your mother and let her know I wanted to show you one more thing before we'll be down."

I nodded and walked off, scared that if I said anything to him the levies would break.

The bathroom was empty and I took a few minutes to catch my breath and get myself together. I wiped the small amount of makeup I had on off and only reapplied the eyeshadow. I didn't use the eyeliner because it smudged and instead of gloss, I decided to rub on some lip balm.

I'm going to just have my makeup redone in a couple of hours anyway so why bother.

The only reason I even bothered with the eyeshadow was because I wanted it to distract from the fact that my eyes were slightly pink and anything even slightly sentimental would result in me breaking down and crying.

Okay. I opened my black clutch. I have my phone, eyeliner, keys, keycard, wallet. I looked back in the mirror. Koko has my cardigan. So I think I have everything. We leave now, get back to the villas, and the glam squad will get me TV ready. Then I'm going to marry Julian Winters. In a few short hours, I'm going to be Julian's wife. I wish he was here to hear what my dad said.

I took a step back from the sink and checked my white dress to make sure I hadn't gotten anything on it.

I really love this dress. This was a good choice to wear today. My stomach fluttered and I put my hand to my belly. Oh my God, I'm marrying Julian today.

Happiness carried me as I bounded out of the bathroom to find my dad standing near the elevator bank.

He smiled warmly and his eyes looked glassy.

"Everything okay, Dad?"

"Everything is perfect, Sweetheart." The elevator door opened and classical music floated out. He took my arm and

linked it with his as we entered. “It won’t be long before I’m walking you down the aisle.”

I repositioned my arm more comfortably as it wrapped around his. I closed my eyes and let my head fall back. “You are killing me, Dad. You are going to make me burst into tears.”

He laughed lightly. “Okay, no more sentimental talk. I just want to show you this view and then we are heading back to the resort.”

“Sounds good.”

The door to the elevator opened and my mouth dropped open. I was speechless.

My grip on my dad’s arm tightened as we stepped off the elevator.

I noticed my immediate family, Julian’s immediate family, and our best friends standing in front of white chairs on either side of a black and white rose covered aisle. I noticed the breathtaking view and how the unseasonably warm sun beamed down, casting a glow over everyone. I noticed it all, but I never focused on any one particular thing because I had tunnel vision. Once I locked eyes with Julian in a pair of black pants, a tailored-to-perfection white button-up shirt, and a black bowtie, everything else faded away.

One of the tears I had just barely been able to hold back during my talk with my dad streamed down my face as I looked at the man I loved. I started to walk toward him, but my dad held my arm and prevented me from moving.

Beverly approached from seemingly nowhere, took my clutch out of my hand, and replaced it with a bouquet of black and white roses. She wiped my face with a cloth and then kissed my cheek. I sucked in a deep breath, determined not to let another tear fall.

And then I heard it.

The smooth yet soulful sound of an acoustic guitar's strings being slowly plucked gripped my heart. Even with the hustle and bustle of the city below, I could distinctly hear the slow drag of each guitar string as the fingers of whoever was playing maneuvered over the instrument. Each note was heavy and light, romantic and heartbreaking, full of love and loss.

An acoustic instrumental! Oh my God, this is perfect. I love —OH MY GOD!

Chele King's achingly beautiful voice began singing the lyrics to "Always The One" as I gazed at Julian. The music sounded like a melancholy lullaby against the lyrics that longed for the love of her life. As she described the man she loved and why she loved him, my father nudged me to start walking. With each step, my heart broke open as the words hit me. I felt vulnerable and exposed as I stared at Julian. Hearing those words being sung the way they were being sung and knowing I felt that exact same way about Julian filled my eyes with tears. I bit my bottom lip to keep my cheeks dry. I didn't even bother letting my bottom lip out from between my teeth until the song came to an end.

He did this. Julian did this. For me. For us. I stared at the man I loved and my heart beat for him. I blinked as hard and as rapidly as I could, but I couldn't help it. A second tear slid down my face and threatened to bring all of his friends with him. I swiped at my cheek with my manicured fingers and swallowed hard. *I love him.*

"We are gathered here today in the sight of God and in the presence of friends and family to unite Zoe Elise Jordan and Julian Evan Winters in holy matrimony. Who is it that offers this woman to this man?"

Ummm what? Who offers me? I thought, immediately snatched from my romantic bubble. "*Offers me*" as if I am a

commodity to be bought and sold? You can't "offer" other people. You can only offer yourself.

I caught the slight cringe in Julian's eyes and I couldn't help but smile. We'd talked to the pastor performing our ceremony at the resort and he knew what language we wanted changed. I guessed Julian had forgotten to tell the man performing this ceremony.

But it's okay. I winked at him. *He put this whole thing together.*

My dad and I looked at each other at the same time and he lifted his eyebrow at me.

"I do," I answered, holding my father's arm tightly and watching the man holding the Bible.

The officiant did a double take before shifting his shocked stare between me and my father and Julian. He even seemed to look at the other guests for help.

"Who is it that offers this woman to this man?" the officiant restated, his voice a little quieter and slower.

"I do," I repeated with a smile. I looked at Julian and my heart fluttered. "I offer myself to Julian."

The officiant paused, clearly unsure of what was happening. "I know we didn't do a rehearsal, but Mr. Jordan...you're supposed to say, 'I do' or 'we do' when I ask the question."

My dad spoke up proudly. "Zoe's mother and I have always taught our daughter to be independent. The word 'offer' implies that this is our decision. As proud and happy as we are for Zoe and Julian to be making this commitment, only Zoe can offer herself to him. But if the question is do we support her decision to offer herself to him, that's something different." He looked back at my mom and when I glanced at her, she looked like she was going to make out with my dad on the spot.

Yep. That's not what I'm trying to see.

I quickly turned back around.

“We do,” my parents said in unison.

The officiant looked as though he was going to roll his eyes.

“Okay,” he replied with only slight annoyance. “You may all be seated.”

I heard the rustling of chairs and amused murmurs as everyone took their seats.

The officiant told Julian to take me from my father and return to the altar with me.

Julian and my dad started to shake hands, but in the few seconds that they were in arm's reach, they fell into a hug. My father, who was slightly larger, grabbed Julian and clutched his head. I realized quickly that he was speaking in hushed tones. Whatever he said filled Julian's eyes with tears as he nodded. When they broke apart, they shook hands and then Julian turned to me.

“Hello, Beautiful,” he whispered, blinking back tears. He reached over, wiping a third tear that had managed to escape from the corner of my eye with the back of his hand.

“Hello, Love,” I uttered weepily as we moved in front of the officiant. I couldn't stop grinning. “This is the wedding we said we wanted. I can't believe you did all this.”

His grey eyes, wet with tears, burned into mine. “I would do anything for you.”

My stomach flipped.

Hold it together. Hold it together.

“Are you two ready? You want to save some of that for the vows?” the officiant joked, causing all of us to laugh.

“Sorry about that,” Julian apologized, amusement lacing his words. “Please continue.”

The officiant spoke about love conquering all and what marriage represented and I pushed my feelings back down. As he spoke, I studied Julian’s handsome face. He seemed happy, genuinely happy. I couldn’t see my own face, but the way my heart leaped from my chest between flutters, I was sure I had the same goofy smile on my face as he did. I loved him and he loved me, but more than that, I chose him and he chose me.

“Would you please join hands?” The officiant directed us. “Now I was told that instead of traditional vows, you two are going to just speak from the heart. Julian since you knew about this, I will give you the opportunity to go first.” He turned his head to look at him. “Julian Evan Winters, please recite your vows.”

I watched Julian’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed several times before he began.

“Zoe...” His voice trembled as my name tumbled from his lips. “My life makes more sense with you in it. My goals, my decisions, my direction became clear when we got together. Everything I’ve done in my life was to get me into a position to meet you and be a man worthy of you. You are beautiful and I’m not even talking about your physical beauty yet. I’m talking about your energy, your heart, your soul...all the things that make you *you*.”

My eyes began to water and I didn’t care. I didn’t try to stop them.

“You are beautiful and I felt that unique beauty the moment you walked into the garden. It could’ve been anyone else and I probably wouldn’t have looked up from my notebook, but my heart ached as if it were longing for something, then I looked up and there you were...” He shook his head and swallowed audibly.

I let go of his hand temporarily so I could wipe the fat tears that dropped from both eyes simultaneously. I let out a shaky breath as he continued.

“I felt a spark or something between us at the meet-and-greet, but I didn’t think too much of it at the time...until I couldn’t get you out of my head. So when I saw you in the garden, everything that makes me *me* recognized everything that makes you *you* before I even had a chance to look up. As clichéd as it sounds, I knew I was in love with you in that moment right there in the garden, but over the last twenty-two months, I’ve grown in love with you and grown in my love for you. Every day I love you more than the day before. I vow to spend my life showing you that love. I will honor you, treasure you, respect you, and protect you until the day I die. I will never hurt you. I will never leave you. I will never break your heart. My life is your life and your life is mine. I look forward to building our family and our legacy together.”

I was certain my entire body was shaking. Staring into his eyes and listening to his words, I felt overwhelmed with emotions. My eyes burned and so did the back of my throat.

“So, Zoe, I commit my life to you and to building a life with you. The second best decision I ever made was every decision that led me to you. The very best decision I ever made was to ask you to be my wife. I look forward to our life together and I look forward to the poem we wrote. I love you. Forever.”

The sincerity of his words moved me so deeply that I wasn’t sure my heart still resided in my chest. I moved our intertwined hands to my belly as discretely as possible.

“I love you,” I said breathlessly, as each heaving breath racked my body.

“That was beautiful, Julian.” The officiant turned toward me and stated, “Zoe Elise Jordan, please recite your vows.”

“Well...” I began, taking a deep breath. “Now that the bar has been raised to impossible heights, I guess I’ll go.”

Everyone laughed, which broke the intensity of the moment and relieved some of the pressure I felt behind my eyes. I was fighting a losing battle against crying, but the laughter gave me a brief reprieve.

“No, but seriously, I won’t even try to compete with Julian’s words because there’s no competition.” I smiled up at him. “Your words are the reason I was more agreeable to going on a show I didn’t watch with a premise I despised. Your words are something special and I had to meet the man behind the lyrics that moved me to tears. I printed out your songs and read them like poems. I saw the poet in you and something happened. It almost felt as if you had lodged yourself in my mind and burrowed yourself deep in my heart. So deep, in fact, that I had to defy everything about my life trajectory and meet you.”

He licked his lips and gave me a glassy-eyed smirk.

“Oh Julian,” I sighed, closing my eyes briefly, allowing myself to be consumed by my feelings. “Then I met you and it was over for me. I didn’t want to admit it, but I fell hard and fast. You are everything people see at face value—you’re devastatingly handsome, you’re extraordinarily talented, and you’re fun and welcoming to be around. At face value, you’re good. You’re a good celebrity.”

I paused, stepping just an inch closer to him. I wanted to see myself in his eyes. I wanted to feel his breath on my face. I wanted to smell his intoxicating scent.

“You’re a good celebrity, Julian, but you’re a great man,” I continued. “I went on a show to meet the good celebrity, the poet, and ended up falling in love with the greatest man I’ve ever known. You’re strong, but not just in physical strength. You’re strong in mental endurance, emotional resiliency, and

in faith. You love hard. You work hard. You can also be hard headed, but that's another story for another day."

He chuckled before bringing my palm to his lips and kissing it softly. The small gesture caused a ripple effect through my belly.

"You encourage me. You challenge me. You push me. You support me. You love me. You make me feel safe." My voice cracked as a few tears fell slowly but surely—not a stream, but one followed by another in unhurried succession. "I will spend the rest of my life adding to your happiness and your success. I will spend the rest of my life being creative with you and celebrating our creativity. I will spend the rest of my life being your advocate, your cheerleader, your rock, your lifejacket, your champion, your love. I will be your everything because you are mine."

I let go of one of his hands and put my palm on his chest, directly over his heart. I could feel the quick beats and I marveled at how they matched my own. "You are home to me and I love you. I can't wait to be Mrs. Winters."

Julian opened his mouth and let out a shuddering breath. His eyes closed and he brought his hand up to cover mine on his chest. I saw him swallow hard a few times. When he opened his eyes, he was unable to blink back the solitary tear that trickled from the corner of his eye.

"Zoe..." His voice was hoarse and had a slight break as he said my name. "I love you."

My heart beat erratically and for a moment, it was just me and Julian. It was just us. My heart was thumping longingly for him more so than it was working to pump blood through my veins. I was his and he was mine.

"That was beautiful, Zoe," the officiant stated. "It is my understanding that rings will be exchanged at an additional ceremony tonight, but what I'd like to point out is that rings

are symbolic. Rings are to advertise your commitment to others. The vows you said to one another speak to your commitment to the marriage and to one another. So, by the power vested in me by the state of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Julian, you may now kiss your bride.”

Julian let go of my hands to wipe my tear-soaked cheeks. I wrapped my arms around his middle while his hands moved from my cheeks to my neck. Settling into their position, he used his thumbs to tilt my head upward.

“I love you, Mrs. Winters,” he murmured before covering my mouth with his.

I instantly whimpered at the intensity of the kiss.

It felt like he was trying to express what he felt for me through his lips. With the soft pressure of his tongue against mine, he weakened me. Butterflies spread across my belly and through my entire body. My legs shook and he untangled his hands from my hair to grip me around my waist. He held me tight, keeping me on my feet, keeping me grounded, keeping me safe. I felt like I was either going to float away on a cloud or melt into a puddle at his feet. With that kiss, he told me how much he wanted me to be Mrs. Julian Winters.

The officiant cleared his throat and I stilled, suddenly remembering the twenty-five close friends and family were seated a few feet away from us. We pulled out of the kiss, stifling laughter as we looked around like we’d gotten caught doing something we weren’t supposed to be doing.

The officiant smiled and turned us around to face our loved ones. “Officially, for the first time, I give to you...Mr. and Mrs. Julian and Zoe Winters.”

Everyone was on their feet applauding as Chele King started singing “Always The One.” We didn’t walk down the aisle as we would’ve in a typical ceremony. Instead, Julian

took my hand and spun me around in a circle before pulling me into him and we danced.

I buried my face into his neck and swallowed the sob that almost emanated out of me as we swayed to the music. I wanted to say so many things to him, but nothing felt like enough. Even if I would've been able to think of something to say to describe how thankful I was, I wouldn't have been able to say it without sobbing. I was beyond happy tears.

“That’s how I feel about you, too,” Julian whispered as he kissed my head.

My body trembled with the effort to keep the emotional outburst at bay. I nodded to acknowledge I'd heard him, but anything else would've broken me down.

“And listen, I won't ever keep anything from you,” he promised softly as his lips grazed the shell of my ear. “I had to contact Lillian to arrange for Chele King to be here. She was recording at Black Hearts Studios New York, but since I paid Lillian to pull some strings, Lillian moved things around so Chele was able to record at Black Heart's California studio.”

“What?” I gasped, my voice barely above a whisper as I lifted my head. Our eyes met and I could see nothing but love and devotion. It took my breath away. He held me tighter as we danced to the slow, yearning melody.

“I'm sorry I kept it from you and made you worry, but I wanted it to be a surprise. I wanted to give you the wedding you deserved. I wanted to give you the wedding we talked about—the small wedding that's just for us, that we don't have to share with the world. This whole weekend has been about what's good for the show and you've gone along with it because I was contractually obligated to do it.” He spun me around slowly when the tempo changed. “So I rented the space and they decorated. I had Beverly let everyone know when they arrived, and I gave Koko money and let your friends pick

out your dress. I didn't want to see this dress because I wanted to be surprised. And I was. You look beautiful, by the way."

