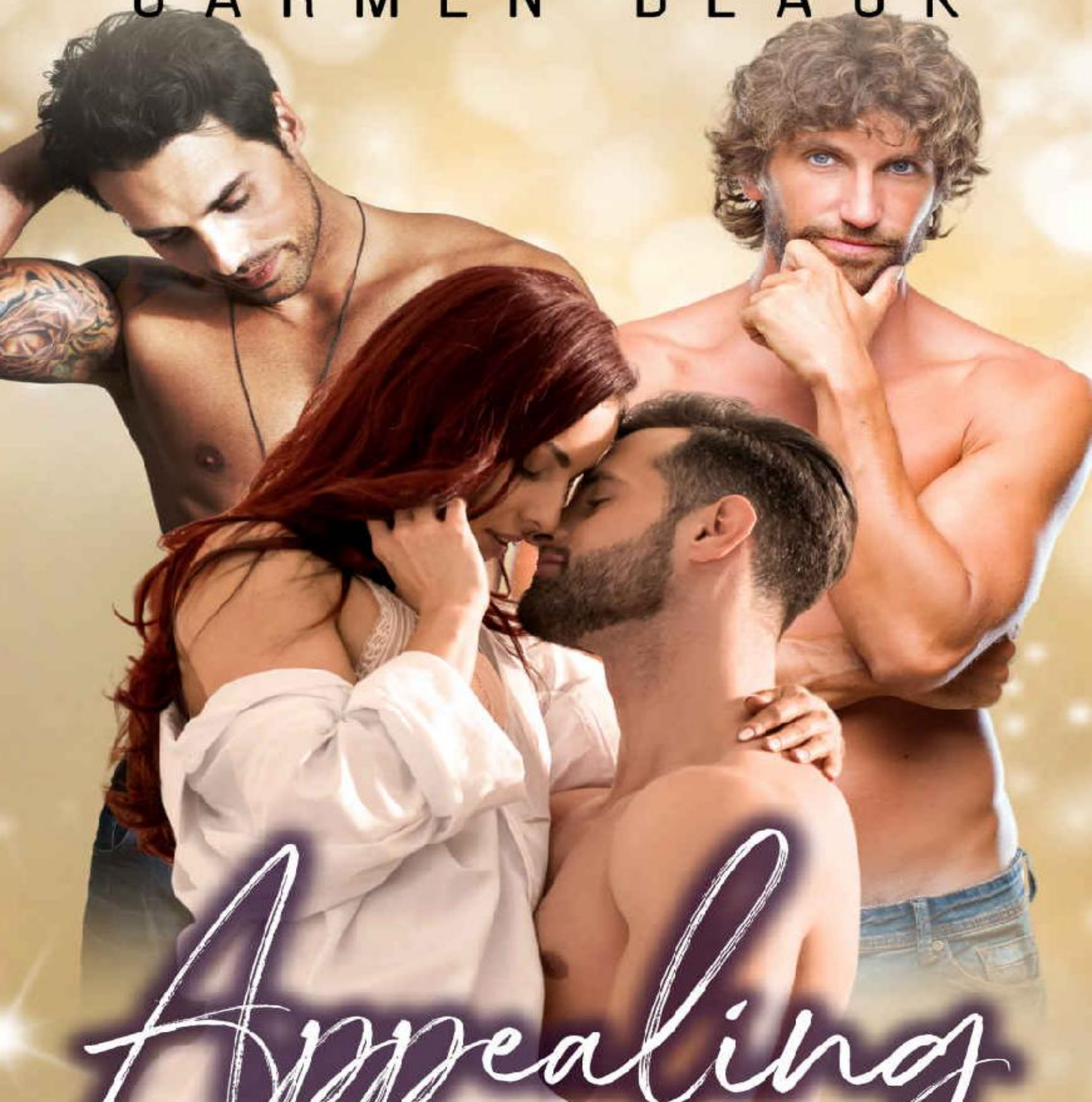


C A R M E N B L A C K



Appealing
EVIDENCE

LAWS OF ATTRACTION | BOOK THREE

Appealing Evidence

Laws of Attraction | Book 3

Carmen Black



SCARLET LANTERN
Publishing

Scarlet Lantern Publishing

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This book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language.

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Chapter 1

Tiffany

“**S**orry. I’d love to, but work has me cuffed by the wrists,” Mario said in response to me practically begging him to come over. Ever since the blowout at Lion’s Bar, Mario, Jared, and Anthony treated me like the plague. “You know I’m just trying to get your apartment back,” he groused.

In the meantime, he was letting me use one of the empty apartments that hadn’t been sold or leased yet. That was nice, but it didn’t ease my frustrations. Even though he went through a lot of trouble to make it look and feel like mine. My frustrations weren’t entirely with him, although him avoiding me was part of it. My frustrations had to do with how the whole situation unfolded.

As far as the apartment went, however, he tried his best. Since he was the one who decorated the apartment Chris had gifted me, he had all those purchases stored on his books. It was easy for him to just go ahead and repurchase everything. The interior was practically the same: bluish-teal accents with hanging white lights in the kitchen and living room, the golden

couch that doubled as a sofa bed, and even the cream-colored beige throw blanket that was my cuddle buddy on nights in front of the same flat-screen TV.

The doors that led to the visitor's bathroom and my bedroom were painted in pale yellow. My double bed had soft pastel-blue sheets, and there was a blue armchair by the window. This apartment was only two doors away from my old apartment, so the view from my bedroom window looked out onto the same mountains. The sun wasn't as blinding and didn't hit my skin the same in the morning, but it was close enough.

He spent many nights and mornings over at my apartment, so he knew where everything was kept. He replaced every piece of silverware, he tried to replace all my hair products except for the holding ones, which meant I had to change up my look again, opting for soft, loose ponytails and messy buns instead. He forgot tampons, panty shields, and Q-tips. There were no makeup options for days when my confidence wasn't soaring through the roof. My special coochie spray was mostly hidden from the guys, so he didn't know about that and therefore couldn't replace it.

Not that it was needed since it was used on my underwear in emergencies, to mask the smell of sex. They had abandoned my coochie, so there was no sex scent to mask.

“Why are you avoiding me, Mario?” The words slipped out of my mouth. We were on the phone as I was getting ready for work. A quickie in the morning was my sole request. It felt

like years had passed since either of them had touched my body, even though it had been no more than a week.

Mario grumbled in frustration, which only fueled my own frustration. "I'm not avoiding you, Tiffany..." he started.

"You know what, forget about it. I won't beg you to fuck me, to look at me, touch me, want me, or choose me. If you don't want me, fine. Someone else will," I said before hanging up the phone.

Immediate regret flushed my cheeks as heat tingled my body in embarrassment. He didn't deserve that. The fact that he'd done so much for me, didn't fly over my head. My heart soared with gratitude and appreciation for him and Jared, who got me new work clothes and shoes. Anthony, well, he went M.I.A. Still, it felt like luck had fallen upon me after what could've been a lot worse after my family deserted me. But that didn't ease the frustration building up with each passing day.

Maybe it had to do with the fact that I hadn't been fucked in a week, or perhaps it had something to do with my family turning their backs on me. It could also be about money and my parents freezing my bank account while they worked on putting a stop to their weekly deposits and detaching me from their accounts. It could have to do with the repercussions of their decisions and the shame I felt having to rely entirely on the men who looked at me like spoiled milk for any and all financial necessities.

At least I'd only have to rely on them until my pending paychecks came into the new bank account. Not that my paycheck was anything to write home about as a first-year associate at a start-up law firm. It was far below average. That wasn't a problem before brokenness became a part of my identity. Okay, maybe being 'broke' was a stretch; the guys had no problem helping but somehow, not having my own money made me feel imprisoned. It was also revealing to me that I didn't have my own money before and was imprisoned by my family. And that revelation was depressing.

Chris gifting me the apartment, having an abundance of money in my account, having my own car, it was all a facade. None of it was ever mine if it could be taken from me as they had been. They were loans contingent on their approval of me. That realization made me feel vulnerable with Mario, Anthony, and Jared; they could do the same thing to me. That fear wasn't helped by them not wanting me sexually anymore. It was more like I was a charity case to them now, rather than a lover.

Anxiety grew inside me in fear of how quickly the life I accustomed myself to could vanish. Just as it did this weekend. In the blink of an eye, Chris decided to make me homeless, and my parents decided to stop financially supporting me. Similarly, Mario and Jared could wake up tomorrow and decide they were over providing for me. Whether or not I wanted them to, they could abandon me as well, and I wouldn't be able to stop it. I was at their mercy.

Mario could rip the apartment from under my feet. Jared could demand for me to give him back everything he'd ever bought for me. And all that could happen if somehow, I failed to be perfect enough in their eyes or upset them in some way. It awoke something rebellious in me and made me want to sabotage myself before they could. Something in my chest was being wound so tight, it was only a matter of time before it ripped me to shreds.

Groaning, I flopped back onto the sofa and attempted to put on my shoes. Leaning forward alone to slip my shoes on was like trying to move a mountain. Everything felt harder, my head hurt, and nausea attacked me out of nowhere. To make matters worse, the new pair of shoes I had just tried on to go with today's suit felt a lot smaller now than it felt in the store. It was scraping the shit out of the back of my heel and squeezing the hell out of my toes. Breaking in new shoes wasn't fun, especially when there were perfectly comfortable shoes in my apartment... excuse me, *Chris'* apartment.

Tossing the shoes across the living room, I sank my head into my hands, feeling a pimple on the side of my cheek. Maybe my period was on the way. Great, everyone at the firm would be stuck with pimple face for now because concealer was scarce. And the awkward request for tampons would have to be made to one of the three guys—two since Anthony disappeared like a ghost in the night. Well, not exactly. I knew he was fine since the guys said they had heard from him. It was just me he was trying to avoid.

Breathe, Tiffany. Patience. That was the name of the game. Mario was right. He was working on getting my apartment back. Calling it ‘my apartment’ felt sickening. I wasn’t even sure if I wanted it back. But I for damn sure wanted the stuff inside the apartment that *I bought*.

Since Chris was choosing to be uncooperative for all of it, Mario had resorted to getting a court order to allow me to collect my stuff. He volunteered himself to be the one to work on that since Chris bought the apartment from him. That didn’t make much sense to me, but something told me he was just trying to protect me from ripping Chris’ face off and making things worse for myself. To think all of this was happening because Chris couldn’t handle the fact that I was grown enough to sleep with whomever, and that ‘whomever’ happened to be his three best friends. He decided to throw a tantrum and take back all his toys. He and my parents were the same. He claimed he wanted to be different, but it was still all about control for him.

Imagine telling a grown woman that she couldn’t sleep with whomever she chooses. *Imagine* telling three grown men that they needed your permission to sleep with a consenting adult! The audacity.

It would be understandable if he were freaking out about his best friends sleeping with his woman or something. But his sister? Me? The same person who didn’t care about his sex life, yet he was all up in mine? There was a difference between protection and control. He was treating me like an underaged kid who couldn’t consent to three grown adult men. He was

dirtying it and turning it into something it wasn't. He needed to show me where the danger was. Apparently, he was the only one capable of seeing it.

This was so stupid and uncalled for. Grunting, I threw my feet into the shoes of death, grabbed my faux leather handbag, and grimaced on my way to the door. The sound of tinkling wind chimes brought me to a stop as my phone rang from the couch. Good thing, or it would've been left behind.

These damn shoes were killing me. *There is no way I'll be able to walk through the office today in these damn things*, I thought on my way back to the couch to grab my phone.

It was my boss, and it was already fifteen minutes past eight. Fixing my mouth to apologize for running late, I answered the call.

"Ms. Sau..." My words were cut off.

"Ms. Levine, please don't worry about coming into work today," Ms. Saunders said.

My words flew back into my throat as my skin prickled with anticipation. This didn't sound good to start with.

"As you know, Bronkers & Associates is a start-up firm, and we're trying to create a reputation for ourselves. While we appreciate how you helped us win a case against Crawford & Beam, which was a good look for a small firm like ours, we can't be associated with the negative press around you at this time. It wouldn't look great for our image. Therefore, we

regret to inform you that it will not be necessary to complete your probationary period with us,” she continued.

“Wait, but...” My voice trembled.

“We wish you the best in your future endeavors,” she finished before I had a chance to ask her what she had heard.

Surely, she couldn't be firing me based on what I did on my own time with my sex partners. That was of no concern to her, the firm, or the clients. Where did this come from? And how would she even know what occurred unless the same person who told Chris was going around telling everyone. My stomach burned, and my heart pounded. Not another fucking wrench in my crumbling life. It felt like there was a boiling pot inside my chest, and my mind immediately went to suing the person responsible for airing my private life to the public, costing me my job.

Even though sweat rippled on my forehead and nausea slammed into me like a dump truck, my mind began to draft a petition when my phone pinged three times in a row with messages.

'Are you okay?' The first message was from Annie.