My head was spinning. "Julian, this is so romantic. I can't believe you did all this."

"Like I told you before, I would do anything for you. I wanted to give you the wedding you wanted. I wanted to give you the song you wanted. I didn't tell anyone about the Chele King surprise until you made me tell Koko to put you at ease. I just wanted to do everything I could to—"

My mouth crashed into his, interrupting his sentence. The kiss was slow and decadent. I wanted him to know how much I appreciated him, but I also wanted him to know that I loved him more than anything.

"Thank you. I...love...you," I murmured between kisses.

I didn't know when the tears started slipping from my closed lids, but when our kiss went from sweet to salty, I tried to pull away. Julian put his hand on the back of my head and lured me back in.

His lips caressed mine softly as he uttered, "I love you, too." He pressed his forehead against mine. "And you don't have to thank me. This wasn't just a gift for you. This was for us."

The final chords of the guitar were strummed and the last note was held for an exhaustive amount of time as our first dance as a couple came to an end.

Our friends and family cheered as we eased out of our bubble and faced them. Each of them had a glass of champagne in their hands. Beverly popped up from behind Julian with two champagne glasses for us.

"To the bride and groom!" Julian's dad called out, causing everyone to cheer again.

We smiled at one another as we brought our glasses together until we heard them clink. I waited until he finished his and then we switched glasses so he could drink mine as well. After a quick round of hugs and well wishes, our beautiful ceremony was abruptly cut short.

“It’s almost two o’clock! We have to leave now,” Koko yelled, looking at her phone. “Bryce just texted me. They are halfway done with the treatment meeting and then they are going to come to the hilltop to film us getting ready. We have to go now!”

Everyone scrambled to pick up their belongings before they headed to the elevator. Julian had arranged for us to ride back to the resort together so while half of the group crammed into one elevator, the other half crammed into the other.

Julian held my hand and took me over to introduce me to Chele and her guitarist. They packed up their belongings while I peppered them with questions. The four of us walked over to the elevator together and I listened with rapt attention as Chele talked about the inspiration behind the song I loved so much. The twist ending to her story came as her town car pulled up to get them.

The love song was written about her guitarist!

We said our goodbyes and before I could express my excitement, the valet pulled up with Julian’s car.

“Are you ready, Wife?” Julian asked me as I finished fastening my seatbelt.

Slipping my hand into his, I looked over at him with an excited grin. “Yes, Husband.”

Julian hit two buttons and music pumped through the speakers. “It doesn’t matter what happens for the rest of the day.” He lifted our hands to his mouth and kissed the back of my hand. “Robert Brady can kiss my ass.”

I tossed my head back and laughed. “As long as he doesn’t find out about today, we should be good.” I paused for a second. “You’re not going to owe him money for violating your contract, are you?”

He smirked. “Well...after my lawyers and my brilliant wife couldn’t find a loophole, we stopped looking and we drafted new contracts for the special. In the new contract, I noticed that the new terminology specifically said we had to have a wedding on January first. That’s it.” He maneuvered around two slow driving cars as he accelerated on the highway. “So, I asked my lawyers to look into it and they assured me that having two weddings on January first didn’t violate the contract. They said we had to get married on the first; they didn’t say anything about multiple ceremonies.”

I sat up with my mouth agape and stared at the handsome man beside me. “Well played, my love. Well played.”

“Thank you. Thank you. Now, we need to talk about something serious.”

My eyebrows lifted.

“You mentioned something about me being devastatingly handsome. I like that and I’d like more information about it.”

I laughed hard.

Chapter 15

I stood in front of the oversized renaissance mirror in the quiet hallway, taking a minute for myself in a lounge area that they'd converted to a bridal suite. I spun around in my gorgeous mermaid style wedding gown with the formfitting white satin skirt. The train fanned out behind me in dramatic fashion. The top was a white lace corset with a deep V-neck design. It was unique, sexy, and elegant, and with my upswept hair and beautifully applied makeup, I felt gorgeous. I was also still riding the high of my real wedding ceremony to the love of my life that had happened three and a half hours earlier.

“You look beautiful.” The deep tenor of his voice cut into my thoughts and startled me.

Is there no security? Can anyone just show up unannounced?

I turned around to find my ex-boyfriend Tate watching me. His eyes glazed over my body before settling on my face again.

I looked around the empty room. Eyeing the door he'd come in and the other door where my friends and family stood guard, I shook my head. “Tate, why are you here? How did you get in here?”

“I wanted to talk to you.” He stuck his hands in the pockets of his black pants. He ambled over to me, staring at his shoes. “Last year a friend had a party here. This was the poker room so I knew about the second door. It leads to the kitchen area.”

I didn't even notice that door was unlocked. That hallway is supposed to be closed anyway.

The building for the ceremony and the building for the reception were next door to one another. The cocktail hour was being held in the winery—in another completely separate building. The entire kitchen area in the ceremony building was closed and should've been blocked off.

“I'm supposed to be in here clearing my head. Alone.” I put my hands on my hips and stared at him.

“This won't take long.” He took a step toward me. “Are you happy? If you're happy, I'm happy for you. I'll move on. I can accept that I blew my shot with you if I know you're happy.”

“I'm the happiest I've ever been in my entire life.” I sighed. “Tate, I appreciate the apology. There was a time I wanted to hear that and felt like I needed to hear it to get past what we had, but that time came and went a long time ago. It's been five years.”

Tate's expression didn't change as he nodded once. “Understood.” He smiled a sad, yet brilliantly white smile. “I just wanted to be sure you were happy.” He stepped back. “I wish you nothing but the best, Zoe. I mean it. You're a good one. Winters is a lucky man.”

Without another word, Tate left the room and I was alone with my thoughts again. I inhaled deeply, calming myself. I wasn't usually nervous to speak in public, but everything felt different in that moment.

It's one thing to do my vows in front of friends and family. It's a whole other thing to do it in front of a bunch of strangers and then have it filmed for the rest of the world to see.

There was a knock at the door. “Hi.” Peri Moore stuck her head in. “They want to get a couple of shots of you alone

while you read this.” She walked into the room. “I was instructed to put this directly in your hand.”

I looked at the white envelope with my name scrawled in Julian’s handwriting.

“Thank you,” I said graciously. “Who wants photos of me reading this?”

“The wedding photographer.”

“Not the show?”

She shook her head. “Not the show.”

My entire demeanor changed. “Oh yeah, send him in,” I laughed.

Peri laughed along with me. “The camera crew is out there waiting though so you’ll probably have five minutes before they want to show your bridesmaids helping you with your veil and then it’s show time. I’ll be back.”

“Thank you.”

The photographer who had also been at the rooftop ceremony entered with a smile. We exchanged greetings and then he started snapping pictures.

I looked down at the envelope in my hand and opened it carefully. The foil-pressed stationery was beautiful, and my skin warmed as my eyes skated over the beautiful words on the page.

January First

Just me and you

Say I do.

Just you and me

Faithfully.

Today

Tomorrow

And for the rest of our life,

I have the honor of calling you wife.

Zoe,

I'd marry you for a third time if I could. My love for you is endless. My commitment to you is forever. And I cannot wait to publicly announce that you're my wife and the mother of my child. In a few minutes, we'll come full circle. The world thinks we met on-air, during the first episode of our session of The One. Everyone thinks our encounter was the moment you walked into the mansion on set. But we know, our chemistry developed during that meet-and-greet cocktail party where you were nice to a busboy named Evan and I was instantly attracted to a woman who admitted to not even wanting to be on the show. We're about to give the world an over-the-top wedding. But we know, our real wedding happened hours earlier with a rooftop ceremony surrounded by our loved ones. Our relationship has its public moments, but we also have our private moments that are just for us. This is the last time we're obligated to give any of ourselves to world. Thank you for joining me on this journey. Being with you is the greatest thing that's ever happened to me. I love you.

Forever and Always

Julian

“That was great,” the photographer said as he walked to the door. “Can I get a picture of the letter over your shoulder?”

I'd forgotten he was in the room. Touching the corner of my eye to make sure it wasn't leaking, I smiled. "No, thank you. It's private."

He nodded with a smile. "Understood."

Opening the door, he beckoned to my best friends, parents, and grandma rushed inside immediately followed by the camera crew. After capturing my mom helping me with my veil and getting one-on-one time with everyone in the room, the camerawoman moved to the corner of the room and waited. I glanced at the clock and knew exactly what they were waiting for.

"It's time," Peri announced as she poked her head in the door. "Let's head out this way."

Koko, Keisha, and Lenny squealed happily and the wedding began. My grandma started crying. My mom and I looked at each other, almost daring the other to break first. When she smiled, I smiled and we wiped the corner of our eyes at the same time.

Life is good.

We relocated to the hallway in front of the main ballroom. No one was allowed in or out so I didn't have to worry about being seen. I hugged Julian's parents and grandma right before my brother and one of Julian's cousins came out the door to usher our grandmas and then moms down the aisle.

Rounding the corner looking like male models, Omar, Scott, and James appeared with Peri.

"You look beautiful," James whispered before kissing me on the cheek. He had his black hair blown out in a way I'd never seen it before; it brushed his shoulders and was perfectly styled.

"Thank you and you look great. You all look like models." I looked back at James. "Your hair is awesome like that."

“Thank you.” He glanced over at Lenny who was looking at him like she was going to rip his clothes off right then and there.

I beamed at them as they were given the signal to start walking down the aisle. I turned my attention to the other two.

“I never really thought of wedding dresses as sexy until now,” Scott joked flirtatiously. “I can see your whole back. I’ve never seen a dress like this in real life. That’s hot, Zoe.”

I shook my head and snickered.

Omar gave Scott a look as he got in position to walk down the aisle with Keisha. “I’m going to tell Julian you’re flirting with his wife.” Omar paused as he saw the camerawoman in the corner. “Soon-to-be wife,” he corrected quickly.

I just smiled. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.

This wedding is for show. I’m already Mrs. Winters.

They joked back and forth before it was time for Scott and Keisha to walk down the aisle. A minute later, Omar and Koko followed.

Peri scurried over, a huge smile on her face. “How are you feeling? It’s almost show time!” She almost skidded to a stop. “Where’s your dad?”

“I’m right here, right here,” my dad responded as he stood from a small bench in the corner. “You were walking so fast, you blew right past me.” He chuckled softly.

The planner looked from me to my dad as she put us into position. “You two seem so calm compared to most of the weddings I did last year.”

My smile grew. “I’m cool, calm, and collected.”

She peered around the corner and gave a succinct nod.

I closed my eyes as Super Casanova started singing a song Julian had written. Even though he had written the song about me, he said it fit best with their three-part harmony so he sold it to them, and it was to be the lead single off of their next album. Dad and I were supposed to come right after the first verse was done.

The double doors opened wide and Dad and I rounded the corner. Even though I'd already married Julian and I truly felt relaxed, I was a bit taken aback by the amount of people in attendance. The entire back sections were full of reality TV show faces—most I didn't know. Cameras were positioned at the end of the aisle, in each corner, and I didn't realize until I had taken a few steps that the camera in the hallway followed us down the aisle.

During rehearsal, we discussed cameras and a large crowd, but I was not expecting this.

From the events over the weekend, I'd guessed two hundred guests would be in attendance. As I made my way down the aisle, clutching my father's arm, I was sure at least four hundred people were present.

Once I finished taking in the crowd, I glanced down the aisle at Julian. The love I felt for him flooded my system and I felt myself heating under his gaze. His beaming smile radiated with adoration that was evident from yards away. I let my eyes slide over his muscular body as he stood in a white tuxedo jacket with black lapels, a black shirt, and black pants.

Holy shit.

Julian had looked good when we married earlier—he always looked good—but in the custom tuxedo that was tailored to the exact specifications of his body, Julian looked like a god amongst men.

As I moved down the aisle to the song being performed live by the band, I couldn't take my eyes off of Julian. I watched

him watching me every step of the way. His eyes traveled up my body and when our eyes met again, he licked his lips and ran his hands over his chiseled jaw.

Even when I should've been paying attention to the pastor as he spoke, I couldn't tear my eyes away from Julian. I just wanted to run up and kiss him. From the way he was looking at me, I wouldn't have been surprised if he was thinking of doing the same.

My dad and Julian shook hands before Julian intertwined his fingers with mine and led me onto the elevated platform. As everyone took their seats, the lighting in the room shifted slightly from a bright white to a soft white.

The pastor stared at us as we positioned ourselves above the microphones that were imbedded on the platform below us. He gave us a warm smile before he began. "All of us here today have our own love stories. Some are short, while others are long. While some of us have love stories that aren't yet fully developed, some of us are just getting back to the good part after a brief hiatus. There are chapters in all of our stories that are sad or disappointing, exciting or full of adventure, rough or challenging. That's what the course of real love is: highs and lows, ups and downs, good times and bad times." He stared at me before shifting to stare at Julian. "And today, we are all here to celebrate an esteemed high, an incredible up, a distinct good time. We're here to witness Julian Winters and Zoe Jordan joined together in holy matrimony."

Someone in the huge audience behind us started applauding which erupted into the entire crowd cheering. The pastor smiled, holding his Bible to his chest as he nodded in agreement. Julian and I looked at each other and grinned. The crowd quieted once the pastor began speaking again.

"Now we'll have two special readings."

I hadn't told Julian I was going to memorize a poem so I was extremely surprised when I realized he'd had the same idea.

The moment the first line of Pablo Neruda's *Sonnet XVII* rolled off Julian's sweet lips, my stomach flipped. I closed my eyes for a second, letting his deep voice bathe me in one of the most romantic poems of all time. I absorbed Julian's voice and those words like it was the moisture my skin craved. When he finished, I licked my lips and smiled.

With the same poem I'd quoted the first time we met on camera, I delivered *Sonnet XI* by Pablo Neruda as if I'd written it myself. As the highly charged poem took on a different meaning than it had almost two years ago, I let my voice lightly float over each gritty word.

Julian licked his lips and I swallowed hard. The poem wasn't lying; I did crave him.

"Pablo Neruda," Julian whispered, just as he had the night of the first Bracelet Ceremony. He smirked.

"Pablo Neruda."

As I got lost in the storminess of his grey eyes, I remembered being so surprised that night that he knew the poem and not being able to do anything but laugh. It had felt so unbelievable that I'd met a man who connected with my love of Pablo Neruda.

I let my eyes close as our faces seemed to float closer together inadvertently.

Our private moment was interrupted when someone said 'aww' and reality struck. My eyes flew open.

We are not just in a room full of people...we are on television.

That realization forced me to bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

“Now the rings...” The pastor looked first at Omar and then to Koko.

The gorgeous white gold bands shined against the Bible’s black leather cover. I picked up Julian’s wedding band and he picked up mine.

“These rings, unbroken circles, represent unending love. As each of you look upon these rings, may you be reminded of this moment and the love you two have promised to one another.”

After reading a verse from the Bible, we were asked to repeat the standard vows. As I listened to Julian repeat his vows to me, I thought about the heartfelt words he’d said earlier in the day. I thought about the way his words touched me, both the ones he recited from the pastor and the ones he spoke from the heart. When asked if he would have me as his wife for the rest of his life, he smiled.

“Yes, I will. Always,” he responded with complete assurance.