'Girl, I saw the news! I wish I weren't bogged down by work, or I'd for sure be there for you right now! Girl, hang in there.' Simone's message read.

News? What news? Had my private life been aired out on the news? By whom? My cheeks flushed. Too much had already happened this morning, I didn't think there was any

way I could handle much more. Cramps twisted my stomach, urging me to use the bathroom. The cramps didn't just stay in my stomach, they were in my head, my back, my fingers, my toes. Oh, no, was I having a stroke?!

Calm down, Tiffany; you're not having a stroke. Relax, the voice in my head said.

'Hey, just in case you haven't seen it yet, I suggest you don't watch the news today. But I guess there's no way you can avoid it. Okay, brace yourself and text me back. Tell me how I can help. I can see if my boss will give me the day off since this is an emergency. Oh, dear. Just remember, you're fucking strong, okay. You're that bitch,' Laura rambled on in her text.

With shaking hands, I turned on the television, having no idea what news station they were talking about. It seemed that whatever they were referring to had already passed. My body felt like an unpracticed acupuncturist was sticking needles into it at random spots as I tossed the remote aside to type my name into the search engine on my phone.

My heart stopped beating, and tears stung my eyes when the first headline read *'Valerie and Benjamin Levine of Levine LLP disowns daughter Tiffany Levine... after rumors of her sex life surfaces.'*

Beneath the headline was a video with my mother and father standing outside of their law firm, side by side with huge microphones. My mother's voice boomed first. 'She may have the Levine surname, but I assure you, she does not

represent our family in any way, and we wouldn't like to be associated with her.'

How could she say that with a straight face?

My father waved his hand at the cameras after my mother walked back inside. She paused at the door with wrinkled brows when she noticed that my father wasn't right behind her. "My wife is very distressed, understandably so, but I share a slightly different opinion than my wife." My mother's mouth fell open, but she fixed her face quickly and hurried inside. No doubt to keep the cameras away from her reaction. Pretty sure Dad wouldn't hear the end of it on the drive back home tonight.

"In all our years of raising Tiffany, she's never been anything but the perfect daughter. This doesn't sound like our Tiffany, and I think it's because those three men; Mario Sharpe, Anthony Whitlocke, and Jared Crawford at Crawford & Beam did something to my daughter. I'm not sure what it is, but it doesn't take a genius to put two and two together here. Three grown men, nearly forty years old and a twenty-one-year-old. What could they have in common? Nothing. They are..." His face reddened just like Chris and mine did when we were filled to the brim of emotions.

He hesitated as if something lodged itself in his throat, and he struggled to get it out. "They are... Well, you know what they are. I don't have to spell it out for you. And even though I haven't spelled it out, I'm sure they're going to try to sue me

for defamation, anyway. Bring it on.” Dad balled his fist at the camera, shaking it.

“I’m going to rescue my daughter from your hands. You’ve done something to her to make sure she won’t leave willingly, but I’m going to...” He started to break down, his voice cracked and rattled. Just at that moment, my mother ran out of the building and wrapped her arm around his shoulders, whispering something to him before turning back to the reporters.

“That’s enough for today. We’ve said all we’ve had to say,” she said before walking away with my dad and carrying him inside the building.

The phone fell from my hands, and my mouth was drying out from hanging open. Time stood still. My body lost all feeling. My ears lost all hearing. My family had set out not only to ruin my life but the life of the men I cared about. All because of what?

Chapter 2

Chris

Aww, man. Oh, no. This was bad. The ache tugging at my chest had me reaching for the phone instinctively to call Mom and Dad to ask them what the hell was wrong with them. My wife turned to look at me as she nursed our son, her blond hair poofy from her shower. Our expressions were the same.

“Did your mother just disown Tiffany on national television, or did I just imagine that?” she asked. “And that wasn’t even the worst of it,” she said, getting up from our beige linen sofa and walking out of our living room into the passageway leading to my son’s nursery.

She was right. My dad just called out my former best friends for being predators, basically. He didn’t have to say the word; everyone knew what he was implying. Oh, this was hard. My fingers tightened around my phone as consideration for whether or not my parents had a leg to stand on crossed my mind. Of course, they didn’t. Right?

And Tiffany, she must have been mortified. My brotherly instinct begged for me to dial her number and check up on her.

If anyone knew what it felt like to be discarded by our parents, it was me. Yet even for me, it was never this extreme.

My heart still couldn't bring my fingers to make the call; it was still broken. By her and by Mario, Jared, and Anthony. Sure, there was no way of knowing whether or not the guys 'persuaded' Tiffany to be with them, so ruling out what my father said would be silly. Especially since there was a time I thought they could be trusted with anything. They proved me wrong by going behind my back and sleeping with my sister, didn't they? So even if they had never struck me as predators before, there was no telling whether or not they were.

My stomach rumbled in disagreement. Not even Anthony had ever stuck out to me as a predator. He was a ladies man for sure, and the women were always super willing to sleep with him; even my ex as much as I hated to admit it.

But what if they were? Well, it would make me a terrible big brother for avoiding Tiffany.

That wasn't the sense I got from her though, which was why it was hard to go by what my dad said. Tiffany cared for my best friends. As sick as it may feel for me to admit it, she wanted them. I saw it in the way she looked at them. And she lied to me, just as much as they did.

Tossing the phone on the kitchen counter, I made my way to the fridge and eyed the beer. If I started drinking now, stopping would be difficult. At home with my wife and baby wasn't the best place to get drunk. This whole thing was such a fucking mess. The fridge shook with the force with which I closed the

door. It wasn't my intention to slam the door so hard. It was the displaced energy in my body that had nowhere to go.

"Chris, please don't damage the fridge." My wife's voice came from our son's nursery.

"I'm sorry," I yelled back, rubbing my forehead while melting into one of the soft-backed chairs around the kitchen island.

Her footsteps were soft when she made her way into the kitchen, so when her arms came to hug me around my shoulders, she frightened me. "Why don't you call them?" she asked.

She smelled like breast milk, ointments, and baby powder, but she still smelled great to me.

"Who?" I asked, turning my face to kiss her hand.

"You know who," she said, rubbing my shoulder for just a few seconds, although they felt damn good with how tense I was. She'd need the massage more than me though, so I didn't beg.

"I can't," I said, spinning around to face her and pull her into my arms. Oh, the scent of the breast milk was way stronger coming from her bosom now. I made a face, and she tapped my back, blushing.

Holding her close around the waist, I let my face rest against her chest; her soft, fuller body with the weight she had gained since becoming a mom felt good. I also didn't want her to feel embarrassed. She hugged me back.

“Why can’t you?” she asked, her gentle voice a murmur against my ear as she stroked my thinning hair.

“I can’t trust her. I don’t know who she is anymore.” My body shook as the image of her and my best friends flashed in my mind again.

“Whoa,” she said in response, rubbing my back.

“I mean, how can I even look at them anymore without picturing it. It’s too much. And even if I could by some miracle get past that, how could I look at them, knowing they all played me for an idiot and didn’t respect me enough to tell me to my face?” I asked.

“But what if Tiffany needs you right now? What if there’s any truth whatsoever to what your father implied?” she asked, pulling back out of my arms to search my green eyes with her deep blue orbs. “Are you going to just do nothing?”

“That’s not the vibe I got from them when we were all at Lion’s Bar together,” I said.

“Either way, whatever happens, your sister needs you, Chris. And if you’re right about the guys, then their whole life’s about to be turned upside down by your parents just because they chose to be with your sister. Again, if you’re right about them, then that doesn’t seem fair, does it?” she asked.

My eyes shifted from her gaze; the truth was that deep down, even though I knew it was wrong of me to feel this way, the hurt in me danced with glee at the thought that perhaps

they didn't get to have their happy ending after all. And so, I didn't bother picking my phone back up to give them a call.

My resentment enjoyed this far more than it should have.

Chapter 3

Jared

Squeezing the bridge of my nose and pulling on the skin between my brows, I growled low in my throat. Focus evaded me. Taking off my reading glasses that were hanging gingerly on my forehead, I rubbed my eyes, pressing my thumb and forefinger into my closed eyelids.

Tiffany was all I could think of. It had been a week since I'd seen her, and the high we experienced after finally reconnecting came to a devastating crash. The look of pain on Chris' face haunted me at night. Damn, it made me feel dirty and disgusting. It was hard to look at myself in the mirror in the morning. It was hard to live in my skin. I let him down. I was a dirty scoundrel, a terrible friend.

The buzz of my phone reverberated through my wooden desk, and I pulled my strained eyes from the blur of the computer screen to look at it. An even louder groan escaped me when I saw Tiffany calling. This time, the reason I hated seeing her name had nothing to do with me hating her. I hated how quickly my hand jumped for the phone and how hard I had to fight myself to keep from answering it.

My brain went numb while my blood flow felt like pure adrenaline powered it. It shook my body, moving me out of my chair to stand before pacing around the room. I watched the phone as it rang and stopped ringing. Rang again and stopped. This had to have been harder for her than it was for me. She was going through it with her brother kicking her out of her apartment. What she needed was reassurance that everything would be okay.

But Mario had that sorted out, right? I wasn't sure how to be anything to her right now. Because if I tried to be there for her, I was choosing to continue to betray Chris and even worse, it wouldn't help his and Tiffany's relationship. The best thing I could be for her was 'gone.'

The phone rang about three to four times, tempting me to answer it so that I could hear her sweet voice while my stomach churned with guilt. But it eventually stopped, allowing me to return to my desk and do my best job of pretending to 'work' by staring at the screen and shuffling papers around. However, I was struggling to make anything out of any of the information before me.

Fear stopped me from actually attempting to work since my failing focus could result in me making a mess of everything. With my lagging brain, I'd get the clients mixed up and end up sending confidential information to one client, violating some of the lawyer-client protocols.

The idea of a short walk and a breath of fresh air to refocus was tempting. Since the pool would turn into an even bigger

distraction. It was highly doubtful that I'd spend any less than too many hours in it trying to drown my thoughts out. And enough hours had been wasted doing nothing this week already. So, a quick walk it was.

Just as I was about to leave my desk, my office phone rang. Melissa must have gone to the bathroom or something; she wasn't at her desk. Yet another groan escaped me. Okay, I would have to get a hang of myself soon and by soon, I meant now. It wasn't okay to greet a potential client or investor sounding as if I were underneath a shaky, unstable sand cave about to tumble down on top of me.

"Crawford & Beam, you're speaking with Jared Craw..." I started, but the person on the other end of the line was determined to finish me.

"Listen to me, Jared Crawford, you disgusting excuse of a man!" the person yelled.

Who in their right mind was calling me to disrespect me in this way? They had to be a lunatic.

I was about to hang up when they said the word predator. "Excuse me?" I reared back to say. Those kinds of accusations could be grounds for a lawsuit.

"I will be taking my business elsewhere to a more reputable firm. I don't want my case to be handled by the likes of you," the person said.

"Who the hell is this?" I yelled so I could get a word in over Mr. Yappy mouth.

“It’s Mr. Robert McIntosh, you braindead creep,” he said before slamming the phone down in my ear.

Oh, shit.

Mr. McIntosh was a younger client, one who would have brought incredible business to our firm. Landing him would’ve meant good things for our investors and our bank account.

Damn it.

Where the hell was Melissa? I jumped up from my seat, fire burning below my feet, launching me out the door to search the floors for her. I ended up in the breakroom. It had a large flat-screen television mounted on the wall, and the otherwise generous space was packed full of my employees.

“What the hell is happening here?” I shouted, and all heads whipped around at me in unison, sounding like a whoosh against the soft air-conditioned wind. Soon, the crowd dispersed, but not everyone was apologetic, running to their seats to get back to work. Some of them ran to their seats to grab their bags instead and storm through the office doors.

As I stared at them in incredulous disbelief, Melissa’s voice broke through the haze of confusion. “Mr. Crawford, you need to see this,” she said, hurrying to her desk.

My eyes were still frozen in the direction of the door as associates and upper-level attorneys alike kept filing out. As I opened my mouth to yell at them, Melissa came back to tug on my hand, pulling me forward.

“Mr. Crawford, that’s the least of your worries. Trust me, you’re going to want to see this,” she said as I followed her, almost stumbling forward in bewilderment.

Her fingers tapped away at her keyboard before a video of Mr. and Mrs. Levine popped up on the screen. She pressed play, and my knees wobbled. I couldn’t feel my feet and had to clutch onto Melissa’s desk to keep from falling.

We were losing clients and employees. This company would crash and burn just as it had before with my father, and it would all be because of a stupid, devious lie.

Chapter 4

Mario

My gray suit jacket was draped around the back of my chair. My body was so hot from the conversation with Tiffany. She was right, I was avoiding her. But I was also right; work was holding me hostage as I tried to get her apartment back from Chris.

It had me tapping my fingers against my desk in frustration now as I responded to another email from Chris' attorneys; he was being intentionally difficult.

But she and I both knew that under normal circumstances, it would be so hard for me to keep away from her, I'd be filling her phone up with the things I wanted to do to her. And man, there were a lot of things.

Her sweet lips were one of the top things I ached for, so was the softness of her breasts and the brightness of her smile. My cock tightened in desperation, missing the feel of her stretching around me. But I couldn't say any of that to her without thinking about how Chris knocked me unconscious with a bar stool.

There was pain, deep pain, and disgust in Chris' eyes, and I put that there, along with the rest of the guys. The thought of messaging her just felt wrong for some reason. And I was trying not to. Not only that, but there was a sense of responsibility that I felt for the loss of her apartment and the rift between her and her brother. If I had just gone ahead and resisted her that night. If... then I would've missed out on her, and that would've also been a shame.

Being with her wasn't what filled me with regret. I broke Chris' trust in me, ruining our friendship and ruining their sibling relationship. It was the reason he got the apartment for her in the first place and now to have him take it back? The apartment was more than just a gift for her. It was his first big brother gesture to act as some kind of missing glue between them. Their age difference made him miss so much of her life.

It always felt like she was someone he'd have to gain the respect of, gain the trust of, and her choice not to tell him about us made him feel like he had failed. He trusted me with information like this, which made this even more painful. I should have known better. It could've been helped if I had told him. If I wasn't such a coward.

Knowing the amount of years we spent with each other, supporting each other, growing with each other, made this so hard to swallow for Chris. It was knowing the stages of life we'd lived through together. Compared to her stages of life, it was disgusting for Chris to think about. And his disgust made it feel that much worse for us even if we had nothing to be disgusted about.

To distract myself from the thoughts that threatened to eat me alive, I put on a livestream of the news and gave the emails from Chris' lawyers a break. Calling my assistant's line to check up on another client, there was no answer. When I popped my head out to look for her at her desk, she wasn't there.

Okay, maybe it was time for a stretch and some coffee anyway before moving on to something else. Getting up from the desk, I grabbed my mug and made my way over to the lunch room. On my way there, I noticed that most of the office was empty and while standing in the lunch room, my ears caught wind of the chatter coming from the break room next door. Did I miss something? Why was there a gathering in the break room?

After I filled up my mug with coffee with the press of a button, I sipped on it on my walk toward the chatter. I hadn't even gotten to the door yet when I heard 'Mario Sharpe, Anthony Whitlocke, and Jared Crawford did something to my daughter.'

What the fuck? I spat the coffee out in shock, hurrying toward the source of the audio to see Tiffany's father on screen, telling a bold-faced lie, basically calling me and the guys predators. Oh, the nerve of them. I couldn't believe Chris allowed this to happen. Okay, maybe that was out of his control. Heaven knew that neither of the Levine children had any control whatsoever over their parents' actions.

“I’m sure they’re going to sue me for defamation anyway. Bring it on!” Mr. Levine said. My heart sank because of what had to happen next.

Whirling around, I made my way back to my office, slamming my coffee down on my desk, only realizing I shouldn’t have done that, giving thanks that it didn’t make a mess. As much as I cared for Tiffany and even Chris still, despite him hitting me in the fucking head with a chair for no good reason, Mr. Levine had made this about more than just my relationship with his daughter and my soured friendship with his son.

This was a lot bigger than our personal relationships, so Tiffany would have to accept my apologies. Chris would have to go on hating me. Their father was ruining more than just my name; he was defaming my character, and I wouldn’t take that lying down. Especially when it was based on a complete and utter lie. Mr. Levine had absolutely no leg to stand on.

The only way left to save my good name and the good name of my friends was to win this case in court. Otherwise, our character would be tarnished. Just by that move alone by Mr. Levine, he made sure that our character would at least be QUESTIONED forever, despite the outcome of the case, and that wasn’t cool.

Bring it on, he said. Well, it was being brought.

Chapter 5

Anthony

Sex used to be my medicine. It still was. The problem, however, was that there was only one person I wanted to have it with. And that was Tiffany. But after Lion's Bar, there was no chance of that happening. Not after seeing how much it hurt Chris.

My heart swelled with anxiety at the thought of doing without my medicine. Whenever my mind was filled with noise, and stress was pounding my bones, there was nothing better than losing myself into the warmth of a woman. The adrenaline eased my ache and for a few minutes, I could think of nothing else but pleasure before having to face the noise again. What was I meant to do now that my medicine had become poisonous? Something I had to stay away from, or it could hurt the people I cared about.

This past week, I tried to become best friends with my hand, but my hand was pathetic. My hand didn't moan my name and scratch my back. And after I was done, I didn't get the ego boost that came with watching a woman after we were done fucking. Sure, I didn't like the clinginess, but it did feel

amazing to know that I had something to do with the look of bliss on her face. Now, the only woman I wanted to look at me that way was Tiffany, and it sucked. When I closed my eyes, I saw her face. And then I saw Chris' face. Felt the way he laid into me and saw how he would've kept going if no one stopped him. He would've killed me, and I wouldn't have blamed him. I hurt him before, knew this would hurt him again, and didn't give a fuck about anyone but myself. And Tiffany. Fuck, I cared about Tiffany.

For the first time in fucking ever, I found myself caring for a woman and like the karma of all the women I treated as if they were nothing coming back to punish me, the one woman I cared for was the one I couldn't have.

An apology couldn't fix anything either. I'd apologized to Chris before and well, that obviously meant nothing, did it? I wouldn't believe the words coming out of my own mouth either if it were me.

So great, I couldn't fuck to reduce the noise in my head.

The noise screamed at me that I was pathetic. I was a terrible friend who should've let Chris lay into me some more. I would've deserved it if he just kept hitting and never... As obvious as it was that I was a shitty friend, I couldn't let my thoughts go down that road. It was too dark, and it would swallow me up. But if the noise in my head could be prevented from consuming me, I had to find a way to drown it out. That's why I was here in this nightclub with music so loud, my eardrums were constantly vibrating, and my brain felt numb. If

sex wasn't on the table for me, then a drink or a few were. Mix that in with some horrible music and being surrounded by people who didn't give a shit about me, and I didn't give a shit about.

It was my hope when I came here, I'd be able to drown out thoughts of Tiffany. But by the sixth drink, it seemed I was either hallucinating or being thrown into the den of temptation. Across the room, under the flickering white and blue strobe lights, in a sea of dancing bodies, I spotted her. Her red hair fell over half her face as she moved along to the music, laughing with the other women around her.

My body didn't know how to react, and my feet didn't know what to do. But my mind and my heart joined alliances as I turned to the bartender.

"It's her!" I yelled over the music, pointing into the crowd.

The bass of the music rattled the alcohol bottles behind him, and he just nodded at me, smiling one of those uninterested grins before walking away. He probably didn't hear me. He didn't need to.

My heart launched me forward, and my body waded through the sea of people but soon, I lost sight of her. Arms shot out from the crowd as the dancing bodies shouted to the lyrics of the song that was playing. Their arms flailed to the rhythm, pumping the air, blocking my view. Irritation tempted me to shove people out of the way, but I wasn't a madman. The music served as a soundtrack as beats rose in conjunction with my panic.

Soon, I spotted her again, making her way toward the exit with a group of other women. And I ran. Bolting through the crowd, running out of the club, searching the street for her. She was leaning against the side of a car, about to smoke a cigarette.

“Tiffany!” I yelled. She didn’t seem to hear me, so I hurried closer, grateful that she didn’t seem to be rushing to go anywhere else. “Tiffany,” I sighed, smiling as I stood in front of her.

Except the woman that looked up wasn’t her.

“With a face like yours, you can call me whatever you want, sweetheart.” She smiled back at me, looking me over from head to toe.

“Ooh!” her brunette friend teased.

My heart sank, and my brain wasn’t ready to accept the fact that I had mistaken her. My body wanted Tiffany. For a moment, I thought that perhaps if I squinted hard enough, I would’ve been able to sweet talk her into letting me hit it, and I could pretend for the night that it was in fact Tiffany. But no amount of squinting could’ve convinced me. She wouldn’t smell like her or feel like her. She wasn’t her.

“I’m sorry. I thought you were someone else,” I muttered, turning away and hailing a cab.

“Aww.” I heard someone say from behind me, and I agreed with them. Aww. Poor me. Poor, pathetic, lonely Anthony.

* * *

The smell of my morning breath woke me up. Oof. No, thank you. Dragging myself from the bed, I stumbled to my feet. The back of my head throbbed, and I held it, feeling the sweat that soaked my tangled curly hair. I groaned. From the bathroom in my master bedroom, a glimmer of sunlight peeked through the windows. Damn, it was no surprise that I drank a bit last night but fuck, I was getting too old for this shit. And how long was I asleep for?

Grabbing my watch from the TV stand in my bedroom, I squinted past the pain in my eyes to see the time. Oh shit, it was fucking midday. Swearing and marching to the window, I

pulled the blinds open, spinning around to look at my empty, messy bed. It looked like I kicked the hell out of my shoes last night since one foot was laying near the closet, and the other was beneath the TV stand.

Turning away to reach for the remote, I put on the news, which was my morning routine when getting ready for work. As late as I was, I needed to prepare myself for the day ahead, and the news always made me feel alert after watching it. Even if the thought of calling in sick was tempting.

As I walked out of my pants and underpants, giving my ass cheek a good old scratch on my way to the bathroom door, my feet came to an abrupt stop.

'Anthony Whitlocke and Jared Crawford...'

My name. In the news. Why? I spun around in shock, to see Tiff's parents on the screen. Turning up the volume, I didn't even feel when the remote fell from my hand. Silence hit me

first until realization came in a series of taps and gradually louder beats until there was a pounding resonance in my brain.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I said to myself, rushing toward the shower.

Fuck. This was bad. This was very bad. And as much as it would have been nice to take the rest of the day off to climb in bed and sleep this hangover off after a warm shower, there was no way I would miss work after what I just watched. The company and the friends I had left needed me.

I couldn't even begin to let myself think about what this meant for Tiffany.

Chapter 6

Tiffany

On any other day, my outfit at the moment would've been the attention grabber. Office attire with some pretty ugly, unmatching sneakers that were amongst the shoes Jared had bought for me. This one was slightly bigger than my feet but even if it slapped the back of my heel, at least it wasn't scraping it off.

The guys weren't answering their phones all day, and this wasn't the time to avoid me, not after watching what my parents said about our situation all over the news. After taking several hours to myself to cry at the loss of my parents, the lack of a supportive call from Chris and being ignored by my three men, I decided to march down here because even though they were ignoring me, they were the only ones who wouldn't slam the door in my face if I showed up.

But perhaps coming to Crawford & Beam wasn't such a great idea. People were rushing out of the building with boxes of stationery in their hands, bumping into me on the way out. Some of them reached out to stroke my hand in reassurance; others turned their eyes to the floor as if they weren't sure how

to react. The ones who weren't rushing out of the building, all turned to look at me as soon as I stepped through the door. I had never been faced with so many curled lips and upturned noses in my entire life. One would think they were long-lost cousins or something since they were wearing the exact facial expressions my mother wore.

My body begged me for a hole in the ground that could bury me as I sank into myself. It felt like a wave of energy zapped across my skin, freezing me in place as I looked around in shock, thinking about how easy it would have been to turn around and run out the door, straight back to my car.

But I had to know how the men were doing. Even more, I needed to see them.

Selfishly, I needed to be held.

Each step toward the elevator felt like my soul was being sucked out of my body by tiny vacuum cleaners that everyone around me held in their hands. Finally, the elevator door opened, and I was relieved to find that it was empty. Tapping the button to close the doors, I prayed that no one would step in here just to confront me with any questions.

The elevator dinged to a stop at the partners' floor. Even Melissa kept her head down as I walked past her. That stung. It felt like I was a contagious virus or something that people were either angry with or needed to protect themselves from. Taking a deep, shaky breath and trying to suck my tears back into my eyes, I stopped at Jared's office first.

Opening the door, I was relieved to find that I didn't need to stop anywhere else. All three heads turned to look at me, which made me feel like I was about to crumble.

"Tiffany," Jared simply said as if he were expecting me. Taking two steps forward, my feet felt like lead and as I closed the door behind me, I stumbled.

Soon, hands reached out to catch me, pulling my head in the direction of Anthony's gray eyes. He cleared his throat and tore his eyes from mine, speaking to the door behind me rather than to my face. "Are you okay?"

Okay? I was overwhelmed. It felt like the weight of the world came crashing down on my shoulders. I was the furthest thing from okay but looking into their pale faces, tensed with anger but drained from blood, I knew they were going through it.

"Are you guys okay?" I asked, turning the question back on them.

Anthony held onto my arm and walked me over to the sofa where Jared and Mario hovered over me like hawks. Mario joined me on the sofa so that Anthony was on my left, and he was on my right. Jared kneeled before me, his face hard with worry and self-control. Anthony's arm around my shoulders felt so nice, so warm and welcoming. And as Mario moved some strands away from my forehead to examine my flushed skin, tingles rushed through my body. It was hard to resist leaning into his touch. So, I didn't. He didn't remove his hand either.