The pastor grinned and then turned to me. “Now, Zoe. Repeat after me please...”

I repeated after him and watched as Julian’s eyes danced around my face before lingering on my lips. He didn’t make eye contact until I was done.

“Yes, I do. I will,” I answered breathily before slipping the wedding band onto his finger.

“By the power vested in me by the great state of California, I now pronounce you—”

“Wait!”

The word rang out like a gunshot. Julian and I whipped around quickly as shocked gasps and fraught murmurs rippled throughout the large crowd. Julian's hand found mine as we stared out in disbelief.

Standing in the aisle in a formfitting white mini dress, Leah repeated herself. "Wait!"

I was in shock as my eyes swept the crowd. The people in the back sections were standing and gawking. Phones were out, pictures were being taken, and uncomfortable excitement rippled through as they waited for what would happen next. The people in the front sections were our actual friends and family and they sat, horrified and uncomfortable. Most of their expressions looked as if they were shocked and unsure of what to do next. The camera crews from *The One* seemed to be in sync as two cameras flanked Leah, one camera focused on crowd reactions and responses, and two cameras focused on Julian and me.

Security was moving forward, but it seemed as if someone told them to stop. Both security guards slowed their pace as they stood behind the camera crews closest to Leah.

I kept my composure, not allowing my emotions to play out on my face as I watched Leah make a fool of herself.

"Julian, I love you," Leah yelled as she took a couple of steps up the aisle.

"And I love Zoe. I chose Zoe. I choose Zoe. I will always choose Zoe."

My stomach flipped twice as I squeezed his hand.

"I'm the one for you," Leah argued. Her voice was almost pleading. "I'm—"

She grunted as she was grabbed from behind.

Oh shit!

For the first time since Leah interrupted, I had a reaction. My eyes widened and my eyebrows flew up.

“Is that...?” Julian whispered.

“Yep.” I nodded as I looked on appreciatively.

Leah struggled. “Get your hands off me!”

“Stop! Just stop!” Tate barked as he pinned Leah’s arms at her sides and prevented her from moving closer to the elevated platform. “You’re embarrassing yourself and ruining this wedding. Look at them!” He turned her so she was facing us. “If you’ve been in here this whole time, you’ve seen the way they looked at each other. You know you have no chance.” Tate looked back up at me and a sad smile played at his lips. “No one has a chance with either of them. They’re happy and it’s real. You have to let it go. I’ll walk you out. Let them have their moment.”

The crowd was on their feet with thunderous applause as Tate escorted her out the way she’d come in. I couldn’t tell what was happening as security met Tate at the door to help him with Leah.

“Well!” the pastor exclaimed looking from one of us to the other as we turned to face him.

I glanced over at my bridesmaids and stifled a giggle. Koko had taken off her shoes. Keisha had taken off her earrings. Lenny was cracking her neck.

“Just say the word,” Koko whispered.

“If Tate hadn’t come down to get her, we were going down there after her,” Keisha added just as softly.

Lenny gave me a look. “I’m still considering running down there and kicking her ass.”

Koko stepped back into her shoes. “On sight.”

I let out a giggle before looking back at the pastor, who was thumbing through his Bible.

“I think after what we just experienced, we need to say a prayer of support and protection for this lovely couple,” the pastor quipped, causing everyone to laugh.

After the prayer, he grinned at us. “By the power vested in me by the great state of California, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss your bride.”

Julian grabbed my face gently and looked at me for a beat too long. The energy that moved between us as his face hovered over mine made my breath hitch.

“I love you, Mr. Winters,” I breathed.

“I love you, Mrs. Winters,” he returned even more softly, the last syllable absorbed by our lips touching.

Julian kissed me in a way that caused a rattling in my chest. All of my senses were working in overdrive and I felt everything.

I felt his kiss consume me.

I felt his kiss devour me.

I felt myself drowning in the perfection that was his mouth, his hands, his heat, his taste, his scent.

I felt everything.

And it was perfect.

Chapter 16

With my eyelids shut, I nuzzled my face into the crook of Julian's neck, breathing him in. His cologne mixed with his natural scent creating butterflies in my stomach. I inhaled deeply as my body moved flush against his. With that deep breath, all of my senses were full of Julian Winters. Sight, sound, touch, taste and smell were all immersed in him.

My eyes had feasted on the way his tailored suit fit his muscular body as he eyed me right before we started our first dance. My ears pricked as he quietly repeated the words of his vows, promising to love me unconditionally for the rest of our lives as we rocked back and forth to the music.

In turn, I whispered the lyrics to the song, lyrics that cemented how I felt about him. I took the opportunity to run my hands through his hair, pulling his head closer to mine. Our mouths met intermittently as his hands lingered on my lower back, his fingers splaying out across the top of my ass. The restrained desire of holding back heightened the sexiness of the kiss, the dance, the moment.

I sighed dreamily and my eyes fluttered open as the song came to an end. My breathing hitched as I lifted my head to find Julian staring at me. It wasn't the fact that he was looking at me that gripped my heart and stole my breath away. It was the way he was looking at me—like I was the only one in the room.

“Thank you,” Julian murmured, letting his forehead drop against mine. One hand remained planted at the small of my back while the other came up to stroke my cheek.

The air between us was thick. The longer I allowed myself to drown in his grey eyes, the harder it was for me to breathe.

I tilted my head slightly, moving the tip of my nose against his. My voice cracked. “For what?”

“For changing my life.” He pressed his full lips against mine as he slowly turned us in a small circle. “For being my wife.”

My heartrate sped up and my eyes shut as my lips found his again. Tightening my arms around his neck, my body melted and molded into him.

“I love you,” I breathed between kisses as my lips moved against his.

He slipped the hand that was on my cheek to the back of my neck and deepened the kiss. I moaned into his mouth as I felt his tongue gently nudge mine. Everything faded and nothing else existed except for the two of us. I was lost in the feel of him.

It wasn't the fact that Chrisette Michele's voice softly floated over the beat promising that we'd be together forever times two. It wasn't the fact that we were swaying to the music as a spotlight cascaded on us. It wasn't even the fact that we had promised to love and cherish each other for the rest of our lives in front of family, friends, associates, colleagues, and on a live feed being filmed for the rest of America. It was the fact that the most important thing in the world to me at that exact moment was the safety I felt in his arms, the warmth I felt in his touch, the love I saw in his eyes and the softness in which his voice breathed the word 'wife' to me.

I didn't think love had a taste, but it did. In each decadent parting of my lips with his tongue, I tasted his love for me. I tasted want and desire, but more than that, I tasted adoration and reverence. In each of his worshipful kisses, I was able to savor the sweetness of love and the promise of our future.

Pulling away, I licked my lips as the final chords of the song reverberated through the decked out ballroom. Replacing the beautiful harmonies

“Mrs. Winters...” The carnal grit in his voice was a dangerous mix of hunger and want. “Are you ready to go home?”

Smiling, I opened my eyes slowly.

Tapping his chest right over his heart with my manicured finger, I traced a heart against the lapel of his tuxedo. “I’m already home.” I looked up at him, my light brown eyes boring into his grey ones. “When I’m with you, I’m home.”

Julian had stopped moving. Even though a different song was playing and Peri Moore was speaking into the microphone, I couldn’t focus on anything, but his eyes. I flattened my hand against his chest and it rose and fell in time with mine. His heart thudded in his chest which only caused a stinging behind my eyes.

He rested his forehead against mine. “I will never get tired of hearing you say that.”

“I’ll never get tired of saying it.”

“Hello!” Bryce yelled through speakers, causing a feverish murmur to rip through the crowd and bursting the romantic bubble I was content in.

The attention of everyone in the room shifted from us bathed in spotlight in the middle of the dance floor to Bryce as he moved across the stage.

Unraveling myself from Julian, I looked around in surprise. Julian and I were supposed to cut the cake after our dance and we were explicitly clear with Peri Moore and Robert Brady that we didn’t want any surprises or impromptu speeches. We wanted to knock out our obligations with *The One* early so we could enjoy the rest of the evening with our friends and family.

And even though I liked Bryce, at the end of the day, he worked for Robert Brady and *The One*.

Trying to be discreet, I turned my body into Julian's. "What is this?" I whispered against Julian's jawline. "He didn't mention this to you during dinner, did he?"

Julian shook his head.

After the ceremony and cocktail hour, everyone—guests and production staff—enjoyed a gourmet dinner to kick off the reception. Because we wanted to steal some time to ourselves for our first dance, Peri Moore had Julian's intern Andre, aka DJ Dre, play our first dance song early, catching everyone off guard. The camera and crew members were also eating and they weren't quick enough to get microphones on us before we began.

My eyebrows shot up. "Is this payback for our dance?"

"I have no idea." He paused, scanning the room before he looked down into my eyes. "No, no, no. Bryce wouldn't do us like that. It'll be fine. It's Bryce," Julian assured me, reading my thoughts. His hands skated down the bare skin of my arms before he enveloped me in an embrace.

Just before I closed my eyes, I saw Robert marching over to where we were in the center of the ballroom. He was flanked by two overzealous producers and while the rest of the crowd directed their attention to Bryce, I nuzzled into Julian's chest. I didn't want to deal with the only angry man in the room.

"Then again, it sounds like Bryce is winging it up there and Robert is heading straight toward us..." Julian muttered under his breath.

I wasn't able to turn around fast enough before I heard Robert Brady barking orders.

"We're getting mics on you now! Out of respect for your special day, I didn't interrupt your little dance. But don't try

that shit again. It's time to get this show on the road," Robert hissed, moving his hands emphatically.

The producers quickly attached microphones to our attire in discreet locations as Bryce thanked everyone for being part of *The One* experience.

"What is this? Is this your doing?" Julian asked Robert, gesturing to Bryce on stage. "We didn't authorize this."

Robert gave one curt nod of his head at the producer who was still standing beside Julian. The younger man's eyes widened before he got the message and swiftly left the area.

The small battery pack that was slipped into the back of the corseted bodice of my dress irritated my skin. The producer jammed it between the laces holding the corset together. She whispered into a walkie-talkie before scurrying away behind the male producer who'd just secured Julian's microphone.

As soon as they were well out of earshot, Robert took a step closer. "Of course it was my doing," Robert spat, with a hint of twisted pleasure weaved into his tone. He looked around before lowering his voice. "Per the contract, you wanted some private time, I gave you private time during dinner. But I'm sure you both knew you were supposed to get your microphones on before the first dance. It's mighty convenient that your event planner decided to give my guys the runaround so I had to come in from the production trailer to deal with this unauthorized bullshit myself. America doesn't just want to see the show. They want to hear it too! Don't try that again."

I bit the inside of my lip to keep from smiling. I drew my eyebrows together feigning surprise. "What? Why would—?"

Robert narrowed his eyes and his features darkened. "Cut the shit," he snapped.

"Watch how you talk to my wife," Julian warned.

My head whipped toward him.

Well damn.

My mouth went dry and my chest heaved as I stared at my husband. The protective way he shut Robert down was sexy. But hearing him call me his wife was about to bring me to orgasm in the middle of the dance floor. I licked my lips as I gawked at the man that I married twice in one day.

“And you need to watch how you talk to me, Julian.”

Hearing the sharpness of Robert’s response snapped me out of my lustful gaze. I turned my head back to Robert. My eyes landed on his curled upper lip as he snarled. I cocked my head to the side.

Was the tone and the snarl necessary?

I put my hand on my hips. “Where in the contract does it say we need to account for and accommodate your lack of preparedness? Because if I’m remembering correctly, and we both know that I am, the language expressly states that for all major reception moments, cameras needed to be present.” I lifted my shoulders smugly. “And the cameras were present.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Julian watching me, seemingly impressed.

The three of us stood in silence as Bryce’s charismatic voice echoed through the room.

“...the perfect temperature for a wedding today. Am I right?” Bryce joked on stage.

With the deep shade of crimson illuminating his face, it was clear that Robert was pissed.

“Lucky for you,” Robert growled. “There was an argument breaking out in the hallway so while you two were selling this bullshit in here without audio, I was selling the new season out there.” He paused and as if someone flipped a switch, Robert laughed to himself, slapping Julian’s arm. “And now that your

mics are on, we can catch more of those sweet nothings the audience goes crazy for. Because we're giving the people what they want, you know, per the contract."

"Per the contract, we're only wearing these for an hour," Julian responded, his tone void of amusement.

The contract stated that we had to allow *The One* to film for an hour as long as they were able to capture the major reception moments—the first dance, cake cutting, and bouquet and garter tosses.

"Fifty-nine minutes," I corrected, biting my lower lip trying not to smile.

Julian reached for my hand, pulling me into him. He chuckled, planting a kiss against my forehead. "Tick tock."

Even though Robert smiled, he glowered at us as he backed away. Without a word, he turned on his heel and signaled to someone. Almost instantly, Bryce wrapped up his monologue to animated applause.

"Now if you would turn your attention to the bride and groom..." Bryce directed.

"What the hell?" I muttered through the clenched teeth of a fake smile. My fingers dug into the material of Julian's tuxedo jacket as I felt everyone's eyes, and every camera in the room, on us. "Ummm..."

Julian pulled me in tighter. "Yeah, I have no idea."

We both stood there looking clueless for about thirty seconds. "I thought we were going to cut the—"

My sentence was interrupted by DJ Dre, looping the repetitive chorus of Rihanna's "Birthday Cake."

The "oohs" and "ahhs" from the crowd erupted over the hard-hitting beat as they parted. A man pushing our exquisite

wedding cake was followed closely by our wedding planner. My body relaxed as soon as I saw her beaming face.

She thought of everything!

I didn't want to say what I was thinking since I had a microphone on, but when I looked up at Julian, he smiled back at me knowingly.

"I love you," I whispered giddily.

"I love you, too."

The cake was rolled to the middle of the dance floor so it could bathe in the spotlight with us. After the men and women operating the cameras were in place, the crowd closed in. The radius between us and the four hundred guests of mostly people I didn't know was about five feet. I searched the crowd until I saw my parents, Julian's parents and our actual close friends lining the perimeter. I smiled and gave them an excited wave.

"That came out better than I thought," Julian declared as he stared at the five-tier cake in front of us.

The famed L.A. bakery, Sweet Tooth, had exceeded our expectations when they designed our wedding cake masterpiece. The square layers of cake covered in white fondant gave it the sleek appearance. The edible sugar musical notes were added to make the traditional cake more unique.

I nodded, looking around as everyone seemed to be snapping pictures of the cake. "It's gorgeous and it seems to be a big hit."

I looked up toward our family and friends to catch their reaction only to notice the tail end of them being ushered behind Tori and a few really pretty women that I knew starred in the show, *Hot Hollywood Housewives*.

My head swiveled around and I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up. *Where did our family go?*

Julian picked up the knife to cut the cake and paused, seeming to notice the look on my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Our family.” I only managed to get out two words as I felt the gentle swell of anger and frustration well up inside of me.

“They’re right over...” His sentence trailed off and his eyebrows furrowed as he looked to the section of the crowd where our loved ones were. “They were just over there.”

“Cut the cake,” the event planner urged us with a stage whisper.

I still craned my neck to find our loved ones to no avail.

“Where do you think they are?” I asked quietly, ignoring the planner.

“I don’t know.” His brows furrowed and his jaw tightened. “They wouldn’t have missed this.”

“Smile,” a producer hissed from one side of the cameraman.

“Cut the cake,” the event planner repeated with a little more urgency from the other side of the cameraman.