In fact, his thumb rested on my chin, tilting my face upwards so that I could drown in his mesmerizing blue eyes. The warmth of Jared's body kissed my knees and soon, fatigue was replaced with the need that had been tearing at me all week, this morning. Their presence felt embracing, and their colognes were sensational. Between my legs ached, and my breasts throbbed. My lips felt naked without them.

Forgetting all about my reason for coming here in the first place and consumed with desire, I leaned forward into Mario's parted pink lips. The scratch of his mustache against my upper lip felt magnified. The sensation of it stroked my spine. A deep, breathy moan escaped me as I deepened the kiss, reaching my arm out to feel Anthony, stroke his hair, his beard, anywhere while I parted my legs for Jared, running one leg up his arm.

Their groans excited me, and I wanted to kiss Anthony but feared breaking the kiss from Mario. I didn't want to shatter this moment. But they did. In one sharp tug away from mine, Mario pulled his lips away, jumping up from the sofa. Jared scooted backward, and Anthony growled, walking to the far end of the room, looking at me like he was fighting his every instinct and urge to pounce on me. I wanted him to.

Mario cleared his throat. "Honestly, Tiffany. This is looking really bad," he said, breaking the spell and answering my earlier question.

"Huh?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

He straightened his shirt cuffs, and Jared stumbled to his feet. “Yeah, I’m guessing you know what your parents said about us on the news. What they said about you...” Jared’s voice cracked. “I’m sorry about that, by the way.”

Shrugging, I straightened up as Anthony got me a cup of water from Jared’s water cooler.

“Thank you,” I said, hissing as my finger brushed up against his. “It’s whatever.”

Letting the cool water remove the heat from my lips and cool down my body, I watched Mario run his hand over his blond beard. “I know this might not make things easier, but we can’t let the fate of the company and our character hang on your father’s words,” he said.

Gulping down some water, my throat scratched when I asked, “What do you mean?”

Jared perched on his desk, fixing his tie pin and clasping his hand in his lap. “We’re suing your parents,” he said.

The way my stomach took a plunge was unexpected. Of course, my parents said some awful things about me, about them... this was reasonably the next course of action. But they were my parents. I was a Levine.

And according to my mother, ‘was’ was the operative word. But suing my parents could possibly mean that there would be no chance to fix things between us and until this moment, I didn’t realize that I wanted to.

My lips trembled. “Look, I know what they said, but I’m sure we can find another way to fix this...” I started.

“There is no other way,” Anthony responded. “I know you don’t like this, sugar, but these things happen in dysfunctional families.” He shrugged.

“Dysfunctional? My family isn’t... dysfunctional.” My words trailed off as it hit me that we were.

The Levines lived the cookie-cutter lifestyle. We were the standard nuclear family. Our parents were that power couple who worked together and stayed together. They were rich, owned an incredibly successful law firm, were important enough to be talked about in the news, practically lived in a mansion, and had two successful children. In the eyes of the public, we were the type of family people should aspire to.

But our mother was cold, our father didn’t speak up for himself or for his children and before now, their son was the black sheep of the family. Until my scandal. Something completely innocent turned into something dark and depraved.

My family was dysfunctional.

“And we completely understand if you want to support your family. I’d do the same,” Jared said. “But if that’s the case, it would be best if we stopped seeing each other.” Jared’s jaw clenched so hard, I could see his muscles doing their best work to keep his face from falling.

That felt like they had just ripped my heart out and was holding it over a cliff like that scene from the *Lion King*. Tears

welled up in my eyes.

“Is that what you want?” I asked.

Mario answered first, choked up. “No, it’s not.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, getting defensive and trying to distract myself from the decision that had to be made. “Because it seems like all of this week, you’ve been avoiding me for some reason. Was it because you wanted to break up and didn’t know how?”

Jared hissed, and Anthony gripped his hair. Mario’s lips were a straight line. “That’s not why,” he grumbled before turning intense eyes, wet and red from emotion, on me. “It’s been torture resisting you, Tiffany,” he growled. “But it’s all been a mess and now with this being tossed on us, based on all lies, it’s just been a lot,” he said.

He was right. It had been a lot. For all of us. And watching him try his hardest to hold himself together made me want to wrap him into my arms and hold him tight as he fell apart. I crossed the room but didn’t touch him. Because this wasn’t the time.

“We didn’t choose this, Tiffany,” Jared said. “It chose us.”

“And now, you’ve got to make a choice. You know the truth. You know what happened between us. What we all shared... still share.” Anthony’s voice cracked. “Will you just stand with your parents because they’re your family, or will you stand with the truth? Will you stand with us?” he asked.

If I thought in any way there would have been a chance to smooth things over with my parents and help them see reason, I would take that chance, but I knew what mattered the most to my parents was their reputation. Now that they had put a statement out to the public, they would stand by it, and there was nothing I could do to stop them.

So, my decision was clear. I had only one choice. To stand with the truth.

“I choose you guys,” I said, letting that sink in.

As easy as it was for the words to leave my mouth, the reality ran into me at full speed. This would be a battle that was about to get emotional and ugly really quick. And it didn't matter whether I was ready or not.

Chapter 7

Tiffany

Behind the curtain felt a lot safer. Outside, there was a nightmare, even if there were no more than ten people seated in the room.

A warm hand on my shoulder had me pulling my eyes from the break in the curtain. “Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t have to do this. We can do this on our own. You can try making things up with your family. We’ll be okay.”

Anthony’s breath rustled the hair on the back of my neck, causing me to shiver from the warmth in my spine. I swallowed and turned around to face him. His gray eyes seemed distant as he stared past me.

“I’m okay. I guess I’m just anxious to get it over with,” I said.

Jared had arranged for a press conference to have Crawford & Beam represent themselves with the truth and to have me set things straight. It should’ve been simple, but the reporters out there were just ready and waiting to rip me to shreds, twist something I said, take a single word or phrase out of context. It was nerve wracking knowing that I had to make sure that

every word that left my mouth was what I meant to say and was carefully thought about.

“What about you?” I asked Anthony.

He held my hand that reached up to stroke his face, holding it against his chest as if he couldn't bear the brush of my fingers against his facial hair. “I'm okay.” His voice rasped.

“Where have you been?” The bags under his eyes told me he hadn't slept well in days.

“Out and about. Why? Are you jealous?” he asked as I pulled my hand from his.

“Would it be so criminal if I were?” I asked.

He exhaled in a rush, running his hand through his hair and gripping it in frustration.

“Tiff...” he started.

“No, don't worry about it,” I responded, walking away from him to get control of my breathing. My headspace didn't need to be filled with images of Anthony pleasing some other woman while he treated me like some type of fungus.

“Hey, you all right?” Jared said, looking like such a snack in a simple black and white suit, pocket square, and black tie. The uncomfortable need returned, gripping me. Frustrated, I turned away from him and almost ran into Mario, dressed in a blue pinstripe suit with an inside vest and everything. His hair was perfectly coiffed as always, face freshly shaved. He was standing in front of the mirror with the vanity lights shining on his face as he checked to make sure that nothing was out of

place. Of course, nothing was. He looked delicious. I groaned. My sexual frustration was at its peak.

“Okay, they’re ready for you.” Melissa’s heels hurried across the floor toward Jared as she checked his collar and his tie, patting him on the back and sending him out there. Steadying myself, I stepped out along with the other guys.

The clicking of cameras set off like fireworks around me, followed by flashing lights. By the time I got to my seat behind a wide rectangular plastic foldout table with black cloth covering it, I was dizzy. Off the stage in front of us were bright-eyed reporters with their mouths hanging open, pointing their microphones and recorders at our faces, ready to capture our first breath. There was no turning back now.

A red light blinked in the corner by the door to let us know we’d gone live. My parents were about to be hit with the vision of me sitting amongst my men, about to speak out against them. My palms were drenched in sweat.

As soon as they got the go ahead, a reporter came out swinging right at me with the first question. “Tiffany Levine, are you safe? Do you need help?”

Any doubts that existed in me before this moment just melted away as pure anger burned a fire within me. Narrowing my eyes at them, I spoke into the projected microphone before me.

“No, I am not in danger. All accusations made by Valerie and Benedict Levine are completely FALSE, and it is disrespectful to the relationship I’m in, to the choices I make

for myself and to actual victims. Please do not make me out to be a victim when it's clear that my parents and much of society can't handle the idea of a woman in a polyamorous relationship with three men.

“Well, let me introduce you to my men: Mario Sharpe, who is sweet, caring, and dashing handsome. Jared Crawford, who is hard on the outside but soft on the inside. He's my very special candy; it takes a while to get to his sweet center, but he's definitely worth the wait. And Anthony Whitlocke, the out-of-the-box, intense, funny hunk with sexy gray eyes that magnetize anyone in his presence.

“You can note this in your notepads, that I, Tiffany Levine, am proud to be with these three men and would appreciate it if people could keep their noses out of my sex life.”

Silence fell over the room. Even I was stunned silent by my speech. Who knew one question could set me off that way? That sort of word vomit wasn't the speech I had planned, but it was out there, and there was no retracting anything I said. Which was just as well since I meant every single word.

My skin heated and flushed as I turned to my left to see all three men staring at me in shock. Everything we had rehearsed was just flushed down the drain, yet they didn't look at me with anger or disappointment. There was nothing but hunger in their eyes. Man, my body ached for them and hoped that hunger would still be there when we left this room.

Another reporter directed a question at Jared, but he didn't seem to hear them. None of the guys were focused on anyone

else but me. After fighting for their attention for so many days, this felt electric. I almost didn't want to break it, but the sooner we could get done with this press conference, the sooner we could leave this room. The sooner I'd know whether those looks were ones of hunger that could be staved off or starvation. If they'd feast on me as if their lives depended on it.

Smiling at Jared, I tilted my head in the direction of the reporter staring at us in confusion, hanging their recorder awkwardly in the air. He cleared his throat and straightened his tie. His skin was a deep pink.

Knowing that my men still burned for me made my toes curl.

“What was the question?” he asked, his husky voice bouncing off the microphone, heating everyone's skin in the room.

“What do you think about Mr. Levine's statement about a defamation case?” the female reporter asked, blushing.

“In response to Mr. Levine's statement, I say, be careful what you wish for. You asked for a defamation case, knowing you have no legs to stand on? You've got one,” Jared said. “If you don't mind, I think we'd like to cut this press conference short. Something's come up. Right, guys?” he asked Mario and Anthony who shifted in their seats.

“Oh, yeah. Definitely,” Mario said as Anthony laughed softly into the microphone.

“What do you say, Tiff? Want to cut this short?” Jared asked me.

I smiled. “Yeah, I think we’ve said everything we needed to say.”

We tried our best not to run out of the room, back behind the curtains where we could be private but as soon as we were back there, my legs shook with need. “What’s come up?” I asked.

Anthony reached for my hand and pressed it up against him. Before I could turn to him, my body was lifted from the floor. Mario had his hands around my ass, and I wrapped my legs around his hips. His kiss took my breath away, shocking my body with pleasure.

Melissa’s heels running toward the curtains preceded the moment she entered our dressing area. I gasped just as Jared growled at her.

“We’re busy,” he said. Melissa’s cheeks turned pink as she clutched the collar of her blue work dress and hurried back through the curtains. We could hear her telling people not to come in here.

“If we could have you right here and now, we would,” Jared said, turning my face toward his, kissing me as Mario pressed his hips into me so that his hardness attempted to penetrate me through the fabric of my pants and panties. Man, this would’ve been a great moment for a dress. So fucking close. Dresses were soon going to be reintroduced to my wardrobe, that was certain.

“Let’s go back to mine,” I breathed.

“Shit, I don’t think I can make it past this room,” Mario groaned.

Smiling down at him, I teased his lips with my tongue. “You’re going to have to.”

Hopping off his hips, I yelped when he slapped my ass. Anthony was already heading toward the door.

* * *

Anthony was pressed up against my back. His hands were beneath the waist of my pants stroking me into oblivion as I fumbled with the key in the lock of the door. Biting down on my lip, I tried to keep from moaning aloud, swearing when the key missed the hole yet again.

“Ah, fuck,” I gasped as his finger slipped inside me. Tears of joy sprang to my eyes, and I pressed my face into the door, giving up on opening it as the keyring hung around my fingers. “Yes, yes, fuck, yes.” My hips jerked back against his.

A deep, desperate groan sounded from behind us and soon, the key left my fingers, and I stumbled forward with the opening of the door. Inside, we all moved quickly to remove our clothes before I jumped into Anthony’s arms, climbing his body as he ripped open his condom packet with his teeth.

With one hand, he sheathed himself, penetrating me as he laid me back in the bed. It was hard, fast, and hot. So fucking delicious, it had me licking my lips as the slight pain of my walls being fucked so hard brought me to a quick release.

Before I could even catch my breath, Jared flipped me over onto my knees and scooted me further up onto the bed to kneel behind me, fucking me and fingering my clit at the same time.

Tossing my head back, I could feel his breath on my neck before he kissed me, causing me to shake against him and tighten around him with another release. “Oh, fuck,” I said, gasping aloud, trying to catch my breath as my body folded in on itself.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you,” Jared said, not slowing down, deepening my pleasure and bringing it to a crescendo. Trying to speak brought no words, just euphoric cries.

“Shit.” I heard Jared say before he pulled out of me. The bed shook, and Mario didn’t waste any time sliding beneath me and gripping my breasts, sucking on them as he pulled me against his body and held me tight around the waist. His hands moved sensually and desperately over my back and ass, gripping it so hard, I saw stars. Feeling him spread my cheeks and air kiss my pussy filled me with no greater need than to ride him.

Taking all of him in me was fast, easy, and electrifying. My hips wound against him so that every inch of him could be savored and felt grazing my organs. “You feel so good.”

My eyes rolled back in my head before I could do anything else but move in to kiss him, suck on his tongue, and feel his wet warm mouth move over mine. My ass slapped his hips, and he looked at me with eyes so bright and happy. My heart warmed at the thought that he felt that way with me. That

warmth moved throughout my entire body until it surrounded him with my next orgasm.

“Fuck,” he groaned, throwing his hips up in me and holding onto my neck so that he could stare into my eyes. He bit his bottom lip, giving it to me before he pulled me down to kiss me so hard, I could’ve sworn I came again.

“Shit,” I said, panting against his lips, trying to catch my breath. He slowed his pace to give me that moment, moving his hips so sexily against me I could hear my own heartbeat.

“Nothing could’ve prepared me for the moment we met, but I want you to know, I don’t regret a single moment we’ve spent together,” he said.

The tears that sprung to my eyes, stinging me, weren’t expected. “Mario...” I started, looking down into his face, running my hand through his hair.

“Tiffany,” he breathed, taking my lips again before flipping me on my back and making sweet, slow love to me in missionary until he came, tugging my hair with one hand and gripping the sheet with the other. His orgasm and the warm weight of his body pressing against me triggered my own, and I shook against him.

“Sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t hold back.” He grinned as if he were embarrassed.

I smiled, kissing him, once, twice, staring into his eyes. “That was incredible.”

He bit his bottom lip, and his smile brightened his face before he kissed me once more, hopping off me as I raised up on my knees.

The other two guys were jerking themselves off, and their faces were tense with what seemed like anguish from holding back their own release. “Come here,” I said, smiling at both of them.

As they walked toward me, I played with my own breasts, watching as it taunted them. I kissed them both before licking down the length of Jared’s body and then Anthony’s.

“I’m so fucking lucky that all of this is for me.” My breasts ached with that genuine confession, and I bent over to pull the condoms from their bodies and take them into my mouth one at a time.

To my delight, Mario decided to keep feeding me as he stroked my clit and fingered me so that I moaned with them deep in my mouth.

“Fuck,” Anthony groaned, before pulling me off him and pushing me backward onto the bed. Like a magician, he produced another condom before sinking himself inside me. While he fucked my pussy, I called Jared to fuck my mouth. It was a bit awkward for him, but we made it work as he climbed over my face and fucked my mouth like it was my ass or my pussy.

“You know, Jared. Your ass isn’t the best view I could’ve chosen here,” Anthony both moaned and groaned in complaint. My pussy tightened around Anthony as I was

forced to suppress any desire to laugh, especially since Jared's dick was at the back of my throat and my body was filling with warmth from Anthony's strokes.

"Gotta say, I can't complain about my view," Jared said, throwing his head back as he groaned. "You okay there, beautiful?" he asked, pulling himself out of my mouth a little.

After giving myself a second to breathe, I grabbed his ass and pulled him back into my mouth, bringing him to his release and swallowing his creamy ejaculation. That was a first.

"I'm so sorry," Jared said. "I didn't pull out in time..."

Swallowing again, I cocked my head, thinking about it. "You know what? I don't think I hated it," I said.

Jared grinned, climbing off me before lowering himself to kiss me. In the meantime, Anthony was going wild in response to what he just heard, driving himself deeper and harder into me, groaning and filling my ears with the sound of his ecstasy. His hairy chest was so sexy to me, I reached for it, tugging on the hairs. It moved against the palm of my hand, rough, yet gentle, teasing my nerves. I could feel it in my pussy. As I tightened around him, he exploded within me bringing me along with him.

Chapter 8

Jared

Her body had the power to take down the most dignified of men. That's what I hoped I still was. Dignified. But every time she looked at me, I lost my self-control and succumbed to failure. Failure to resist her caused me to not only lose my best friend but now, my entire reputation and my company's reputation was on the line. Fucking her in the file room wasn't who I was before and weakening before her the way I had, couldn't be who I was becoming.

Next to me, Tiffany was a vision of beauty. Freckled, pale, yet orange-tinted skin. Her breasts peeked at me over the covers, and I ached to pull the sheet lower and ease the guys off her so I could see more. The memory of how she swallowed me last night with a smile on her face had me staring at her mouth. The pads of my fingers yearned to stroke her lips, kiss them. Damn it. It wasn't her fault she was so damn irresistible. She couldn't help it, but I could.

My employees and partners needed me to try harder. They needed to look at me with respect again. The respect I worked so hard to build yet lost due to a lack of responsibility. We

could have fucked anywhere else, even in my goddamn office for fuck sake, with the blinds closed and the doors locked. The walls were soundproofed. But nostalgia for the moment she captured me begged to be re-visited in that file room, and I gave into my urges.

Only weak men gave into their urges so easily at the risk of losing everything, without caring for the consequences. Damn it, I'd grown weak. My heart constricted, squeezing me to tears. I thought I was about to have a heart attack at the thought. Weakness wasn't a great survival skill to have, not as a lawyer or as a man. My body broke out in sweat as I pulled myself out of the bed, jumping from it as if it were a tub of water someone just dropped a toaster in.

We all had urges and temptations, but it was our ability to set our priorities straight and fight those temptations that determined our strength. So, despite the ache in my groin and the wave of current rushing through my skin, flipping my heart over at the memory of her kiss and the taste of her, I had to be strong enough to put my lust for her behind me, at least for right now. I needed that strength to hold up my crumbling company and reputation.

The Crawford name was at risk, which meant our partnership at the company my father found was at stake, and that needed to be my priority. Not my feelings for Tiffany or my relationship with Chris. Not the guilt that mocked me and told me that I was a failure and a hack of a friend. Or my conscience when it came to Tiffany, her family, and putting her in the line of fire on that stage when she should have been

working on trying to fix things with them. No, my priority was Crawford & Beam, and it was under attack by those same people, her family.

It was unfortunate, but this was no time to take emotional risks. And she was an emotional risk. It wasn't just her sex that drove me crazy; I liked her and the fire she injected in my life. Losing that fire would be a nightmare. I had a taste of that before. It was horrid. But losing this firm? It was my life and the only thing left of my father that I could keep alive. He didn't deserve to be taken down by greedy, undignified snakes. It killed him, and he never got a chance to see this place come to life again, to see its expansion and its success. I revived it in his memory, and nobody would take it down again. Not even the parents of the woman I felt I couldn't live without.

Hurriedly, I grabbed my clothes and exited the room to get dressed, knowing that if she awoke and called me back to bed, all of my resolve would be broken down and shattered. If her eyes opened to greet me, and her morning voice called my name, my dick would do all the thinking for me.

Pausing as I buttoned my shirt, I hesitated. It felt like leaving her here without an explanation was an insensitive thing to do, but what were my other choices? Having heart-to-heart conversations about stuff like this wasn't something that came easy for me. I didn't even know where to start. Grumbling, I tugged at my hair, threw on my shoes, and headed out the door.

With the closing of her front door behind me, I bit down on my hand as my feet found it hard to walk away. She asked yesterday if we were trying to find a way to break up with her, if that was what we wanted. It wasn't what I wanted, but I found myself wondering if it was the best thing we could do. What kind of a foundation could we have built on such animosity and resentment between her, her family, and us? What happened between us last night was a mistake. Wasn't it? A mistake that I wanted to make again and again. But still a mistake, regardless.

It was all too complicated, and I didn't have the space to think about it right now. I had to get to work and do what I should have done yesterday instead of leaving the press conference to indulge in the desires that got me in this mess in the first place. All my attention should be on saving what I had left of my workers, my clients, and my company.

Chapter 9

Anthony

My nose was pressed into the softness of her sheets. Her floral-scented detergent cradled my face. Her mild but sweet shampoo caressed my skin, and the smell of our sex enveloped me in a warm embrace. Breathing in and out felt calming. It was like this was exactly where I should be, and that was the problem. Not her. Me. And the need to be in a woman's bed to feel safe despite how much it hurt my best friend. Despite how much it hurt... anyone.

What was wrong with me? I never cared for the husbands of the women I slept with. Somehow, I could always justify it. Maybe the husband was out there having his fun too, so there was nothing wrong with his wife fucking me. And the women who developed feelings for me, they should have known better than to expect anything other than sex from me.

Sex gratified me and screw the consequences. Even when I slept with Chris' ex, I could justify it somehow. They were broken up, so it didn't matter, but it did, to Chris. Still, it didn't matter to me too much about the boundaries I'd

overstepped, only that I'd managed to lose my best friend over it.

I vowed I'd never hurt him again. Until Tiffany.

And I justified that too. She was an adult, she wanted me, I wanted her. So what if her brother was my best friend? It wouldn't be the first time a sister hooked up with her brother's best friend. And if Chris couldn't accept that, then he didn't have to find out. In my mind, I didn't care about whether or not I was wrong, only that I was getting what I wanted and what Chris didn't know couldn't hurt him.

Except it could. And it was different this time; I should've learned from my first mistake, but I didn't. I chose to continue seeing Tiffany because *I* couldn't get her out of *my* head. Because of my selfishness. And she was so irresistible to me because somehow, deep down in my twisted subconscious, I liked the thought of getting caught, even if it was by Chris. Even if it would break him. Why? I had no idea.

At nearly forty years old, I had no idea why I did the things I did. That I'd always done, despite who it may affect. If I'd gone to a shrink, and it was a woman, I'd probably end up fucking her. But after that, she'd probably tell me that it was linked to my childhood. It was always linked to the fucking childhood, wasn't it? Perhaps it had to do with the fact that when my parents separated, I didn't get to see my father as much. And my mother tried to find love a bunch of times, only to be left heartbroken by a trail of men with empty promises.

Maybe those men taught me how to be 'men' through their actions. Because men used, they got what they wanted, and they ran.

Gulping against the sickness rising in my stomach, the realization that I had become them, the type of men who I secretly resented, slammed into me. It was always my belief that I wasn't like them. Lying to a woman to get into her pants wasn't necessary. It was a cowardly and insecure way to do it. Being honest about what I was looking for always worked for me because the women mostly understood that it was nothing more than a transaction. Setting the cards down on the table from the get-go wasn't as sinister as what they did, which was selling women false promises. But I was wrong.

Just because sex was transactional for me, it didn't stop women from wanting more from a man they let inside their body. And the fact that they did made me resent them; they reminded me that I was hurting them just as those men hurt my mother. Even after I told them exactly what to expect. After I tried to make sure that I wouldn't hurt them by telling them the truth. Resentment toward them burned like bile rising out of my stomach because it felt like in the end; they wanted to hurt themselves and make me the bad guy.

How sick was that? Of course, they expected someone they let inside their body to have some ounce of care for them. It wasn't foolish of them to expect that. And if it were me who happened to develop feelings or feel guilt, it would terrify me. I was too afraid to offer more than I had to give. I didn't want to offer commitment, which was essentially a promise I wasn't

sure I could keep. It wasn't just with women either. Obviously, it affected my relationship with Chris too. As a best friend, I couldn't stick to the fucking promise to respect him enough to not cross certain lines. It was just all about me, all about 'Anthony' getting whatever the fuck he wanted.

With Tiffany, everything I feared was being brought to the surface like all the gunk rising out of a clogged sink. At first, she felt safe enough to fuck despite the whole Chris situation; she knew what she was getting into. It was fun for all of us, and I didn't think there would be any risks of feelings developing. I was wrong.

My attachment toward her was growing, and hers was growing toward me too. Her eyes told me earlier when I teased her for being jealous. Damn it. Running would make it easier for everyone. Crawford & Beam was already crumbling. Chris hated me. Tiffany didn't, but I couldn't sleep with her or look at her without thinking about how much our involvement with each other was destroying her relationships with the people she cared for. I wanted to disappear. It felt like it was the answer to everyone's questions at the moment. Even the thought of disappearing from myself brought me relief because looking in the mirror only confused me now. The person looking back at me wasn't someone I liked.

Taking care to remove my arm from her body, I flung my feet over the side of the bed. However, Tiffany ruined my smooth escape. She caught hold of my hand and tugged on it so that I stumbled back onto the mattress.