Julian and I shared a look before I placed my hand over his as he guided the knife through the bottom layer of the cake.

Everyone cheered as we cut into the rich white dessert with the lemon buttercream filling. The slice was placed on a monogrammed plate and we paused, allowing the camera to capture the image. When our eyes locked, my heart thumped.

I forgot that we were in front of a bunch of people. I forgot that we were on camera. I forgot that our family and friends had disappeared. I forgot about everything except for the man that looked at me as if I were the only woman in the world.

My lips parted and I let out a breath. Julian's eyes seemed to hone in on my mouth so I licked my lips.

“Zoe...” The strained tone in which my name rolled off of his tongue made my body react.

I closed my eyes briefly as I pressed my thighs together to dull the ache that he created with just my name.

Shit, I swore internally as I tried to think of places to which we could sneak off without the cameras. He'd just stoked a fire in me that was not going out anytime soon. *This is going to be the longest fifty minutes of my life.*

Julian nodded slowly as if he could read my thoughts. I grinned.

“Less than an hour and then you're mine,” Julian mentioned sexily. He looked around and then smirked.

It wasn't until he broke eye contact that everything came rushing into focus—the music, the crowd, the cake.

I glanced over at the event planner whose eyes were as big as saucers. She tapped at her watch and mouthed the word cake.

With a smile tugging at the corner of my lips, I refocused on the task at hand. I reached onto the plate and broke off a piece of cake.

After breaking his piece and holding it between his thumb and forefinger, Julian licked his lips and lifted his eyebrows. “Open wide!”

I bit my lip to stifle the laughter that bubbled up inside of me. My shoulders trembled unable to keep it together. “I'm not even going there,” I commented with a suppressed giggle.

There was a mischievous glint in his grey eyes as he brought the cake closer to my mouth. “Yes, you will.”

All of the breath left my body. Every single one of my nerve endings were on fire.

Julian chuckled as we fed each other pieces of the mouthwatering cake. The crowd cheered, the music thumped through the speakers, and I could almost feel the wedding planner and producer breathe a sigh of relief as if to say “finally.”

“Mmmm,” I moaned, my eyes involuntarily closing as the flavor coated my mouth. I swallowed. “That is amazing.”

When I opened my eyes, Julian was staring at me as he licked the icing off of his forefinger. Before the wedding planner was able to push the cart away, Julian reached for the cake and dragged his finger across the decadent filling.

“Single ladies? Single ladies? Where are all of my single ladies?” DJ Dre yelled as the music switched to an up-tempo, hard-hitting beat of a song that celebrated female empowerment.

I was impressed that Andre didn’t immediately play Beyoncé’s hit after that intro. When I opened my mouth to make that comment, I was distracted by the icing on Julian’s finger and the look he was giving me.

Even though there was a flurry of movement and the spacious event space was filled with noise, Julian held me frozen in place with his stare. My heart raced.

Without a word, he lifted his finger and trailed the lemon buttercream filling across my bottom lip. With his other hand, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and tilted my head back. The greys of his eyes were darkened and I could both see and feel his desire for me.

There was a distinct throbbing between my thighs as I struggled to breathe normally.

As he moved his face toward mine, I was intoxicated. My eyes shut just as he brought his mouth against mine. He nibbled and sucked my bottom lip and ran his tongue against the sugary lemon filling.

I felt it everywhere.

Kissing him back, I wrapped my arms around him, melting into his hard body. Drunk off of desire, I opened my eyes woozily as I felt him press his forehead against mine. Soft puffs of air breezed over my skin as we stood in silence.

“Lovebirds, are you ready?” DJ Dre screamed into the microphone.

Julian waved his hand in the air dismissively as he kept staring into my eyes.

I put my hands on the side of his face. “I love you,” I giggled.

He grabbed one of my hands from his cheek and kissed the inside of it before reciting Pablo Neruda’s Sonnet XVII.

From deep in my gut, a flurry of butterflies turned into bats. He’d given me butterflies before, but nothing ever like that.

“Oh!” I gasped. My hand flew to my stomach and my eyes widened. “I think the—” I cleared my throat. “I think the poem was really moving.”

“You know I didn’t write that one, right?” Julian joked before seeming to understand what I was saying. “Oh, oh, oh shit!”

I nodded excitedly.

He scooped me up into his arms and spun me around. After putting me down and making sure my feet were solidly on the ground, he yelled to the crowd, “She’s my wife!”

Everyone went wild.

“Have you ever seen two people more in love? Let’s hear it for the happy couple!” DJ Dre called out. After the crowd cheered, he continued, “Now let’s get the single ladies on the floor!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw our family. Shaking Julian’s arm, I pointed excitedly and we jogged over to them. We were barely there long enough to hug them before we were called back onto the dance floor.

The rest of the reception highlights were scheduled back to back—the bouquet toss, garter toss, father-daughter dance, and mother-son dance flew by. The only event that stood between us and the end of our obligation to *The One* was the speeches.

“We have a few people who would like to say a few words about Julian and Zoe,” DJ Dre alerted the crowd, quieting them down from the raucous laughter incited by Julian and his mother’s unconventional dance.

When I saw my mom and dad approaching the DJ booth with Julian’s parents, I grinned even though I knew none of them wanted to do an on-air speech. The wedding planner handed me a glass of nonalcoholic champagne. I rolled the stem between my fingers as I lifted the sparkling cider toward my beautiful mother as she held the microphone.

“Hello,” Elise Jordan greeted the crowd. “We are the parents of the bride and groom.” After everyone finished clapping, my mom turned to us and continued. “We got together the other night and discussed how we’ve never seen either of you as happy as the two of you are when you’re together. Remember that. Hold on to that. They say that reality TV couples don’t make it. And that’s true. But you two aren’t a reality TV couple. You two aren’t the byproduct of a manufactured romance. Zoe, Julian... you two are a real couple who met and fell in love on TV. But the real romance wasn’t when you were on the show or even the years you’ve

had together. The real romance was today. The commitment to choosing one another every day for the rest of your lives is romance. We love you both individually and as a couple. Congratulations!”

My mom lifted her glass as the rest of our parents shouted out well wishes, congratulations, and I love yous.

The guests applauded as they left the DJ booth to embrace us.

Next, Omar approached the stage, flanked by James and Scott. The catcalls and shouts from the women in the audience overpowered any other sound in the room. It was so loud that Andre had to make an announcement to quiet down.

“Hi, I’m Omar—”

They squealed.

“I’m James—”

They shrieked.

“And I’m Scott—”

They screamed.

Omar, James, and Scott were undeniably good-looking and in their tuxedos, they looked like the ad for some high-priced clothing line. But the crowd reaction was a bit of an overreaction. I looked around Koko to see Keisha and Lenny’s expressions. I started to crack a joke, but my brother interrupted me.

“Had I known this was going to happen, I would’ve gone up there with them,” Zach quipped.

Julian and I chuckled.

“Thank you for the warm welcome,” Omar started with his mix of humor and graciousness. “We aren’t going to take up much time. We just wanted to come up here as a group to say

congratulations. Julian has been my best friend since he moved to California eighteen years ago. We met Scott freshman year in high school and we met James junior year in college. There are a lot of stories we could tell, but since this is going to be on national television, we decided to save those for later.”

Omar smirked as everyone laughed. “Julian is a good man. He’s one of the best men I know and I’m honored to stand up as his best man today. I know he will be a good husband because there is nothing he wouldn’t do for that woman right over there. Zoe, I knew Julian was in love the first time he told me about you. I was a bit skeptical because it was a reality show and let’s face it...” He lifted his hands and shrugged. “The track record isn’t so good.”

The audience laughed again.

“But I reserved my final verdict because we’d never heard Julian talk about a woman like that before. I know I’d never heard him more sure about anything in his life. But again, it’s a reality show.” He paused. “But the moment I met you, I knew I was looking at my best friend’s future wife. And seeing you two together, there was no doubt in any of our minds that our best friend had found what he was looking for. So Zoe, thank you for being the best thing to ever happen to Julian. To the happy couple!”

I clanked glasses with all of those around me before I brought my sparkling cider to my lips. My eyes watered a bit. Not because I didn’t know that Omar and the guys loved me for their best friend, but because I was so happy to be surrounded by so much love.

Julian dropped his arm around my shoulder and a kiss against my forehead. I looked up at him and grinned in response.

I heard James and Scott take turns saying they loved us and congratulations before the three of them exited the stage to the same enthusiastic catcalls as they entered.

Koko slapped me on my ass and by the time I looked over my shoulder to where she was standing, she was making her way on stage. I peeked over at Lenny and Keisha to see if they were going on stage with her, but neither of them moved. They just flashed me huge smiles.

“Good evening, everyone!” Koko chirped out to the crowd after a thunderous applause. Her delicate features showcased her happiness to both the moment and the response she’d just received. “As some of you may know, I’m Koko...the maid of honor and best friend of the bride. I’m not going to bore you with all the details of how we became best friends when we were thrust together as roommates freshman year of college. I’m getting the stink eye from the planner so I know I have to keep this short and sweet.”

I laughed and looked around for Peri who was standing near Koko’s parents, grinning from ear to ear. She didn’t know Koko at all before the wedding weekend, but there was an odd excitement about her expression.

“...the best friend in the entire world. We are kindred spirits. We are sisters. So I knew that Zoe and Julian were meant to be long before today. Zoe’s mom, Elise, said it best earlier. People fall in love every single day. But when I’m around Zoe and Julian, it’s more than that. There’s a genuine sense of belonging and commitment. They belong together and are committed to one another. It’s one thing to feel that for your partner, but it’s another thing when you can feel that from a couple. Zoe, Julian... I’m so happy to witness your love as it has continued to grow and evolve. I’m so happy for you both.”

Koko swiped at the corner of her eye at the same time I swiped at mine. The three speeches had taken their toll and

another tear threatened to drop, but I brushed it away quickly.

“Now raise your glasses... my best friend, my sister is married to the man of her dreams. And my brother-in-law just upgraded his life by marrying a queen. Now drink up bitches!”

Everyone cheered and celebrated with drinks and since it was the last speech, Andre was supposed to start playing music. I looked at the producer next to the closest cameraman in hopes of signaling to him that Julian and I needed our mics removed. But DJ Dre didn't start the music.

“Koko!” a male voice shouted out. “Koko!”

Everyone quieted down and had their heads on a swivel. I kept my eyes on Koko who seemed to be looking directly at the person who was screaming her name.

Koko squared her shoulder so she was her full five feet and nine inches in height. Her porcelain complexion was tinged pink and her lips puckered into a bow. She was nervous.

With my eyes still glued to the stage, I slipped my hand under Julian's jacket and removed his battery pack. I turned slightly so he could do the same for me. We turned them off and then removed the microphones that were clipped to us. Sharing a confused glance, we returned our eyes to Koko.

“Koko!” Bryce repeated, his voice unmistakably distinct in the almost silent ballroom.

“You are the most amazing woman I've ever met. I know we work together. I know it's complicated. But what's not complicated is that I love you.”

A collective gasp traveled through the room.

My empty hand flew to my chest.

“Kumiko Liane Green, I love you and I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier,” Bryce declared as he moved to the DJ area. He ran his hands through his blonde hair. “I used to think I didn't

want to be with anyone, but you changed that. You changed me. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry about the misunderstanding, but believe me, that's all it is—a misunderstanding. I want to be with you and only you. I love you. Please forgive me.”

Julian was on his way back from handing over our microphones to a producer. His eyes were glued to Koko and Bryce as he walked toward me. While all eyes were on the action on stage, my eyes traced the strong jawline and Adonis-like profile of my husband. Julian Winters was not only the sexiest man in the room. He was the sexiest man in the world.

To me anyway.

At that moment, he looked at me and warmth coated my insides. My heart constricted as if reminding me that I was in the presence of its mate. I let out a sigh from deep within me once he wrapped his arm around me, pulling me into his side.

“Please say yes, Koko,” I whispered, looking up in quick prayer to God.

I believed Bryce. I'd believed Bryce since I spoke to him on the phone in her trailer. Hearing what he said to me and the way he said it to me, I couldn't see him throwing what he had with Koko away for someone who we all knew was an opportunistic fake.

“What?” Julian asked, his lips brushing my earlobe and sending a chill down my spine.

My words faltered as I explained myself. “I was praying that Koko says yes.” I moved my head so that our foreheads touched. “I want her to let go so she can be free to feel what it is I feel every time I'm with you.”

The corners of his mouth turned upward slowly. “What is it you feel when you're with me?” He asked.

I was quiet as I got lost in his eyes. I placed my hand over his heart and waited for him to do the same. His breathing matched my breathing. My heartbeat matched his heartbeat. And deep in his eyes, I saw happily ever after.

“I feel a love that’s so big and all-encompassing that I feel powerful and powerless at the same time,” I murmured as our noses touched. “I feel like I’m home. I feel...”

Capturing my mouth with his, Julian interrupted my sentence with a tender kiss, causing me to feel faint. I gripped the front of his tuxedo as he took his time exploring my mouth with his own. The kiss was tender and worshipful. He deepened the kiss, causing me to moan lightly into his mouth.

We’d kissed a lot over the course of the day—during the ceremony, during pictures, during cocktail hour, and during dinner especially. But we kept the kisses ranging from rated G to rated PG-13. Mostly it was due to the cameras and the four hundred guests, but also because kissing Julian was a gateway drug. It would start off innocent enough, but it would always lead to me having R-rated thoughts. And if I heard him moan, the thoughts would exponentially turn X-rated.

I pulled out of the kiss before things went too far. Our faces were an inch apart and as much as I wanted to continue kissing him, I felt my self-control slipping. If I was being honest with myself, my thoughts had been R-rated since the first wedding ceremony.

Nothing gets me hot and bothered like a surprise wedding.

With us no longer kissing, the sound of the crowd cheering and musical instruments cueing up alerted me to the fact that something had happened.

I turned my head slightly and saw Koko and Bryce looking lovesick as he held her lovingly. Next to where they stood beside the empty DJ booth, Super Casanova was set up and started playing one of their hit love songs.

“Zoe,” Julian growled my name roughly against my ear, pulling my attention back to him. “I’m supposed to sing a song that I wrote for you.”

Aww!

“Oh my God.” My heart swelled and I knew I was officially swooning. “Really? When?” I asked between kisses of appreciation and love that I peppered onto his face. “That’s so sweet.”

“After this song.”

“I—”

“But we’re leaving now,” Julian interrupted, the demanding urgency in his voice was doing something to me.

“Why? I love hearing you sing.”

He discreetly pushed his hard dick against me. “Because I can’t think of anything other than fucking my wife,” he uttered sexily.

My panties were instantly soaked.

“There’s a room on the second floor.”

His words reverberated through my body and I gripped his shoulder to keep my legs steady.

Nodding, I replied, “Let’s go.”

We mumbled an excuse about an interview before scurrying away. Julian tucked me under his arm and we snickered on our way toward the door.

“Where are you two headed off to in the middle of your reception in such a hurry?” My grandma asked, stepping directly in our path.

She and Julian’s grandma appeared seemingly out of nowhere, both with a hand on one hip and a wine glass in the other.

We stopped in our tracks. My eyes widened as I positioned myself slightly in front of Julian, blocking any bulges that might have been noticeable.

I thought they were standing near Zach and his girlfriend on the other side of Julian's parents. I felt my forehead crease in confusion. Where the hell did they come from?

“Hey...” I replied in a voice higher than my natural tone. I stretched the word out as I glanced up at Julian. “Are you two having fun?”

“Not as much fun as you two,” Julian’s grandmother joked with a wink before lifting her full wine glass. “The way you two have been canoodling, it looks like you two are off for a little reception sex!”

“They wouldn’t do that!” My grandma chastised, her hand flying to her chest. She gawked at her before shifting her gaze to us. “You two wouldn’t have sexual intercourse at your reception? While the guests are here?”

She is literally clutching her pearls.

“You know who had sex in the broom closet at their wedding reception?” Julian’s grandma exclaimed as she looked at my grandma. “Ellen on *As The Days Get Restless*. She had sex with Marco, the best man. The things she did...oh my! My second husband used to get me to sneak into closets too. Do you remember that episode?”

“Do I remember? It was the episode that made me...” She looked at me with a wink. “Well let’s just say my husband, may he rest in peace, had a great afternoon.”

Julian and I groaned in unified disgust.

Yuck! No one wants to think about their grandparents getting it on. No one.

“What?” Julian’s grandmother feigned surprise as she patted her fine grey hair. “We had lots of sex back in our day. That’s the secret to a long marriage. Lots of sex. My feet barely touched the floor in the sixties. The trick—”

“Grandma Pearl!” Julian scolded sharply.

I felt the corners of my mouth set in a semi-permanent frown as I shook my head.

As our grandmothers giggled, I felt the wrinkle in time. I felt the exact moment in which I dried up completely and my sex drive did a disappearing act.

“Thank you! I’m Hayden and this is Londyn and Marshall. And we are Super Casanova!” Hayden called out from the elevated platform where they performed.

The crowd screamed, pulling our attention away from the sex lives of our grandparents. Julian and I turned toward the stage and clapped. I peeked over my shoulder and saw our grandmothers chatting happily.

“Hey,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around him. I looked deep into his eyes, twisting my pursed lips into a rueful smirk. “Looks like I will be hearing you sing tonight after all.”

Julian scoffed, running his hand up and down my back before resting it on the curve of my ass. “It’s probably for the best.”

I nodded. “I’m going to need at least an hour to get that conversation out of my head.”

“You?” He glanced over his shoulder. “My dick died back there. Right after my appetite. It was a one-two punch.”

My shoulders shook as I did my best to hold in the deep chuckle that threatened to burst out of me. “I don’t ever want to think of my parents or grandparents doing the same thing we were on our way to do.”

“Grandma Pearl just said—” He put his hand over his mouth and made a distressed noise. “She said something about a trick and I think I blacked out.”

We had to hold each other up from laughing so hard.

“Oh there they are!” Londyn waved from the stage as we struggled to pull ourselves together. “We’ve had a lot of talented writers and producers work on our albums. But one of our favorites to work with is Julian. We’ve grown up in the industry together and we’ve become more than just collaborators. We’ve become friends. And anyone who has had the pleasure of getting to know him or listening to his music knows that there’s only one Julian Winters.”

Everyone in the room, including me, screamed at the top of their lungs and applauded. As I cheered, Julian grinned at me like I was the only fan he needed which only made me giddy.

Marshall flashed the room his trademark smile. “Julian was helping us put together one of our most successful albums when he was contacted about a little show on network TV called...*The One*.” He paused as the hollers and shouts from former contestants intensified. “Well when our friend appeared on it, we thought it’d be good for him to meet someone. He works so hard. Thought maybe he’d come out of the situation with a friend, maybe a girlfriend. But we didn’t seriously think he would find love. But when we saw Julian and Zoe together for the first time, we knew he’d found her.”

Everyone cooed in response. Julian’s arm tightened around me and I looked up at him. Just hearing someone else tell the briefest version of our story gave me butterflies.

“Follow me,” Julian whispered, kissing my forehead.

“Anywhere,” I answered as our fingers intertwined and he pulled me toward the stage.

We stopped next to Koko who was standing beside the stage steps.

“...and because of that, it is even more special that we are here to sing backup as our friend, Julian Winters serenades his wife, the beautiful, brainy, and brilliant Zoe Jordan.”

Julian kissed me softly before he made his way up the platform to thunderous applause and catcalls.

My fingertips immediately brushed over my lips, savoring the feeling of his kiss. I tilted my head to the side as I watched his sexy ass greet his friends on stage. When he turned around, I took a moment to appreciate the way his tuxedo was tailored to his muscular body, the way his smile lit up the chiseled features of his face, and the way his eyes penetrated the room. He slipped on a guitar that looked similar to the one I gave him for Christmas and brought the microphone to his lips. His eyes found mine causing my breath to falter. My heart skipped a beat just watching him on stage in his element.

“How’s everybody doing tonight?” Julian asked, smiling wide. Once the cheers died down, he continued. “It’s good to see you all here. Thank you for being here to celebrate with me and my wife.”

The cheers were loud, the flashes of light were bright, Koko bumped me with her hip and it all barely registered as my eyes were glued to my husband. I knew I probably looked like a lovesick puppy and the cameras from *The One* were catching every pining glance. But I didn’t care. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him.

“I love you, Zoe.” Julian licked his lips and flashed a panty-melting smile. “While on tour, I wrote a lot. Poems turn to songs turn to musical love letters to listeners. But this song is different. It’s a musical love letter that’ll eventually be available to listeners, but was written exclusively for Zoe. I

never told her about it because I was waiting for this day to surprise her with it. Anyone mind if I debut it here?”

The reception guests didn't stop applauding until Julian started strumming a simple beat on the guitar.

I stood in stunned silence as a swarm of butterflies ricocheted against my chest cavity.

Julian leaned into the microphone. “This is for you, Zoe. It's called ‘The One.’”

My stomach flipped. And then flipped again.

I put my hand flat across my belly in an attempt to calm the sensation, but it was useless.

Julian was sexy—that was undeniable. But when he was on stage, it was like he owned the room. He commanded attention. I was only vaguely aware that there was no additional sound or movement as everyone was captivated by what was happening on stage.

The simple beat was slow and rhythmic. People started snapping along. His grey eyes were cast downward as his fingers danced across the strings of the guitar. He closed his eyes and let his music consume him as Super Casanova joined in with their instruments, filling out the sound.

Once we were lured in with the melodious beat, Julian's sexy voice softly began.

“I've been searching for you
Not literally but lyrically
Writing songs about love
Always written hypothetically.
Met you by chance
Can't explain how you affected me.

The thing about love

It happens unexpectedly...”

Julian’s smooth vocals floated over the music he created with Super Casanova. His talent was evident. His gift was obvious. But the emotion that emanated from his voice and the lyrics that were specifically meant for me brought tears to my eyes.

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry, I repeated silently as he immortalized our love in song.

I felt his love for me through the words. I felt his love in the beat. I felt his love in the way he would look directly at me and into my heart as he poured his heart out on stage for me.

As the song started to come to an end, I realized that I had tears running down my face. I wiped them away quickly, determined to keep it together.

Julian took off the guitar he was using and as Super Casanova continued to play his song, he strolled off of the stage.

With each step he took, my heart felt like it was in my throat. My belly tightened with so many emotions as I stood frozen waiting for Julian to reach me near the bottom of the stairs. As he got closer, my lip and then my body started trembling. Two pent up, hormonal, happy tears trickled down my cheeks as he approached me. I quickly swiped them away.

Stopping less than a foot away from me, Julian’s expressive eyes took me in. My chest rose and fell in time with his as I made my move. He’d just cemented his love for me in an art form that would live on well after our deaths.

The romantic notion of that made my throat burn with unshed tears.

I stepped toward him, closing the gap between us. I placed my hands on his cheeks and saw the effect my touch had on him. He wrapped his arms around my waist as our lips met. The sweet kiss was salty with my tears, but he didn't seem to mind as he deepened the kiss. When I pulled away fractionally, our lips hovering, our foreheads touching, our breaths mingling, I lost it.

“I love you, Julian Evan Winters,” I whispered against his lips as the tears started falling. “I've loved you for almost as long as I've known you. And I will love you for the rest of my life.”

Unaired Wedding Special Footage

January 1st

6:43pm - Cocktail Hour

Interview Room

“I’m tired of doing these promo interviews. Is it seven o’clock yet? I’m ready for reception. All of this fake ‘I’m so happy for Zoe and Julian’ bullshit is putting me to sleep,” Pepper complained quietly. “We’re missing the action. I hope they haven’t dragged Leah’s crazy ass off of the property yet. I really want to get an interview.”

“Leah’s probably in debriefing. This is the last interview with people from Julian’s season and session. Robert said he just wants congratulatory soundbites for the promos and a quick ‘where are they now?’ angle. We’ll be out of here in five minutes if we play this right,” Joe explained in a whisper, even though Pepper was right there when Robert Brady gave them the assignment.

Pepper made a gurgling noise in the back of her throat. “Fine.”

Producers Joe and Pepper looked behind them and waited until cameraman Miguel gave them a sharp nod. Once they got the signal, they turned their attention to the three women sitting on the couch in front of them. Knowing they were just below the camera’s lens, producers kept a notepad between them to pass messages back and forth so interviewees wouldn’t hear them.

Pepper tapped her pen against the notepad, signaling to Joe to ask the first question.

Joe shook his head, making his dreadlocks swing, but he obliged. “Hi, ladies...I’m Joe, this is Pepper and we’re just going to ask you a few questions. Sorry about stealing you away during cocktail hour, but you’ll be done with us before the reception.” He paused. “So, what brings you this weekend?”

Tori tucked her bleached blonde hair behind her ear as she flashed a smile almost as bright as the shiny silver dress she wore. With an earnest look, she leaned forward. “I came because I wanted to see Julian and Zoe tie the knot. I’m so happy for them. They make the cutest couple.” She glanced over at Tiffany and Ana, her blue eyes lighting up with inner deviousness as she scoffed. “I’m just kidding. I don’t give a damn about their wedding. I’m only here to promote my new show, Hot Hollywood Housewives.”

Tiffany’s mouth dropped open as she shook her head. “Wow, Tori.” Uncrossing and then crossing her legs, the emerald green dress with the hip high slit exposed her creamy pale thigh. Looking directly at the camera, she continued, “I’m here because I like weddings, vacations, and good looking men. Zoe and Julian seem like the real deal so I’m happy for them.”

Ana nodded in agreement. “I’m here for the wedding.” Her thick Romanian accent was as striking as her dark hair and flawless skin. Wearing a low cut dress, Ana flipped her silky tresses over her shoulder and gave a smoldering look to the camera. “And for the men.”

“Ana, do you mean the men in attendance or the men who work on the show? Joe, watch out—Ana might fuck you for more screen time.” Tori’s snarky comment caught the room by

surprise as she laughed. Seeming to notice no one joined her in amusement, she stopped. “What?”

“Are you serious?” Tiffany whipped her head to the right and glared at Tori. Her face reddened and almost matched the deep crimson of her hair that was pulled into a high bun on the top of her head. “You said you weren’t doing this bullshit anymore. But whenever a camera is around, you’re back at it. You’re not this person. Stop being a bitch.”

“What?” Tori threw her hands up and let them fall to her lap loudly. “It was a joke! And it’s not like it was a secret or anything. Everyone knows.”

Ana’s pretty face twisted into a scowl. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Tori quirked her eyebrow and made a face at Ana. “Okay, Ana.” She turned to the camera. “Ana doesn’t know what I’m talking about so I guess she didn’t sleep with a producer to try to win the competition and get Julian.”

Tiffany, positioned in the middle of them, looked from left to right before settling her eyes on Tori. “What’s your problem? We’re supposed to be here having a good time. Downstairs, twenty minutes ago, you just said—”

Ana patted Tiffany’s knee. “No, it’s okay. Tori wants to make a name for herself as a reality TV bitch. I see her for the fame-whore that she is.” She folded her hands in her lap and turned her body so that it was angled in their direction. “Tori, you’re really concerned about what’s going on in my life, but you should be worried about your own. I saw some of your fellow castmates from the Housewives show in the winery. They all seemed to actually have husbands. Where’s yours?”

Tori narrowed her eyes. “You’re one to talk. Your desperate ass can’t keep a man or a job. And who’s watching your kids? You keep dumping them on other people for this.” She gestured to the cameras. Sitting back as if she knew she had hit

a nerve, she added, “Ladies and gentlemen...Mother of the Year.”

Writing ‘too far’ on the notepad, Joe’s eyes pinged between the two women. He braced himself for a fight that he’d ultimately have to stop.

Pepper nodded, sloppily adding ‘hate her’ to the notepad. She seemed simultaneously pissed and riveted by the action.

Ana stood, her compact body billowing with tension. She had a death grip on her tiny clutch and a death stare directed at Tori. The anger thickened her accent. “You bleached blonde bitch, you take that back.”

“Or what? You’re going to hit me? You are such a great role model for your kids,” Tori baited cattily. “Great job teaching them to be jealous and desperate—you drop them to chase men who don’t want you and fight women who are prettier and more successful than you.”

Tiffany scooted to the edge of the couch, her hands up to keep Ana from jumping on Tori—even though Tori deserved it.

Ana took a noisy breath as she muttered something in Romanian. “You’re not worth my time or energy. You’re as fake as your tits.” Tossing her hair over her shoulder, Ana removed her microphone and dropped it on a table as she walked out.

“Can you believe her?” Tori hissed, staring at the doorway with her mouth agape.

“Her? You’ve got to be kidding me!” Tiffany scooted into the seat that Ana vacated, staring straight ahead. Her eyes bounced from Joe to Pepper. “Are there any other questions?”

Tori’s face scrunched up in confusion as she stared at Tiffany. “What? That’s the most interesting thing she did on the show. I’m not judging her for being slutty—but that

doesn't change the fact that she's a slut. It's not like I'm lying on her. It's the truth. You know it's true. They know it's true, too." She gestured to the producers who sat in shock watching the interview dissolve into trashy reality TV gold. "What's your problem? This isn't any different than what we said on the show."

"Yeah, but we're not on the show anymore. It's been two years and you're almost thirty now. This isn't high school or *Mean Girls*." Tiffany rose to her feet, unclipping her microphone and dropping it on the table beside Ana's. "You're too old to be acting like this."

"And you're too old to pull off that dress." Tori retorted.

Tiffany shook her head. "Grow up."

The door slammed behind her.

"Well, I guess it's just me now," Tori commented haughtily. She repositioned herself in the center of the couch and crossed her long, thin legs. "It's probably for the best. No one probably remembers who they are anyway."

"I think we've got everything we need," Joe concluded quickly. "Thank you."

"Wait," Pepper interjected, putting her hand on top of Joe's as he started to grab the notepad between them.

Joe's eyebrows furrowed as he stared at his producing partner. In turn, Pepper winked and nodded slowly.

Joe sighed and shrugged. "Go ahead."

Pepper's smile stretched across her face as she trained her eyes on Tori. Joe knew that look so he tapped the paper between them as he wrote 'don't do it.' She ignored him and scratched her temple.

"Tori," Pepper started sweetly. "You're on the show *Hot Hollywood Housewives* and as it was mentioned, you're not

married. How did you manage to get that gig?”

Joe underlined his message three times, but Pepper continued to ignore him.

Tori’s smile dimmed a bit and a worried crease faintly appeared between her eyes. “I earned it.”

“You earned it?” Pepper asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Yes. I earned it. I auditioned like everyone else,” she snapped, squaring her shoulders and standing. “That’s it for now. Thanks.”