“Good morning, handsome.” She grinned, and her morning voice sent shockwaves through my body, stirring my groin. Fuck.

It would’ve been easy to turn around and forget all my misgivings of before, make my dick do all the talking for me, bury myself into her for some morning sex. But I needed to learn self-control. I needed to learn to put others before myself. Her, Chris...

Sitting up in the bed, I made to stand again, keeping my back toward her so she wouldn’t melt me with her gaze or her messy bedhead. Her hands weren’t ready to let me go though, and they moved from my back to my stomach. The warmth of her body serenaded me as she wrapped her arms around me. Fuck. She felt so fucking good. But this was so fucking bad. Damn, I was so obsessed with being bad; knowing it was only thrilled me more.

Her breath tickled my cheek and before I knew what was happening, she moved her hand from my waist to turn my head toward her. If her lips met mine now, I was a goner. My heartbeat was going crazy but at the very last minute, I got my first lesson in self-control, turning my head away so that her kiss landed on my cheek. That only made things the tiniest bit easier.

“I should be getting ready to go to work,” I said, all hoarse and shit before pulling myself from her embrace and jumping up from the bed, feeling embarrassed for the first time in my life. I was naked, and she was looking at me with both hunger

and confusion. Grabbing my clothes and shoes from the floor, I hurried from the room.

On my way out the door, I caught a glimpse of a shimmer in her eye, and I wasn't sure, but it seemed as if her eyes had grown wet with tears. Oh, fuck. My heart dropped, and there was a tug on my back, pulling me and trying to turn me back into the room to check on her, make sure she was okay. But fuck, if I didn't leave this apartment right now, I'd never fucking leave. And leaving felt like the right thing to do. It felt safer than staying.

Fuck. I hurried from her apartment, feeling even lower and more lost than when I'd just woken up.

Chapter 10

Tiffany

It was incredible how I went from a crowded bed to an empty bed in the blink of an eye. It seemed as if I was exceptional at making people want nothing at all to do with me. Call me a fucking magician. Hey! That could be my next job, making people disappear since I was such a high achiever in that department. You know me, never mediocre at anything.

Loneliness hit first; the silence and the chill of the morning air tortured my skin without anyone to hold and keep me warm. The inability to escape from my crumbling life was what hit me next. Jumping out of bed to get ready for work wasn't an option. No one wanted to be associated with me. My reputation was shot to hell because my mother painted me as a whore, and my father painted me as a victim. I was neither, but no one cared about that. No one actually cared about me. The public and my parents cared about perception. Chris and the guys only cared about themselves and their lousy friendship that couldn't survive this.

Yesterday made me think differently about the guys. We came together, and they didn't look at me like spoiled milk.

They didn't want to run for the hills. And I thought that despite everything breaking down around me, at least things were back to normal between my men and me. But this morning was trying to wake me up to the fact that nothing lasts forever, and no one else would ever have my back but me. I found no strength in that fact.

All I felt was emptiness, and all I heard was deafening silence, like nails on a chalkboard making my teeth rub against each other. My head felt like it was about to explode, and my chest was so tight, it could have burst open. All of that tension and pressure was building up inside me with nowhere to go, pushing pleading tears from my eyes and sweat from my skin as it found ways to seep out. Soon, the tiny pressure of tears became a raging flood bursting from my eyes and nose, pouring down my face in snot and salt water.

The pure force of unrestrained emotion shook my body until I was gasping for air. Loneliness felt like a punishment, completely undeserved with no escape from the torture. It didn't seem fair; nothing I'd done seemed to justify me losing everything, but here I was, trying to figure out what the meaning of all this was. Because it had to mean something. Otherwise, it was cruel and harsh without reason. To be discarded as if I meant nothing to no one and who I was wasn't valuable. Without a lesson at the end, without meaning, what was the point of suffering? What was the point of being hung out in the harsh, unforgiving sun, left to dry?

My body felt heavy, and so did my mind. Maybe the lesson was learning how to stand on my own two feet without

needing the approval of anyone to keep my head up. And one day, when I was strong enough to learn that lesson, I was sure that I would, but today wasn't that day. Today, I could sink into the softness of the mattress and beg for it to hold me, to be my only support as the coldness of the world quivered my teeth and rattled my bones. So, I fell sideways into the bed and cradled myself in the fetal position; any other movement felt impossible.

As if things hadn't been bad enough, I knew that yesterday's press conference was only pouring gasoline into an open flame. But my naivete thought that I would have the guys by my side to fight the battle with me. Because my parents wouldn't back down, it was about to get even uglier, and I was on my own to fight it.

Yet, as cold and insensitive as my mother could be, my already shambled heart shattered even more at the thought that she would never smile with me again, and she would never look at me again with pride. Instead, she would only look at me now with the resentful looks she'd given Chris, looks that I never thought he deserved. Perhaps the way she'd look at me now would be even worse. And that thought heated my eyes and crushed my bones. My father would follow her lead because Val Levine scared everyone, especially Benedict Levine.

And Chris? The last time he looked at me in the bar, it was with disgust, shock, and pain. If I had done something to deserve this treatment, it would hurt sure, but I wouldn't be this lost. But for nothing? I felt helpless, hopeless, and broken.

Being alone in this apartment allowed me to let everything go, and I lost awareness of how much I howled until the contrast of a voice burst through the bathroom door across the way from my bedroom.

“Tiffany? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Mario stood in the door frame for a few seconds as he stared at me wide eyed before he ran into my bedroom with his arms wide open. Almost choking on my tears in fright at the realization I wasn’t alone, I gasped and jumped to sit up straight, staring at him as if I were dreaming. My heart flipped over with a bit of hope, then clenched in fear of hoping. My shocked silence lasted all but one minute before I was a big mess of tears and ugly sobs. It was too late to save face now anyway, to pretend as if I weren’t crying, and that everything was completely fine. Right now, being strong didn’t matter to me.

I just wanted to be held.

Chapter 11

Mario

My body's reaction was instinctive at the sight of her tears. My toes were pointed in her direction, and my heels pushed me forward. With arms stretched wide and the need to take her pain away, I hurried to her side. Fresh tears attempted to wash away the stains of the ones that dried up on her puffed cheeks. And her body shook against me as I held her.

If there was anything I could do to never see her cry this way again I would do it. My heart fell with a thump to my feet as I held her tighter.

"It's okay," I said, rocking her as she unfolded herself in my arms, moving to hug me around the neck as I cradled her waist. "It's okay," I whispered again in her hair, stroking the messy strands and massaging her scalp with the pads of my fingers.

"No, it's not," she said, sputtering from her nose against my naked chest. "Oh, I'm so sorry." She eased herself up to wipe the slabber away. "I'm such a mess. I'm so disgusting," she started before I shushed her.

“It’s okay. I don’t mind,” I admitted. After being granted access to so many parts of her body and giving her access to mine, a bit of slabber didn’t bother me. She had as much of me in her as I had of her. At this point, we were bound.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, easing away so that I could look at her and wipe her tears away from her reddened eyes with my thumb.

She couldn’t bring herself to meet my eyes, so I held her face in my hands, searching her wandering green eyes until they focused on me. “What’s wrong, beautiful?” I asked again.

She opened her mouth to speak, and her lips trembled. I smoothed them with my thumb, wanting to kiss it better but not doing so. I’d rather hear her speak. Have her release the thoughts she had bottled up only to be surrendered when she thought she was on her own.

“Tell me,” I said, pressing my forehead against hers as my heart reached out its hands for hers.

“I’m scared,” she admitted in a rush.

“Scared?” I asked, as she moved away from me to lie down as if the admission was too heavy, and she didn’t want to keep talking. Refusing to move from the side of her bed, I stroked her legs, which she had pulled up underneath her. She watched me, and my hand stilled. “What are you scared of Tiffany?”

She swallowed, and her breathing grew shorter. “It’s okay,” I said. “You can tell me. You’re not going to scare me away.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” she said, turning her eyes away from me.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, waiting.

She sighed and flipped onto her other side, clutching her pillow.

“Would you like me to leave?” I sighed in return, feeling as if I were invading her space and private time.

After a beat or two, she rose, running her hand through her hair, flopping her shoulders as fresh tears streamed down her face.

“No,” she said, taking my hand and resting her forehead up against the side of my shoulder. “That’s the problem. Everyone’s leaving me. Last night, I fell asleep with three men in my bed and woke up with no one. It’s just reinforcing the past few days. That one day, it seems as if I have everything and the next day, I have nothing. I don’t know what I’m trying to say. I’m just scared to fall asleep and wake up to everything being pulled out from under my feet. I’m afraid that everything and everyone will leave my life until I’m homeless and lonely with nothing and no support.”

She began to hyperventilate.

“I’m afraid to want because if I want, then I’m setting myself up to lose what I want, who I want...” She paused as her words trailed off, and her eyes widened as if the disaster she was imagining in her head had morphed into this monster that was chasing her.

“It’s okay, baby. Breathe,” I said as my own breath shortened in response to hers. “Breathe,” I said, taking deep breaths myself, allowing our breaths to syncopate.

When our breaths were steady, I tilted her head up to look at me. “Look, no matter what happens, as long as it’s in my control and power, you’ll never be homeless...” I started, and she cut me off, shaking her head.

“You’ve done too much already,” she said. “You’re not obligated to take care of me. I don’t want to depend on you. One day, you may decide...”

“Never.” I silenced her. “Look at me, never. As long as you need me, I’ll be here. And you’re not depending on me, I’m offering you this as a token of my...” I gulped as awareness slapped me in the head and slammed into my chest at full speed.

Clearing my throat, I tried again. “I’ll never be able to do too much for you.”

An overwhelming need to confess consumed me. The words were right on the tip of my tongue. ‘I love you.’

My heart swelled so large, it could have burst in my chest as I looked at her. It wasn’t just three words I could say to make her feel better. They were three words I could say that would scare the living hell out of me because they were true. Damn, I loved her. I was in love with her.

Nerves crept up my back and played with the strings of my heart like an instrument. And my chest tightened. I was in love

with Tiffany, and that held me still in shock. Nausea pulled at my stomach at the thought, not because there was anything wrong with loving this wonderful woman. Loving her meant more to me than ‘seeing where things could go with us.’ Loving her meant wanting to be with her, being able to envision a future with her, and there were a few problems with this.

Whenever I envisioned my future before her, it had me, the love of my life in a conventional marriage and having a child or two. But this dynamic was the furthest thing from conventional. And while I knew I cared for Tiffany since I wouldn’t have continued to sleep with her if I didn’t, with how our relationship was set up, thinking of the future was forbidden.

With her, I wouldn’t overthink it. All I knew was that regardless of what happened between us, she would have my respect. She would know that she was cared for. But deep down, it was always a given that someday, it would have to come to an end, especially because of Chris.

In my head, I’d seen us always remaining as amicable as possible afterward, looking back at this as a fun time with hopefully no regrets on her end or mine. In my head, we’d always be friends, no matter what. But imagining a future with her seemed impractical. Me, my two best friends and my wife? Would she even want to be married to me or would I date other people? It was crazy to think about.

Now, to be in love with her? She wasn't the only one who was afraid now. I was terrified.

"Are you okay?" she asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. My stomach roared with the need to upchuck its sparse contents.

"Huh?" I asked her.

"You've gone pale," she said. "You're having second thoughts, aren't you?" she asked.

"About making sure you're taken care of?" I asked. "Never." I shook my head.

That part was true. I'd never leave her stranded if she needed me, materially or even emotionally, but could I commit to being there for her romantically and give up on the future I envisioned for myself? In the long term, could I trade in myself for a relationship with someone who couldn't devote herself romantically only to me as I wished to do for her?

Short-term, this was fun and different for me. A great experience outside of my comfort zone. But long-term, I was afraid of losing myself because this dynamic wasn't me. Or was it? Damn it, I needed some air and some space to think.

"Hey," I said, pulling her forward and kissing her on her forehead. "Are you going to be okay?" I asked. "You don't have to be worried about being homeless. As long as I still own this complex, there'll always be a place here for you. You'll never be broke as long as I have money in my bank

account and before you tell me it's too much..." I said, pressing my thumb against her lips.

The brush of her lips against my thumb made me tremble, and I pulled it away as if I got burned.

"It's never too much," I whispered, wishing so badly that she were mine and mine alone, but knowing that she couldn't be. If I wanted her, I'd have to be okay with sharing her. And right now, it was a lot for me to process. Getting up from the bed, I made my way back into the bathroom for a shower.

"See you later?" I asked her.

She mustered up a smile for me and nodded. Locking myself in the bathroom for a moment to figure out what my feelings meant for us came with a welcome relief before I left her apartment and headed home.

Chapter 12

Jared

Walking into my firm was like trying to complete an obstacle course with a bed of nails that everyone was trying to get across. Whispers stopped as soon as I stepped into the building, and everyone in the lobby shuffled to either get back to work or pretend they had something more important to do. As for me, I spotted some of my partners and hurried toward the stairs, opting to take those instead of the elevator to avoid running into them.