“You certainly did earn it.” Pepper leaned forward, going in for the kill. “Fucking Robert Brady for a spot as a mean girl on his new show seems like a fair trade off.”

Tori’s chest heaved as she glared at Pepper. “No. That didn’t happen.”

“I’m not judging you for being slutty—but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re a slut. It’s not like I’m lying on you. It’s the truth. I know it’s true. You know it’s true.” Pepper gestured beside her. “Joe and Miguel know it’s true, too. It’s not a secret and it’s definitely the most interesting thing about you.”

Hearing her words being thrown back at her seemed to catch Tori off guard. She swallowed hard. “It’s not true. I didn’t—”

Pepper stood up. “You should’ve made sure you were alone and checked the next room before begging to suck his dick for the part. You think you had it rough? I was stuck in my office, trying to work while some reality TV has-been tried to stretch her fifteen minutes of fame into a full half hour.”

Tori froze.

“Yeah, exactly. So think about that before you start spilling people’s secrets and slut-shaming other women for doing

practically the same thing you did.” Pepper pursed her lips and silently dared Tori to say anything in return. “You can leave now.”

Joe and Miguel looked at each other with wide eyes.

Tori didn’t utter a word as she hustled out of the room.

“Well damn, Pepper,” Joe commented as soon as the three of them were alone.

“I told you Pepper was crazy,” Miguel laughed, running his hand over his bald head before breaking down his camera equipment. “Sheesh.”

Pepper smirked as she put the notepad into her shoulder bag. “I hate girls like that. My best friend in high school was a bitch and I’m a bitch, too, so that was fine. The problem was that she was a mean girl and I didn’t realize until it was too late. I told her that I’d had sex with the foreign exchange student after track practice.” Pepper shook her head. “That bitch told everybody and it followed me to college.”

“Why?” Joe asked as he made his way to the door.

“Maybe she liked him and never told me. I don’t know. What I do know is that if someone thinks of you as a friend and trusts you with a secret, you don’t publicly shame them and you definitely don’t do it on TV.”

“I’ll never understand women,” Miguel chuckled.

Pepper looked over her shoulder at him. “Women don’t do things like that. Girls do.”

“Oh shit.” Joe waved Pepper and Miguel through the door. “It’s seven o’clock. We need to get down to the reception if we want to eat and be ready for the first dance.”

January 1st

7:03pm - Reception

One hundred feet from the back entrance of the reception building

“Pam, are you ready? She said she won’t leave until you talk to her. We need this interview and we also need to get back to the reception if we plan to eat,” Axel explained, a little annoyed that he was paired with the naïve, wide-eyed new producer. “Do we need to wait for Joe or Pepper? They just finished up.”

While Pam paced in front of him, he chewed on his toothpick and stared at her ass. Although he didn’t think she was cut out for the puppet mastery of being a producer, Axel didn’t mind the view.

“No, no. I can handle this.” Pam rolled her shoulders back and cleared her throat before turning to face her producing partner. “Let’s do it.”

As Pam walked over to the edge of the road, Axel waved over the camerawoman and waited for her to catch up. “Sydney, we’re ready.”

“About damn time,” Sydney muttered as she hoisted the large camera onto her shoulder.

“Pam’s the only person she’ll talk to. And if she does well with this, we won’t have to babysit her anymore. Then we can pick up where we left off, sweet cheeks.” Axel slipped his hand over Sydney’s round ass and squeezed.

“That was a one-time thing. Grab my ass again when I don’t have my camera, you’ll lose a limb,” Sydney snapped as they saddled up to Pam. “We’re rolling in five...”

Axel smirked, running his hand over his thick black beard. “Four...three...two...one...”

“Hi Leah,” Pam started in her sweet voice. “What happened back there at the wedding ceremony?”

Leah Trotter delicately brushed invisible debris off of her short, white dress with her manicured hands. Her wavy, light brown hair seemed perfectly styled as it cascaded past her shoulders. Even though the temperature had started to drop, her long, toned legs were bare and ended in an incredibly high pair of heels.

“I was manhandled by that New York General running back! That’s what happened!” She looked off into the distance. “Well I guess better him than one of those Neanderthals that the resort calls security. Did you know they banned me from the property? This was not supposed to happen! Does Robert know that they’re treating me like a common criminal?”

“I’m sure he knows about the incident,” Pam offered.

“What?” Leah screeched.

Pam swallowed hard and looked to Axel, who was quiet as he tossed his toothpick.

“He may not know.” Axel scratched his beard. “He’s a busy man.”

“What are you even doing here?” Leah spat, giving Axel a dirty look. “I told you when you hit on me earlier to go to Hell.”

“Well darlin’, if I’m standing here with you, clearly I’m already in Hell.” Axel’s lips turned upward into an easy smile.

“Axel!” Pam chastised, swatting in his direction.

“Screw you,” Leah hissed.

“You wish, little rich girl,” Axel baited, riling her up.

“Get him out of here!” Leah screamed at the top of her lungs. “I don’t want to fucking see him! Get him out of here!”

Lifting his arms up in surrender, Axel started to back away. “Pam, you got this?”

Pam looked like a deer in headlights, but she nodded. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“I’ll give you five minutes and then I’m coming back.” Axel winked at Leah who rolled her eyes. He turned on his heel and paused beside Sydney. “Please tell me you got that,” he whispered.

“Every last word,” Sydney whispered back. “Nice work.”

“Thank me later with that pretty little mouth of yours.” Axel strolled off toward one of the production trailers before Sydney could respond.

Pam looked over her shoulder. “He’s gone. Let’s talk. What happened?”

Wiping her flustered face, Leah let out a loud, exasperated sigh. “I was invited to the wedding by Robert and he told me that Julian and Zoe were going through a bit of a rough patch and she convinced him to marry her. I thought he was full of shit, but then he said that Julian had his people contact him for my new number. I didn’t believe him at first, but then... I don’t know.” She lifted her shoulders. “It’s possible. I mean, look at me. I’m gorgeous. I’m cultured. I’m intelligent. I’m the type of woman that men like Julian gravitate toward. I even look like his ex.”

Pam nodded, acknowledging both Leah’s beauty and striking resemblance to Lillian.

Leah put her hands on her hips. “Robert led me to believe that Julian was just looking for a way out, any excuse not to get married. And I figured, even if it was bullshit, why not?”

Pam's eyebrows relocated to the center of her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Julian embarrassed me. If he knew he was going to pick Zoe, he should've just said that." Leah looked down and for a moment, a flash of vulnerability graced her features and her tone softened. "I really liked him. I liked him a lot. And when I made it to the final two, I really thought he was going to choose me. We have a lot in common. We've traveled to the same places. We move in the same circles. We had a spark—there was something between us."

"Oh...okay." Pam nodded slowly.

"We did. We had a spark," Leah argued. She rolled her eyes and let her head drop back. "Yes, I get it. I've seen the way he looks at Zoe." She lifted her head back up and looked at Pam and then Sydney behind the camera. "But there was a time when he looked at me like he liked me. There was a time when he said things that led me to believe he would choose me. And maybe it was a game for him, but I let my guard down and my feelings got involved. And then he embarrassed me. So when Robert told me that I should come to the wedding, I figured, why not? I could come here today and either Julian would leave Zoe for me or I'd finally get him back for hurting me."

Pam's hand went to her chest, over her heart. The recent heartbreak she'd experienced made her susceptible to the hurt in Leah's voice and the pain in her words. Although Leah was snobby, entitled and manipulative, her actions made a little more sense.

"I'm sorry," Pam murmured sincerely.

"Once I got here, I realized that Julian wasn't interested in me. I saw the way he looked at her and I knew. He was..." She paused and licking her lips. "He is in love with Zoe. Fine. That's fine. But why should he get off so easily for hurting and embarrassing me on live television?"

Pam nodded. “An apology would’ve been nice.”

“Exactly! I tried to ask him for an apology at the meet and greet on Friday and he dismissed me. I gave him an opportunity to apologize on Saturday night and he had me kicked out. I just wanted an apology, some sort of acknowledgement that my feelings mattered. So I told Robert and he suggested I do something big. I said, ‘Like interrupt the first dance or the cake cutting?’ and he suggested that I interrupt the ceremony. I thought that was too far. I wanted to ruin their weekend, get in Julian’s head. But interrupting the ceremony? That seemed over the top—especially since Julian clearly planned to marry Zoe. But Robert reminded me of the way Julian kicked me out and embarrassed me in front of the world. He said that he would make sure it came off as a bold, romantic gesture as opposed to psycho. He said he had my back because Julian was the most difficult bachelor to work with and he felt blindsided by him too”

Pam glanced back at Sydney. “So what did Robert say when you talked to him after the ceremony?”

“He wouldn’t see me. He had an assistant tell me that he was busy, but he would call. Security has required me to stay one hundred feet away from Zoe and Julian. The Villas tried to ban me, but I called my father so that’s not happening.” She shook her head and dropped her face into her hands. “It wasn’t supposed to play out like that. I was supposed to feel better. I was supposed to feel vindicated. That was the only reason I came out here. But...I just feel like I’ve been victimized all over again.”

Pam twisted her lips sheepishly. “If it’s any consolation, I understand that mindset.”

“Me too,” Sydney added from behind the lens.

Leah wiped underneath her eyes and then ran her fingers through her hair. “You know how it is when you have feelings

for someone and they hurt you on a normal day. How do you think that would play out if you were being watched and recorded? Secluded from everyone you really know and love? What if it happened in front of an audience? That's the trouble with these things. Everyone thinks they know what they'd do if they were being filmed during some of the most emotionally draining times of their lives. But no one knows until they're going through it."

"That's true. I know I wouldn't want to be followed with a camera twenty-four hours a day," Pam agreed.

Leah let out a deep breath. "Well that's all I wanted to say. I just wanted to explain myself. If they are going to make me look like I'm some lunatic, at least they should get the story straight."

Pam nodded.

Leah started to turn to head to the black town car that waited for her down the short path to the main road. Looking over her shoulder, she gave a small smile. "This show calls me crazy, but never mentions that they drove me there."

Without another word, Leah's heels clicked down the well-lit path. Pam and Sydney silently watched as she disappeared into the car and then drove off.

Pam's black shoe toed the ground in front of her. She heard Sydney packing up her camera but still didn't look away from the spot where the black town car was parked.

"They're not going to air this footage, are they?"

Sydney waited until Pam turned to look at her with her big doe eyes before she answered, "No."

January 1st

9:37pm - Reception

West Wing of Reception Venue

“What you did back there doesn’t change anything. You’re still an asshole,” Koko pointed out as she walked out onto the large veranda on the west wing of the building.

Tate was leaning over the railing with a tumbler of amber liquid in his hand as he gazed over the elaborately manicured grounds. He looked over his shoulder at the striking beauty who managed to pull off blue hair. Lifting his glass in salutation, he turned his entire body around to face her.

“I guess I deserve that,” he agreed with a nod.

Koko crossed her arms over her chest as she gave her best friend’s ex-boyfriend a once over. “What are you doing here?”

“I was invited.”

“Not by the bride or the groom. So again, I ask: what are you doing here?” Koko took another step forward.

Tate raised his glass to his lips and threw it back quickly, emptying the contents into his mouth. The liquor burned going down as he loudly exhaled after the large shot.

After placing the empty glass on the ledge, Tate stuck his hands in the pockets of his pants. “I came to see if Zoe was happy.”

Koko pursed her lips as her stare became lethal. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Yes. I’m very serious.”

“You didn’t give a flying fuck if she was happy when you proposed to her without a ring, telling her that the ring would come at graduation and then breaking up with her in front of

everyone after hooking up with some groupies. You basically said ‘fuck her happiness’ when you got selected in the NFL draft and you completely blew her off.” Putting her hands on her hips, she took another step forward. “So why now?”

“I love her,” Tate answered simply. He shrugged. “I love Zoe.”

“Well, you had her and you thought you could trade up with groupies.” Koko let out a scoffing laugh, tilting her head to the side. “That’s the thing that guys like you don’t understand. You had a woman who supported you and loved you for exactly who you were and you let her go for some ass. Now look at you.”

“It wasn’t that cut and dry,” Tate argued.

Lifting one of her hands as she shook her head, Koko silenced him. “You don’t get to say that, Tate. You didn’t see the damage that you did. You didn’t see the trust issues that you caused. You didn’t see the wall she put up so no one would get close. You didn’t see any of it because you were off fucking anyone who would give you attention for being a football player. But I was there. And as much as I hated you for hurting her, you and I both know you did her a favor.”

Tate rolled his shoulders back and licked his lips. “I deserve that.”

“No, you deserve worse than that. And not even for what you did, but for how you did it. You didn’t want to be with her, fine.” Koko shrugged. “But you didn’t have to cheat on her. You didn’t have to embarrass her at a party you invited her to. You invited her to a party where you were fucking other women and when she arrived at the party that you invited her to, you broke up with her in front of everyone.”

Tate shook his head, casting a glance up into the sky. “I was young and dumb. I’d just gotten signed and I let—”

“You let your dick make your decisions for you,” she interjected, finishing his sentence. “You hurt her because you’re weak. But know this: she didn’t shed one tear for you. Your foolishness made her stronger and kept her single longer so she could end up with the man she’s supposed to be with.”

He lifted his hands in surrender, visibly irritated. “I get it.”

“No, I don’t think you do. Showing up here was not cool, dude. Not at all. You—”

“I said I get it,” Tate snapped in frustration. “She’s happy. She’s with him. She chose him. I fucked up. I messed up a good thing. I won’t find another Zoe Jordan and it’s my fault!” Tate’s deep voice rose with each sentence, echoing out into the night. “Is that what you want? Is that what you want to hear?”

His chest rose and fell angrily as he came to terms with the facts he’d just yelled out loud.

Silence stretched between them as they eyed each other with the same mutual frustration due to their love of Zoe.

With a slow nod, she was finally able to let go of her anger toward him. “Yes, it is.”

Tate scrubbed his face with his hands. “How long have you been waiting to say that?”

Koko moved toward him. “Maybe five seconds after you broke up with her at that party. I pulled up as she was leaving. The only reason I didn’t go in there to kick your ass was because she told me not to.” She poked him in his chest. “You avoided a beat down.”

Tate chuckled to himself. “You’ve always been violent.”

“And don’t you forget it.” She lightly punched him in the arm. “Now that I’m speaking to you again... Thanks for walking that bitch out earlier. She avoided a beat down, too.”

He laughed harder. “Well when I saw the show’s staff not doing anything, I thought stopping her from ruining the wedding was the least I could do. I mean, I did come here hoping to steal the bride.”

“And now you’re destined for a life full of the groupies and gold diggers you wanted all those years ago.” Turning in her gown, she started walking back into the building with Tate following behind. “As my grandma always says, there are even bugs that eat knotweed.”

Tate’s face scrunched up in confusion. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Koko gave Tate a look over her shoulder. “There’s no accounting for taste.”

Epilogue

Winters is Coming

“We have to keep it down if we don’t want to be caught,” Julian whispered as he palmed my ass and backed me into a small, dimly lit studio.

“I’ll be quiet,” I promised, running my fingers through his black hair which had grown longer.

He only let go of my ass to lock the door behind us and then he pulled me flush against him again. His lips brushed against the shell of my ear. “You are so beautiful...and sexy...” He moved his lips down and then back up my neck, nibbling along the way. “And you taste so good.”

I sighed as his mouth covered mine. “It’s been too long,” I whispered between kisses.