When I finally got the fuck to my floor, I was panting. Gratitude to my morning swims for keeping me active enough to not pass out or sweat profusely in this damn suit soared within me. Melissa looked up in shock when she saw me coming from the direction of the stairs and reaching for my handkerchief to dab the sweat from my forehead and the top of my lip.

Her mouth fell open, and I greeted her before she could say anything. “Good morning, Melissa,” I said, moving swiftly toward my office.

“Good morning, Mr. Crawford. You have a...” she started.

But I had already opened the door to my surprise before she could finish. Groaning with the need to sit in the coolness of my office and knowing that I wouldn't have a moment of silence now, I closed the door behind me.

"Good morning, Chris," I started as I made my way to my desk.

"Let's skip the greeting." He raised his hand. "I need you to drop this suit against my parents. What the hell is wrong with you? Haven't you done enough?" he asked.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on there. It was too early for this. What I needed was a break, a sip of water, and maybe a coffee, not Chris yelling at me. Setting my bag down, I went over to the water machine. Chris was breathing heavily in the visitor's chair in front of my desk as he watched me with impatience. The coolness of the water coupled with that of my office gave me the chill in my bones I was looking for. After tossing the paper cup in the rubbish, I moved toward my desk to sit and press the button on my phone that connected me to Melissa. "Would you mind getting me a coffee?" I asked her.

"Sure, you don't want something stronger, Mr. Crawford?" she asked.

Her light response caught me off guard since the heaviness of the past week made this office feel like it was filled with smog, making it hard for us all to breathe. I almost smiled, but it would have been insensitive.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to be reckless," I said, instead.

“That ship has already sailed,” Chris said under his breath.

Hanging up the phone, I inhaled and exhaled deeply before folding my hands before me on my desk and facing Chris.

“Look, Chris. I’m afraid I can’t withdraw the suit. Your parents are the ones who forced my hand and unless they take back their false claims against me, I would be doing myself, the firm, and the people involved in this claim a disservice if I withdraw the suit,” I said.

“So, sleeping with my sister wasn’t enough, you have to go and fuck my parents too? They don’t deserve to lose everything they worked so hard for,” he started, his face as red as a tomato.

My own blood bubbled as I looked at him in disbelief, scrunching my brows and flaring my nose, trying to grab ahold of my temper.

“Did you watch the news? Or are you set on deafening yourself to the truth? Your parents are the ones who made false claims against me, my company, my partners, and Tiffany. They did it and challenged us to a lawsuit, and they’re the ones destroying everything. What about me? Am I supposed to lose everything I worked so hard to build, that my father worked so hard to build, over a few lies?” I asked.

“None of this would be happening if you hadn’t been a perv and slept with a twenty-one-year-old when you’re nearly forty!” Chris shouted, and I found myself rising from my seat.

“You said it yourself, twenty-one! Last time I checked, that made her an adult, Chris, and it wasn’t anything like what your father is trying to paint. We both consented, and we did nothing wrong. None of us did, and your family wants to destroy our entire lives over our private CONSENSUAL sex life? Have you guys lost your mind?” I yelled.

“So, you don’t think you did anything wrong?” he yelled back, rising from his seat as well, meeting my challenge. “You don’t think you did anything wrong?!” he asked again. “What kind of sick person are you to think it’s okay for all three of you to get together and fuck one woman as if she’s your little fucking sex toy that you can play with. As if she doesn’t mean anything to you. And to go behind my back and choose my little sister for something like that? As if our friend...” He paused. “Twenty-one or not? You’re fucking disgusting!”

The pure revulsion in his eyes and the hate in his voice gave me pause, and I lowered my voice. “Is that what you think she is to us?” I asked. “She’s not just...”

“I can’t stand here and listen to this. I better leave before I end up with my own fucking lawsuit on my hands,” Chris said, shutting me up and storming out the door.

“Wait, Chris,” I stuttered, moving off after him.

No wonder he was so mad if that was what he thought we saw in his little sister. He didn’t understand that our affections... my affections for her were genuine. He didn’t know. But maybe if he did, he’d feel differently. Sure, it would

still be a lot to digest but if he knew how much we valued her, it could change everything. I took off running after him.

“Chris! Wait,” I yelled, but he was too deafened by his rage to hear me as he ran into Anthony who was carrying a hot cup of coffee. The liquid scalded them both, and they howled.

“Shit.” Anthony gritted his teeth in pain.

“Dumb fuck!” Chris yelled, his eyes red with rage as he shoved Anthony into the chest with all his power, sending him flying to the floor. One glance at Anthony told me that he was more than a little humiliated, but my focus was on Chris.

“Fuck off, Jared,” he yelled over his shoulders without looking at me.

Swearing, he hit at the stain the coffee made, grumbling to himself. He was in the elevator and closing it before I could say anything, but it was my goal to help him understand that while it was wrong of us to go behind his back, the image he had in his head of his sister and us was false. My heart raced as I ran to the staircase, taking the stairs two at a time, trying to end up on the ground floor before him. By the time I swung open the downstairs door, sweat stung my eyes, my shirt was coming out of my pants, and my tie was swung over my shoulder. I looked wrecked, and he was already on his way out the door just as Mario was on his way in.

“Oh, for fuck sake!” he yelled at the sight of him, puffing his cheeks as he seemed to almost foam at the mouth in frustration and anger.

“Chris.” Mario stared at him stunned before jumping in front of him to try to get his attention. I had given up on trying. As fit as I was physically, emotionally and mentally, I was drained.

“Chris! Look at me,” Mario said as Chris bounced into his body, moving him out of his path. “Chris, don’t you know that I’d never hurt her!” Mario threw his arms up in the air in what could have only been exasperation. The same exasperation that had me sweating the fuck out of these clothes, utterly lost and confused, staring at them while feeling the eyes of my workers burn holes in my jacket.

Chris paused and hope was rebirthed inside me. What I expected to see when he turned around was forgiveness and understanding. He heard it in Mario’s voice what I wanted to tell him. That Tiffany was far too valuable to us to ever wish to cause pain. But that was too presumptuous of me. When he faced Mario, he was redder than he’d been before, and his green eyes seemed black when he looked from him to me.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay the fuck away from me,” he growled, digging his nails into the palm of his hand as he balled up his fist. It seemed to take everything he had inside him to spin around and keep making his way to the car when more than likely, he wanted to plant his fist into Mario’s face.

Mario ran his hand through his usually perfectly gelled hair, ruffling it up in the way we only saw it when he was at home or in Tiffany’s bed. His gesture made me take note of my

appearance, and I straightened my tie, trying to remain as dignified as I possibly could while looking back at my employees who had just seen me desperate for the first time. I was pretty certain that my goal to come back to the office today to regain their respect had not been accomplished.

Chapter 13

Mario

It was just on the tip of my tongue again. Gah! I almost said it.

'Don't you know I'd never hurt her! I love her!'

My love for Tiffany was almost professed on the entryway of Crawford & Beam. And if I weren't so fucking scared of loving her, it wouldn't have been a big deal. Especially under different circumstances but fuck, man. Look at Chris and Jared. Me. We were all losing it. An ache gripped the side of my head, and the nausea was back again.

We fucked Chris up, man. His eyes looked as though sleep was a long-lost friend who he hadn't seen in years. And his now lost friends slept comfortably last night in his sister's bed, in spite of it all.

His skin was paler except for when he was flushed red with fury. He lost weight for sure. In just one week, his clothes seemed to be a tad bit baggier than before. And with this new lawsuit against his parents, this could only get worse for him. He didn't deserve this, man. He was a father with two kids. He was a husband. And he was my best friend, despite how much

he hated me at the moment. Despite how lowly he thought of me, of us, I still loved him and hoped he wasn't drinking himself to bits over this. His children needed him, his wife needed him, and his job needed him. Fuck, man, I felt sick.

Loving Tiffany didn't just mean having to accept that I'd never be her one and only, but loving Tiffany meant breaking Chris. It meant crumbling organizations, tearing apart units of family and friendship. Loving her meant risking everything. And yet I couldn't stop. Deep down, I wasn't sure if I wanted to.

Sure, it scared me but fuck it, I loved her. Her smile lit me up and waking up next to her felt like beautiful chords being thrown together to create the most wonderful music.

Fuck, I loved her spirit and how she pulled me out of my comfort zone. Holding her and feeling the warmth of her body melt into my skin was like heaven. She was strong and spicy, yet elegant and bewildering. She was never boring and kept me on my toes.

But perhaps my love for her was selfish. If I loved her, wouldn't I have walked away by now after seeing how much pain it wasn't just causing everyone around us but her too? Wasn't I lying when I said I'd never hurt her? Did my love hurt her? Fuck.

No.

I wasn't making sense. At this point, I'd rubbed my beard so many times, the next time I would have pulled some hair from my face. Jared left the lobby, and probably went back to his

office. The last thing I wanted to do was step foot inside this company and tackle even more fucking problems.

Groaning, I walked straight for the elevator with my lids lowered, wishing I could close my eyes altogether and not have to face anyone. Thankfully, it seemed no one wanted to face me either, and I got to ride the elevator alone.

Finally by myself, if only for a few seconds, I rested the back of my head against the coolness of the metal box, closing my eyes and sighing. As much as I was filled with self-doubt, I couldn't let myself think it was better to leave her alone. Because when it came down to it, neither Jared, Anthony, nor I were the ones who aired her privacy to the public, humiliating her and costing her job. We weren't the ones who left her high and dry, weaponizing love. That was her family.

So as much as guilt was telling me that my love for her was selfish, her parents' version of love was even worse than mine. Even if they believed the lies her father spewed, love wouldn't shun her and discard her to save their own image. Love would support her, check up on her, take her away from us to protect her. And as much as that would've infuriated me, Tiffany, Jared, and Anthony, knowing our truth, I'd be okay with letting her go so she could be in the arms of a family who loved her. I'd still sue her parents for defamation, sure but at least I would've been able to convince myself that her family acted out of love.

But they didn't. They chose their ego; they chose something dark and ugly. They chose rejection. My love could never

abandon her, despite my own fears.

Organizations weren't crumbling, and Chris wasn't breaking because of me. My only error was keeping it from him... and maybe we could've all chosen a private location instead of the file room to keep us from being discovered. But that was an error on all our parts. Tiffany loved the idea, and we loved the idea. That didn't justify all of this, having us lose everything.

It was Chris' parents who were breaking him. I'd take responsibility for lying to him, but I wouldn't take responsibility for everything else. Their parents were hurting Tiffany; I was trying my best not to. That realization should have relieved me somehow, but it didn't. As I left the elevator, my eyes blurred with emotion, and my body felt like I'd suddenly gained eighty pounds. Today would be a long day.

Chapter 14

Anthony

“Hey, Ant. You okay?”

Trying to dab at the tender skin on my stomach with some cold water, I spun around to face Jared.

“Fuck, man. You look like shit,” I said with an upward glance at his overall appearance.

“Yeah,” he said, running his hand through his hair and leaning up against my door frame. “Shit, that looks bad. You should probably see a doctor.”

“Yeah, I might do that,” I said, grabbing my car keys and walking past him. “Hey, lock up for me, will you?”

“What do you mean? It shouldn’t take you long at the doctor’s office, and we have to go over the lawsuit,” he asked, looking at me with panic in his eyes.

“Bro, when’s the last time you’ve been to a doctor? If the office is full, who knows when I’ll be back. Unless you don’t think this is that serious after all,” I said, playing the guilt card.

He dropped his head, sighing. “No, it looks bad. Yeah, I’ll lock up. If it’s not full though, try to get back here as soon as

you can?" he said.

I nodded. The truth was that I wasn't going to see a doctor; I deserved the pain. The ongoing burning feeling that couldn't be eased with the cold water felt like my karma after all the pain I had caused. It was just punishment.

Instead, I would do what I did best. Get drunk and see where the rest of the day took me. Stopping at Lion's Bar was probably a bad idea since I knew it was Chris' favorite spot. But deep down, a part of me hoped to run into him again so he could give me another beating. Beating myself up wasn't quite getting the job done. But luckily or unluckily for me, he hadn't shown up. At the very least, I had the memory of the last time we were all in here together. The moment I realized I was the scum of the earth. Cheers to that.

"Let me have equal parts gin, vodka, rum, and whiskey. And keep 'em coming. I want to be dragged out of here today," I said to the lone bartender in the otherwise empty bar.

"Dude, it's ten a.m.," he said, looking all handsome and youthful.

"So?" I asked with a snarl, staring at him. He put his hands up in the air, backing away from me to make my drink.

Staring hard at him, I asked, "How old are you, man?"

"About as old as your girlfriend," he said with a snicker.

I nodded as the need to haul his ass over the counter overcame me. But well, I deserved this, remember? The

humiliation, the pain, the mockery. All of it. So, I swallowed my rage.