Unzipping his jeans and pushing them down, I ran my hand over the bulge in his boxer briefs. Reaching inside, I wrapped my fingers around his girth. It was hot and heavy in my hand. I squeezed gently and relished in the feeling of his body reacting.

“Zoe.” He exhaled my name with so much want that I started to throb with need.

I stroked the length of him. “We don’t have much time.”

With a sharp intake of breath, Julian grunted, moving my hand and backing me against the wall. I gasped as I hit it with a thud. Our lips connected in a series of heated kisses. “They can wait. I’ve missed you.” Pulling my tight magenta dress

over my hips, he slipped his fingers inside my black silk G-string. “Shit...”

“Yes,” I murmured against his lips as the pads of his fingertips slipped easily over my clit. “I’ve missed you so much.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, Julian parted my full lips with his tongue and kissed me hard and deep. He pushed his finger all the way inside me causing me to cry out. “I can tell. You’re soaking wet.” Spreading my wetness around, he added a second finger and then let out the sexiest groan. “I’ve missed that sound.”

The sheer pleasure of his fingers inside me was too much. When he pulled out, I whimpered.

Putting his forehead against mine, his grey eyes stared into my brown ones. “I need to be inside of you. Now.”

“Yes, please.” I bit my lip, hiding my grin. “I can’t guarantee I’m going to be able to keep quiet,” I admitted as I slipped off my G-string.

Running his hand along the full length of his dick, Julian’s gaze raked my body hungrily. When our eyes met, he licked his lips. “I can guarantee you won’t.”

Leveraging me against the wall, he grabbed the back of my thigh and lifted my leg. Using his thumb, he caressed my clit, driving me crazy. He kissed me deeper, allowing our tongues to caress before he started teasing me.

My breathing became labored. “That feels so—”

We moaned in unison as he eased the head of his dick inside me.

“I’ve been...” His words and breathing faltered as he slowly inched his way inside me, stretching me out. “I’ve been going crazy without you...”

I couldn't even respond. My nipples were so hard, they hurt. Rotating my hips, I pulled his mouth to mine and kissed him with a passion that had built up for the last three months. I felt his fingers dig into my skin as he struggled to pace himself.

Without warning, he thrust into me and I let out a loud noise that was part gasp and part groan. My heart thumped inside my chest cavity and my knees buckled.

"That's it... that's it..." Julian coerced my first orgasm out of me, catching me by surprise. "Shit."

My head jerked back, hitting the wall hard, but I barely noticed as pleasure pulsed through me. My new angle propelled my breasts upward and Julian slowed his thrusts to catch my nipple between his teeth. The wet, hot heat of his mouth permeated the jersey knit dress, sending a shockwave of desire to extend the orgasm.

Breathing heavily, I lifted my head to find Julian staring at me with a mixture of love and lust. He had stilled himself for a moment before slowly starting to work his way into me again.

"I needed that," I huffed, rotating my hips to meet each stroke.

Julian exhaled roughly. "I needed to see that. The way your body responds..." He licked his lips and started to increase his pace. "I almost came watching you."

"Oh yeah," I murmured. His words caused me to tighten around him which in turn, seemed to spur him on.

He took in a sharp breath. With his eyes shut and his bottom lip clamped between his teeth, I saw the strain on his face as he was holding his release back. The sight of him struggling to hold it together almost broke me apart. Every single one of my nerve endings burned for him and I felt my second orgasm building right there.

"Julian," I whimpered, clutching him.

“Fuck, that’s sexy,” he grunted, ramming me against the wall. “Say it again.”

“Julian,” I repeated, needier than before.

Because I was—in that moment, I needed him like I needed air to breathe.

“Shit...sa-say it again.”

“Julian...oh!”

Holding me steady and fisting my hair, Julian drove himself into me over and over again. The sound of Julian forcing his way in and out of my wetness echoed in the silent room. My panting grew louder and more insistent as he grunted with each powerful stroke. My orgasm built quickly and as much as I wanted to hold out and savor it, it was a losing battle.

I lost it.

I dug my nails into his shoulders, screaming as I clamped down, writhing on him. My mouth fell open and my toes curled inside of my five inch heels.

“Fuck!” Julian growled before crashing his lips into mine.

His kisses were a mixture of reckless abandonment and uninhibited hunger. His strokes and breathing were erratic and chaotic. And at some point, he lifted my other leg and fucked me senseless against the wall.

Deep guttural groans reverberated throughout the room as Julian exploded inside me. I shuddered as he filled me up.

We huffed and puffed into each other’s mouths as we caught our breath. Our kisses, and our heart rates, slowed down as we disengaged.

Julian gently lowered me to the ground, making sure I could stand before letting me go. Dropping his forehead to mine, he didn’t just stare at me, he stared into me.

The spark of emotion he managed to ignite lit up every inch of me. After all this time, he still managed to give me butterflies.

I reached up and touched his face, brushing my lips against his. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he replied. Taking the paper towels we’d grabbed on the way into the studio out of his pocket, he cleaned me up.

I stepped into my panties as he pulled up his pants. There was a bathroom down the hall, but we’d have to walk across the main entryway to get to it. We inspected each other to make sure we were presentable before we exited. After a quick trip to the bathroom, we strolled down the hallway, back to the party, hand-in-hand.

“Well, well, well...” Koko startled us from behind just as we were going to cross the threshold into the party. We turned toward her voice, waiting for her to catch up.

With her midnight blue hair that transitioned to brighter blue hues as it got to the ends, Koko stood out. But it was her laugh that always got my attention first. Since we met ten years ago, my best friend’s laugh was usually the best way I could find her in a crowd.

Julian and I started laughing as she tried to glare at us from the other end of the hallway.

“Hey!” I greeted her with over-the-top excitement.

“Mmm hmmm,” she pursed her lips as she gave us both the eye. She looked at her watch. “Twenty minutes is a mighty long time to go get a diaper bag.”

Having no response, we snickered.

Julian kissed the back of my hand. “I should probably run to get the diaper bag.”

I nodded, still amused. “Yeah, probably.”

“Fortunately for you,” Koko continued. “Beverly had the spare key and I was able to get it from the car. I figured since you two haven’t seen each other in months, you weren’t coming back anytime soon.”

“Thank you,” we said in unison as we laughed.

As she saddled up to us, the cutest little boy in the whole world lifted his head off of her shoulder and smiled at me. I reached out for him. With dark curly tufts of hair, light brown eyes, and naturally tanned skin, Evan Jordan Winters reached out for me.

“Mama!”

Koko looked down and pouted. “Ohhhh, okay! After Auntie Koko feeds you and lets you throw her phone across the room, you are just going to leave me as soon as you see your Mommy and Daddy?”

Evan twisted his body and stretched his little fifteen month old hands out and I scooped him up. “You have fun with your Auntie Koko?”

He smiled and cooed nonsensical words as I smothered him with kisses. Seeming to sense his dad, Evan whipped his hard head around, hitting my chin.

Damnit that hurt!

“Dada,” Evan exclaimed, attempting to leap out of my arms.

“I’m old news it seems,” I joked as I handed Evan to his beaming father.

“Not to me.” He winked at me before giving his undivided attention to our child. “Hey Buddy, I missed you...”

Julian and Evan walked ahead of us. Watching my husband in his tight white shirt that stretched across his muscles was already a sexy sight. But watching my husband interact with

our child was one of the sexiest things I'd ever seen—right up there with watching him on stage or reading any of his poetry. The things that made him a great man were the same things that made him a great father.

I sighed happily. “Thank you for watching Evan while we... took care of some things.”

Koko swatted me away. “You know I'm happy to watch Evan anytime. It's good practice.” Looking down, she put her hands on her belly. “Can you tell?”

Because Koko was naturally so slim and her clothing tended to be formfitting, it wouldn't be hard to tell she was showing a small baby bump. But in her strapless black mini dress with pockets, no one would notice.

“Your secret is safe and you look beautiful so win, win.” We stood at the entranceway of the party. “You're glowing.”

“You also look beautiful. And you have a glow as if you were just bumping uglies with Julian Winters.”

My head fell back and I laughed. Koko's gasping giggles only extended my amusement.

“You crack me up. I miss you.” Turning, I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her tightly. “Why'd you have to move so far away?” I playfully whined.

Koko ended the lease we'd had on our apartment when she'd moved in with her boyfriend in the spring. A few months after they'd moved in together, she was a few months pregnant.

“I'm only an hour away.” She squeezed me and rubbed my back. “But I hate that it's in the opposite direction of your job now.”

“I know!” I exclaimed. “That's what I mean. In the apartment, when you were off and home, I looked forward to

our lunches twice a week.”

Looking around the room at our guests, I noticed a handsome face staring over at us.

I smiled at him.

“He loves you,” I said as he started to approach us from the opposite side of the room. He’d only gotten three steps before getting stopped by Julian’s assistant, Beverly Davis.

“I know.” Koko was quiet. “I love him, too.”

“I know. You two need to talk about this.” My voice was gentle as I knew it was a sensitive subject.

“I don’t know what else there is to say. He told me he doesn’t want to have kids,” she reminded me. “And with all of the birth control we’ve always been careful to use, Peanut still made it through. I know he has a right to know and I’m going to tell him. But if he puts me in a position to choose, I’m choosing Peanut.” Her voice broke at the end of the sentence causing me to embrace her with more force.

“I know, Koko. I’m sorry you’re going through this, but you’re not alone. You have me. I just wish you would tell him so I wouldn’t worry so much about you—especially with us not seeing each other as often. Look at the way he looks at you. I don’t think you have anything to worry about, but I get it. This is a lot to process. Anything you need—room, board, hand-me-downs—I got you. But you’re going to start really showing any minute now. You can’t rely on kimonos and baby doll dresses to hide you away forever.”

“Whatever, dude. I look hot in kimonos and baby doll dresses so I’m wearing the fuck out of them until my due date,” Koko giggled. “And I can hide mine for at least as long as you hid yours.”

“I’m a lot curvier than you so it was harder to tell,” I argued with a chuckle. “And the people I work with at the firm are

very involved with themselves. By the time I was really showing, I'd already been there for long enough that firing me—the only African American female lawyer at the firm—for a sexist reason would've raised some eyebrows. And I know the laws they'd be violating to try to fire me.”

Koko laughed.

“I had to hide mine for survival. You work with JJ who loves you and supports you. And you're really slim and you stand really close to people all day applying their makeup. People are not going to keep believing that that's food.”

Our hug had turned into a means of support as we laughed heartily and held each other up. Switching the subject as Bryce came close, we let each other go.

“I didn't get a chance to say this earlier, but I love what you guys did to this place—great colors and style choices.” Koko was talking to me, but staring at Bryce.

Julian's expanded, state-of-the-art recording studio, Winters Wonderland, was launched the summer after Evan was born. With large windows, hard wood floors, and enough room for album release and listening parties, the lobby was the perfect location for Julian's surprise birthday and welcome home party from his summer tour.

“Yeah, she's right,” Bryce agreed, smiling dotingly at Koko. “We had a lunch meeting with the bachelors for the upcoming sessions and the bachelorette for the summer session the other day. One of the bachelors is an executive for a big music magazine and he said Winters Wonderland is the next big thing.”

“Did you tell Julian that? That's awesome. Thank you both.” I let my eyes scan the room until I saw Julian laughing with Scott and Andre. I smiled. “All compliments for the success of Winters Wonderland go to Julian and his hard work. I can only take credit for helping with some of the décor.” I

pointed around the corner to my huge corner office. “Bryce, did I tell you that I’m going to be working here full-time as in-house counsel starting in January?”

“Yes, you may have mentioned it a time or two,” he laughed. “But you didn’t mention Evan getting so big. It seems like you were just pregnant.”

“He’s growing so fast.” With a quick glance at Koko, I added, “I was pregnant and then he was here two seconds later. And now he’s a toddler. It all happened so quickly.”

Oblivious, Bryce just smirked. “Evan is a cute kid. You two did good.”

“Thanks.”

“Speaking of kids...” Koko started, turning toward Bryce. “Can we talk?”

My heart started pounding with nerves and my face froze. I was pretty sure I said goodbye before I fled the scene, but I couldn’t be positive. Even though in my heart I knew Koko was going to be fine, I was so nervous for her. I knew she didn’t want to have to choose, but she would. I also knew that if it didn’t work out with Bryce, she would probably give up on relationships for a very long time.

Please God, let this work out in her favor.

“That’s a hot little dress for someone pushing a stroller,” Lenny commented, smacking me on the ass.

I turned with raised eyebrows and smacked her ass in return. “That’s a hot little dress for someone who is over her ex-boyfriend.”

She pursed her lips as she tried not to smile. “I am over James and he was never my boyfriend.” She paused. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to remind him of what he’s missing.”

“The only reason you two aren’t together is because he took that job in Seattle last year. That doesn’t mean you don’t still have feelings for him. And it’s clear that you do.” I looked her up and down with a nod. “You look hot.”

Lennon wore a fitted black and white polka dot dress that hugged her body sexily. Her brown hair was hanging in loose curls around her shoulders. Bright red shoes and lipstick completed the look against her honey-toned skin.

“I’ll always care for James, but we ended over a year ago. By the way, since you brought him up, is he here?” Lenny asked in her best effort to be nonchalant.

“Yes, I saw him when we first arrived, but then we left out to...” I let the sentence trail off and wiggled my eyebrows.

She laughed. “I get it. Trust me.”

“But we could head over and ask Julian,” I offered.

“Sure. And just so you know, I’m dating someone so I’m not looking for James for any reason except normal curiosity.”

We started walking toward Julian who was standing with James, Omar and Keisha.

“Who are you dating? You didn’t tell me that a couple of weeks ago!”

“Yeah, it kind of just happened. It’s weird. I don’t know. The whole dating the boss thing is...” She interrupted herself and looked at me. “I’m dating Ethan.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What? Ethan Diaz? Owner of Breakers Bar, Ethan?”

She nodded, scrunching up her nose. “Weird, right?”

It was more shocking than weird. Lenny always said that Ethan wasn’t her type and Ethan said the same about her.

More proof that anything can happen.

“I’m shocked, but I think it’s great! He’s a nice guy and he’s cute and he’s a really good person. It’s only shockingly weird because of how you were adamantly opposed to the idea of dating him three years ago.”

“I know. Tell me about it. But one day, we were putting bottles away in the stock room and he brushed by me and I don’t know what happened.”

The look on her face told me she knew exactly what happened.

“Well good for you, Lenny!” I gave her a squeeze as we continued walking. “I’m happy for the two of you.”

As we got closer to Julian and his friends, I felt Lenny’s uneasiness.

“I haven’t been around James since we broke up and the thing with Ethan is still really new,” she whispered as she clutched my arm, pulling me to a stop. “Don’t let me fuck him.”

I would’ve laughed if Lenny’s eyes weren’t pleading with me. I could see that she was serious.

“I like Ethan, but James was like my kryptonite,” she admitted in a hushed tone. “I wanted James to see me and want me, but I don’t actually want to fuck him. I mean, I do, but I know I shouldn’t because I want to see where this goes with Ethan.”

I nodded. “I understand. I can’t stop you from doing anything you don’t want to do, but if you stay in my line of sight, I’ll give you a nonverbal pep talk.”

“It’s not me that needs the pep talk...” She pointed downward and gave me a look.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I got you. Just stay away from situations where it’s just you and him. And don’t talk about

anything sexy.”

She nodded as we approached the group.

“Mama!” Evan cheered when he saw me, but he still clutched to his dad’s neck.

I understand, baby. With my arms holding on to Julian, I leaned in to kiss Evan’s chubby cheek. *I’m the same way with your dad, too.*

“My turn,” Julian stated before I moved out of his personal space.

I planted a lingering kiss on his lips.

“My turn,” Keisha called out, causing everyone to laugh as we hugged. I hugged Omar and James next.

“So what’s new? What did we miss?” Lennon asked after giving a quick hug to everyone in the group.

“Julian was telling us that he had no idea about the surprise. I thought I’d blown it when we talked a couple of days ago, but he had no idea,” James answered her, staring with obvious interest. He seemed to realize what he was doing and shook himself out of it. “He didn’t think twice about me saying I’d see him soon.”

“In my defense, my birthday is tomorrow. I figured, we were going to do something for my birthday sometime this month,” Julian replied before looking at me. “No wonder you were on my ass about missing my flight on Saturday.”

The Winters Is Coming tour was over Friday night, but due to a New York meeting Saturday afternoon, he wasn’t scheduled to be home until Saturday night. The meeting went well and Julian scored the contract to collaborate with two of the biggest musical artists of our time. But the meeting went so well that it ran longer than expected and he missed the flight. He wasn’t able to get home until three o’clock Sunday

afternoon. His late arrival only left time for him to shower and change before we needed to get on the road to the surprise party.

I smiled up at him. “I wanted you to have a nice ‘congratulations on your world tour and happy birthday’ party and I was scared you were going to miss it. People traveled from near and far to be here.”

“Yes, Julian. And if you didn’t show up, I’d expect to be reimbursed for my travel. Driving that long, arduous hour on a Sunday afternoon was really difficult for me,” Bryce noted jokingly as he appeared next to James with Koko in tow.

I tried to read Koko’s facial expression, but she refused to look my way. My stomach knotted.

I hope the conversation went well. Please let it have gone well.

“...with Omar,” Keisha announced, excitedly to the group.

Everyone with glasses cheered. Those without offered their congratulations.

Crap! What did I miss?

I looked at my beautiful friend with the dark, shoulder-length hair, dark brown eyes, and rich brown skin and she glowed. Not just because she wore a white dress that made her look like she was a sexy angel. She had the kind of inner glow that—

She’s pregnant?!

My mouth dropped open as I looked at her with the thrill of exhilaration pumping through my veins. “Are you—?”

“Going to start a nonprofit together!” Keisha nodded excitedly.

“Nice! Congratulations!” Not the news I was expecting, but I recovered quickly.

I was happy that they planned to help underprivileged youth together in San Diego. I was excited that they were excited about their joint venture. But Omar and Keisha were perfect together and yet, they made every excuse known to man to downplay what they felt for one another.

In every way, they were a couple. But if put on the spot and asked, they said they were taking it slow—they had been taking it slow for the last year and a half. I loved Keisha and Omar together and although neither of them was dating anyone else, they wouldn't admit to being together.

At our March girls' night out outing, almost six months prior, Keisha drunkenly admitted that she was in love with Omar. When I asked why they weren't officially together, she said that relationships end so if she never gave in and established a relationship, what they had wouldn't ever end. The conversation broke my heart and the next morning, she didn't remember saying it and she didn't want to talk about it again.

"Where's James?" Lenny asked, causing the conversation to halt. "I meant, Scott." Her cheeks heated as James ogled her from across the circle we'd created. Tearing her eyes away from James, she looked at me. "Where's Scott?"

I discretely put my hand on Lenny's back and gave her a reassuring pat. Clearly, she had James on the brain. "I'm not sure. I know he's here though."

"Scott is talking to a modeling agency outside," James answered even though Lenny still refused to look his way.

"Modeling agency? He's a model now?" Julian seemed surprised and his eyes lit up. "And that asshole always called me the pretty boy." He laughed. "Good for him!"

"He didn't mention it when I called to confirm that he was coming today. He only said that he was bringing a guest," I

recalled as I pursed my lips. “And now that I think about it, he never said who his guest was.”

“Probably that new girlfriend of his,” Keisha speculated. “Omar was working out and I picked up his phone and Scott told me he had a new lady in his life.” She shrugged. “He told me I’d meet her tonight.”

“So does no one know who he’s dating?” Koko asked, scanning the group. Everyone shook their heads.

Bryce had an odd smile on his face. My eyes narrowed as we made eye contact and his smile grew. “Bryce...”

He chewed his bottom lip nervously, as if he were put on the spot. Relief relaxed his features. “Ask him.” He nodded his head toward the door where Scott was finishing up a conversation with my parents and Julian’s parents.

With olive skin, hazel eyes, and short brown hair, Scott looked the part of a model in his polo shirt and jeans as he strutted across the room toward us.

“Getting ready to take over the catwalk, I see.” Lenny whistled as he joined us.

He looked at Omar. “That’s why I can’t tell your ass anything,” Scott laughed, punching his arm good-naturedly.

Omar chuckled. “It wasn’t me.”

James nodded. “It was me. It’s my fault. That’s on me, man.” He looked at Lenny. “I was distracted.”

“He’s still distracted,” Omar pointed out, causing both James and Lenny to laugh awkwardly.

“Speaking of distractions, Scott, word on the street is that you have a new girlfriend and no one has met her,” Koko blurted out.

Scott eyed us all with a wolfish grin. “You’ve met her. You know her. You just haven’t met her as my girlfriend yet. We’ve

been dating for a couple of months now. Wanted to keep it quiet to see how things progressed and things are going pretty well.”

“Please don’t say it’s Mya.” I clasped my hands in prayer.

Mya and Scott were hot and heavy for a solid month and then things took a turn when her ex-husband appeared back in her life. She and Scott hadn’t been dating long so she waffled back and forth between them until Scott ended it. Scott took a break from dating and was not interested in the idea of getting serious with someone for a long time—until now.

“No, it’s not Mya,” Scott responded with a shake of his head. “It’s—”

“Dinner will begin in five minutes. Please find your seats,” DJ Dre called out from the DJ booth, interrupting Scott’s announcement.

None of us moved.

“Who is it?” Julian asked.

“Tell us!” Lenny demanded.

“The suspense is killing me!” Koko clutched her chest dramatically.

Everyone else was silent, waiting with baited breath.

I wanted to know just as badly as everyone else, but the chefs had started cooking at the serving stations and between Julian’s late flight and an active toddler, I didn’t get a chance to eat all day. The aroma that permeated the air smelled so good, it was distracting.

“Hey! What are you guys doing?” Bailey asked as she walked up with my grandma.

The blonde bombshell had her thick hair pulled up into a high bun and she wore a sexy blue dress that matched her

eyes. I hadn't had a chance to see Bailey all summer because of her show so it was a pleasant surprise to see her.

"I'm going to find my seat," my grandma announced without slowing down. "Bye kids!"

"Bye Grandma!" I called after her with a laugh.

After everyone greeted Bailey, I threw my arms around her. "Hey! I didn't see you when you came in. Your RSVP card had a big question mark and a happy face so I wasn't sure if you were going to make it."

Bailey laughed loudly. "Ah! I forgot about that. I sent that as a joke, but I meant to follow up and tell you I was coming. But I've been distracted with work and other stuff. And then as soon as I got here, I spilled wine on my dress and your grandma came out of nowhere like a fairy godmother and helped."

"Well I'm glad it worked out. I can't even tell you spilled wine anywhere," I mentioned, eyeing the dress as she turned around. "But I can tell you've been doing something. Your legs look great!"

"Thank you! I've been working out a little harder these days."

"I need the guest of honor and his crew to also be seated so we can open the serving stations," DJ Dre joked from the DJ booth causing everyone to laugh.

"Why are you guys just standing around?" Bailey inquired with her hands on her hips. "I'm starving."

"We're waiting for Scott to tell us who his mystery girlfriend is," Omar answered, giving Scott a look.

"Oh that's easy." Bailey shrugged. "I saw them making out outside."

“Scott, if you don’t tell us, Bailey will,” Koko threatened with no ounce of intimidation in her voice.

“Bailey, come tell me who you think it is in my ear and then if you’re right, you can tell them,” Scott offered.

“I don’t have time for these games,” Bailey sighed as she walked over to him.

She whispered something in his ear and Scott blushed.

Well damn. Bailey must have seen more than she let on.

Scott cleared his throat and nodded. With his cheeks still pink, he was grinning ear to ear. “Okay, we’ll say it at the same time.”

“One... Two... Three...” They said in unison before turning toward each other and kissing like two horny teenagers.

I gasped in surprise before breaking out in a little excited dance. “I love this!”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“How long has this been going on behind our backs?”

“Oh my God! Seriously?”

We threw questions at them as we made our way to our table.

As I sat down, my son finally wanted some Mommy time. But I had resigned myself to the fact that Evan believed that if he couldn’t have what was on my plate, neither could I. Shaking my head, I kissed my sweet little boy’s face and could see that he was winding down.

After a prayer over the food and a thank you to everyone who showed up, I sat in quiet contemplation as people ate their appetizers and went back up for seconds. Since I was seated and everyone seemed to be making a bee-line for the tomato

and basil bruschetta appetizer, I happened to catch a private moment not meant for anyone else's eyes.

Koko was walking back to her table, which was empty except for Bryce. Before she had a chance to sit down, he grabbed her hips, pulled her to him, and kissed her belly. He looked up at her and I don't know what he said, but the look on her face was about to make me cry. She nodded as she stroked his hair and then he kissed her belly again. He stood and kissed her lips and then they walked together to get in the long line for the bruschetta.

What the hell is going on? Why is everyone in the bruschetta line? There's a taco station, for goodness sakes!

Julian leaned over so that his lips were on the shell of my ear. "It's small pieces of toast with diced tomatoes. I don't get it."

I turned my head slowly, my heart skipping a beat. "Right?" I sighed. "God, I love you."

He kissed me on the lips softly. "I love you, too. Do you want me to take Evan and you go get tacos or do you want me to do it?"

I looked down. "He should be falling asleep soon so I'll keep him. Will you make my tacos extra spicy please?"

"Is there any other way?" Julian asked before planting another kiss on my lips. "I'll be right back."

"You are a blessed little boy," I said to Evan who looked at me in confusion. "You are going to grow into such an amazing man. You have the best daddy in the world. You also have the best grandfathers in the world. You have a great uncle—well, several great uncles. You have lots of good men to show you how to be a good man."

Without warning, Evan sat up and knocked me in the chin with that head of his.

I let out a noise and I grimaced in pain.

As if he understood that noise to equate to pain, Evan looked up at me and said some nonsensical baby talk before kissing my chin.

I melted.

When I touched his face, he got distracted by my bracelet, pulling it.

“No, don’t pull that. That’s Mommy’s bracelet.”

“No?” Evan asked.

“No.”

“No?”

I shook my head.

“No no no no no no no no no no no no...” Evan repeated in a singsong voice.

“What happened? I thought you were sleepy?” I asked, readjusting him in my lap. He grabbed my bracelet again and tugged on the charm. “No, Evan.”

“No no no no no no no no no no no! Dada!” Evan squealed with delight as he saw his father and a plate of mini tacos.

“Hey Buddy, you want to eat?” Julian asked him.

“Eat,” Evan answered, pulling on my bracelet.

Julian took him out of my arms and I peeled his little fingers off of my bracelet. He started to cry, but was quickly distracted and pacified by the blackberry applesauce he saw on a small plate.

“You should let me put more charms on that bracelet,” Julian said as he fed our son the applesauce.

I looked down at it. “Then it wouldn’t be my bracelet. These are the charms you gave me while we were on *The One* together. These few little charms represent our beginning and everything we went through.” I held up my left hand, wiggling my ring finger. “This big charm represents our end, our happily ever after.”

Julian held my gaze, searching my face. His eyes bore into mine, controlling my heartrate, affecting each breath. His lips parted. “I—”

“Have you guys tried the bruschetta?”

Our heads whipped around to Scott who seemed completely oblivious that he ruined a moment. Julian and I looked at each other and laughed.

As James and Julian talked, I looked around the room in awe.

I used to think perfection didn’t exist. I used to think perfection was what movies and television shows propagated to make viewers believe in happily ever after. But as I sat beside my gorgeous and talented husband who spent a third of the year away from home, a perfect little boy who was growing more and more obsessed with the word ‘no’, family and friends I didn’t get to see nearly enough, and surrounded by more love than I thought was ever possible, I knew two things to be true: perfection did exist and happily ever after was a choice.

After The One Playlist

Music inspires me. The artists mentioned below wrote songs and lyrics that I feel accurately depict the thoughts, feelings, and mood of Zoe and Julian as they navigated falling in love in a crazy environment in such a short amount of time. If you haven't had a chance to listen to any of these songs, do yourself a favor: purchase each song immediately and listen to them in order, on repeat.

Lucky – Jason Mraz & Colbie Caillat

Move Together – James Bay

Ordinary People – John Legend

Flaws and All – Beyoncé

Breaking the Law – Emeli Sandé

When The Right One Comes Along – Clare Bowen & Sam Palladio

Pendulum – FKA Twigs

Primetime (feat. Miguel) – Janelle Monae

A Message – Kelela

The Truth – India.Aire

I Gotta Be – Jagged Edge

Make Me Whole – Amel Larrieux

The Point Of It All – Anthony Hamilton

Fantasy –Alina Baraz, Galimatias

A Couple Of Forevers – Chrisette Michele

Nothing Even Matters – Lauryn Hill D'Angelo

<https://open.spotify.com/user/1298254681/playlist/42E3V8q42aWBoR7IOhBIiY>

Danielle Allen

The One (Series Premiere)

After The One (Series Finale)

Work Song

Heartache (Heartache #1)

Heartfelt (Heartache #2)

Love Discovered In New York

Autumn and Summer

Back to Life (Back to Life #1)

Back to Reality (Back to Life #2)

COMING SOON

Back to December (Back to Life #3)

Back to December is the third and final book in the Back to Life Series. Although Back to Life (BtoL #1) and Back to Reality (BtoL #2) must be read in order, Back to December

(BtoL#3) can be read as a standalone. But it is still recommended to read Back to December after reading Back to Life and Back to Reality to know and fully understand the backstory.

Expected Release Date: November 2016

Acknowledgements

Three years, nine novels.

I wrote my first novel (*Back to Life*) and published it in July 2013. August 2016, my ninth novel is published. I am incredibly blessed to do what it is that I love and have people enjoy it. God has blessed me with readers who enjoy the elaborate, diverse, intriguing love stories that I make up as I go along and I am excited and humbled by that every single day.

In 2016, Zoe Jordan and Julian Winters started talking to me (and through me) during an emotionally taxing, mentally draining, physically exhausting time in my life and I will be forever grateful for that.

To my family and friends who have loved and supported me, thank you. I am blessed to have you in my life. I love you all to the moon and back.

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CP Smith—thank you for being you and for using your formatting magic on my finished product. You really are a gem.

Authors, bloggers, readers, thank you. You have changed my life with your love and support. It truly means so much to me. I am floored when I hear people say that they know me and love me and/or my work. I am honored when I read

reviews that get it—my stories, my characters, my point. The knowledge that I've moved people with my words is huge to me. I don't take it for granted. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I can't begin to explain how much it means to me to be able to write and publish my novels and to have you take the time to read them. Sending you all hugs and love.

at the very very very end, I'd like to have my website (www.authordanielleallen.com) added

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