Fake laughing, I wagged my finger at him as he brought my drink over to me. “Clever,” I said, taking a sip. “And brave. You know if you weren’t serving me my drinks, I might have been mad, but this should obliterate all my thoughts anyway, right?” I said before downing the harsh mixture that burned my esophagus on top of the already burning sensation on my abdomen.

I winced.

“Hey, are you okay man?” he asked, all worried all of a sudden.

“What do you care?” I asked.

“Look, I was just messing around. Do you need me to call someone?” he asked.

“And who would you call? My girlfriend?” I smirked. “Better yet, you could call her brother. Bet he’d prefer if your pretty ass were dating her instead. Where’s my other drink?” I muttered.

By drink nine, I was wobbling out of the bar, laughing at the fact that I could hardly feel my feet as my body swung with each step forward. The burning sensation from earlier was forgotten. In fact, I couldn’t even remember my name. On my way to my car, a few hands pulled me to a stop, gripping me, and I yelped, shrugging them off, feeling as if whatever I was

running from, my inner demons had caught up to me, and they were about to take me away.

“Hey, hey, hey, okay, steady there,” a voice said. It was high pitched, but I couldn’t tell if that was because of my own disorientation since the other voices surrounding it sounded warbled. “You’re in no fit state to drive, are you crazy?” they continued.

Spinning around, about to tell off whoever it was, the blurred vision of women in business suits all rushed to my aid.

“I came here for brunch, not this shit,” another voice that sounded female said as her faint silhouette walked away. “When you guys are done with him, meet me inside.”

“Bye.” Wobbling, I waved with a curl of my lip. “I wasssn’t evennn asking for yourrr help, anyway.” My words slurred.

“Come on, we’ve got to get you home,” yet another voice said.

“Home? I’m not going to your home,” I said. “How old are you?” My arms felt like they were floating away from my body. Turned out that they were just swinging them over their shoulders.

“Forty. How old are you?” the voice responded. It was friendly.

“Almost forty,” I grinned. “What a messsss, right?” I asked, waving a hand over my body.

“Wait,” I said, struggling to be released from their hold.
“Are you married? Seeing someone?”

“Why? You wanna date her?” A voice snickered.

“From the looks of things, he doesn’t seem to be doing too bad for himself, financially even if he is a sorry son of a bitch,” the other voice said. “That’s a nice car and check out that watch.”

That made me crack up a bit.

“He’d probably be a good catch if he sobered up; he’s pretty good looking,” someone teased.

The original voice grinned. “No. I’m single as ever. If you’re still interested after you’ve sobered up, maybe we can talk about it. How about that?” she asked just as I felt my body being shoved into a car. The door slammed behind me and then another door.

“So, where to?” the voice asked from the front of the car.

“Your place?” I said, grimacing and trying to sit up straight to make eye contact with her through her rearview mirror. But my head was pounding.

She grinned. “Yeah, I don’t think so. What’s your address?” she asked.

After grumbling it to her, her friends said, “If you think we’re letting you drive on your own with Mr. Crazy pants in your car, you must be out of your mind. I’ve got my pepper spray and taser just in case.” The car doors on either side of

me opened. “Scoot over, weirdo,” someone said before I was sandwiched between the bodies of a few women.

“I’ll take my car and follow behind you,” another one said before the door closed and the car started moving. My body swayed with the movement, and I rested my head, feeling it land against something soft.

“Oh, for the love of...” the woman groaned, but she didn’t push me away. Instead, she hissed under her breath before she stroked my back. “Guess you just had a bad day or something, huh? Hell knows we’ve all had our fair share, although we wouldn’t be crazy enough to drive drunk,” she tsked before pulling me closer.

“Ah, come here,” she said. My body eased into her embrace; a cuddle was exactly what I needed. It reminded me of why I always found solace in the arms of a woman. Maybe I just needed to stay away from the ones with baggage.

* * *

“All right! I’m on my way!” Responding to the relentless knocking on the door, I pulled myself from the couch, groaning and stretching to extend myself to my full length. It was probably the guys checking up on me.

My neck and back ached, but that stretch sent shivers down my spine.

The chill of the night air brushed against my cheeks upon opening the door but the fact that it was dark outside, and I had no idea when I got home, wasn’t my biggest surprise.

“So, you’re alive then,” the woman on the other side of the door said.

Rubbing my eye to remove the blur of confusion, I looked at her from head to toe. Nice legs in navy blue pantyhose, a skirt that loved her hips, and a shirt that wasn’t completely buttoned up.

“Do I know you?” I asked, wondering if it was a woman who I fucked before who didn’t get the memo.

She grinned. “Wow, you don’t remember anything, do you?”

“Gwen, hurry up! It’s getting late,” another voice yelled as they honked their horn. Sounded like another woman.

“Give me a second,” she yelled back before turning to me as I tried to peer through the darkness at the vehicles parked in my driveway.

“You were quite the damsel in distress at Lion’s Bar earlier,” she said. “If it weren’t for us, you probably wouldn’t be here. Just wanted to swing by to make sure you were okay.”

That’s right. The last thing I remembered was going to Lion’s Bar and having a chat with the pretty boy bartender before waking up here. As a matter of fact...

The rumbling in my stomach had me rushing from my door toward the closest bathroom, leaving the pretty stranger standing in my doorway.

“Oof!” she yelled at my departing back. “Looks about right. You should have a nasty hangover,” she said. Her voice was

muffled over the roar of the monster being released from my stomach as I hung my head over the toilet seat. Fuck. It felt like my entire soul was being pulled out of my body as I rocked from the full force of the constant hurling.

“Guys, looks like it’s going to be a minute,” the stranger at the door yelled.

“Aww, come on! He’ll be all right. We’ve done our part. Let’s go,” another voice said.

Heels clicked across the dark wooden floors of my living room and soon, another set of heels joined those. Before I could protest and tell the strangers to leave my house, another wave of sickness overtook me.

“What are you doing?” someone whispered.

“Preparing myself in case he’s a crazy psycho or something,” the voice responded. “Libby, put the mace away,” the original voice, Gwen I think, said.

“Yeah. No. If he comes out of there and attacks us, you’ll be thanking me,” Libby responded.

My brain rattled with the need to remind the strangers that they were in *my* house and if anyone should be macing anyone, it should be me. The nerve of these people. But after the ordeal my body just went through, I was hot, sticky, and smelly. My ego took precedence over logic as I locked my bathroom door—with the latch—and made my way into the shower.

Minutes later, a thousand times fresher, and my mouth tasting a million times better, I left the bathroom with a towel around my waist and marched into the living room. “Look, I don’t know who you guys are, but you need to get the hell out of my house,” I said, pointing toward the front door.

“Ungrateful bast...” one of the women said, looking up at me before her words were cut off by the sight of a ghost; apparently, she was frozen. But since her eyes never left me, the ghost must have been me standing before them in a white towel.

And going by the look in her eyes, it seemed she had a thing for ghosts.

“Damn,” she said. “You look a lot better when you’re not drunk out of your mind.” She ran her hand down the lapel of her shirt. It seemed unconscious on her part, but it brought my attention to the fullness of her breasts beneath her crisp, white, long-sleeved shirt.

All six of the women sitting on my lavish couch were brunettes, dressed similarly in half suits.

“Are you going to be okay, or do you think you need to see a doctor?” the one who must have been Gwen said.

In the light of my living room, I could see her blue eyes against dark lashes on a rounder face with two deep dimples on either side of her cheeks. She was cute. Pretty. Okay, she was hot. So were the rest of her friends and by the looks of it, they thought I was quite the looker since they hadn’t taken their eyes off my body.

But I was trying to change and sleeping with crazies who thought they had the freedom to walk into my house uninvited was definitely not the best idea. Yet, I still needed a distraction. I'd always need a distraction from Tiffany and the shit my selfishness with her caused.

“Who did you say you were again?” I asked her.

She smiled and approached me with an outstretched hand. “I’m Gwen,” she said.

It was a formal and distant handshake. It meant she wasn't trying to schmooze herself into my house for some sinister reason. Perhaps her concern was genuine. Definitely added to the attraction factor.

“That’s Libby, Sandra, Fiona, Sally, and Margaret,” she said.

Older names though a few of them didn't look their age. And the ones that did were still pretty hot.

“We found you heading toward your car, so drunk you couldn't even stand up straight. I offered to give you a drive home. My friends came as backup just in case you were a Ted Bundy type, faking helplessness to lure some unsuspecting woman into your dungeon. But well, the stench of the alcohol was hard to miss and as soon as you flopped inside my car, I figured you were harmless. Libby over there, still isn't that convinced,” she said, tossing her head toward the shorter woman with a few gray strands streaking her slicked-back low bun.

She was pretty. Sexy. With laugh lines around her eyes and cheek. Her lips were painted with a pink gloss, and she blushed from embarrassment as she tried to tuck the mace away.

“Libby is a smart woman,” I said. “Though you’re the ones who entered my house without being invited, so if anyone should be scared, it shouldn’t be you.” I smiled and sat in my arm chair, making sure to cross my legs so I didn’t flash them.

There was a line between a sexy tease and just throwing your junk into the face of someone who didn’t ask for it. They didn’t need to see what I was packing. Yet. Only if they wanted to.

“Oh, you’re right.” Gwen laughed, sweeping her hair behind her ear. “We should probably get going.” She turned around and headed toward the door, but she was flustered and blushing. It could’ve been her embarrassment by the realization of their intrusion into my personal space. But by the way she spoke to my chest and my hips, I was guessing her blush had something to do with her liking what she saw.

If I had truly changed, I would’ve let them leave but look, loneliness, especially tonight wasn’t appealing.

“You’re welcome to stay,” I said. “If you want.” Trying to get up was dizzying. My stomach felt empty, and my head felt light as I fell back into the chair.

Gwen came running forward, pressing her warm palm against my forehead. “Oh, my goodness, have you eaten at all today?” she asked.

“I don’t think so,” I confessed. And if I had, there wasn’t anything left in my stomach after throwing up that much.

“Where’s your kitchen?” Sandy or Sally, one of ‘S’ names asked. She was tall and curvy. She had quite the ass on her. It looked soft and welcoming. I couldn’t keep my eyes off it as she walked down my hallway.

“Oh, here it is! Found it,” she yelled.

A few minutes later, the buzz of my blender and the sounds of pots and pans banging together got my attention. Pulling myself up from the chair, I made my way into the kitchen to see her preparing eggs on the stove before pouring a smoothie in a glass for me.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“My mother was an alcoholic,” she said. “I have experience in helping her sober up. Here, drink this. It’s full of antioxidants, and your body needs that after you emptied your guts in the bathroom. And eat this. Protein is supposed to be good for something,” she said.

“What’s in it?” I asked, taking a sniff of the smoothie. It smelled delightful, and tasting it was even more pleasant. The last thing in the world that I wanted to do was eat something, but she went through all this effort, and I couldn’t ignore the effects of hunger.

“Just some fruits and yogurt,” she said. “How is it?”

“It’s good, thanks,” I said, drinking down as much as I could manage and seating myself around my kitchen island to

eat the eggs. She kept her eyes on me the whole time but as I looked up at her, she turned away, red as ever.

“Is something wrong?” I asked her.

With a hand pressed against her chest, she smiled. “No.” Her voice was hoarse. “Did it help?”

It did. So, I didn’t lie. “Yeah. How can I repay you? Any ideas?” I asked, wiping my hand over my mustache. I was sure the smoothie made a mess, and I was trying to be smooth. Leaning forward, I studied her.

“There’s no need,” she said, taking my glass and plate from me to carry to the sink.

She wasn’t leaving my kitchen. She was taking her time, finding other things to do like wiping down my sink and washing my blender. Coming up behind her, I reached for it, taking it from her hand.

“It’s okay. I’ll do that in the morning. Thanks, a... Nope,” I said, swerving at the last second as her breath brushed up on my lips. Almost tripping over my own feet and jumping back to put some distance between us, my towel came undone, falling around my ankles.

“Damn it,” I muttered, reaching for it to shield myself again, tucking it around the waist, tighter this time.

“Oh!” Her cheeks grew red, and she brought her hands to her mouth, staring at me with wide eyes.

Mirroring her, I raised my own hand to my face, swiping it over my mouth, exhaling.

“I’m so sorry.” She stuttered, gripping her chest before fanning herself. Her forehead grew damp in an instant. “I thought you were... Oh, my goodness, I’m so sorry. This is mortifying,” she said, stepping to the side so she could move past me in a rush. She kept her eyes on the floor, hurrying back into the living room with me behind her.

I groaned, not wanting her to feel as if she was being gaslit because she didn’t misread the signals. My movements were specific, to stir desire between us, and she was about to give into my seduction. But just as she leaned forward, the image of Tiffany was clear in my mind. I remembered the jealousy in her tone when she thought I had slept with someone else. Fuck. There was just no way to go through with it.

“What happened? Are you okay?” Gwen asked, jumping up to hold Sandra around her shoulders as she stared at me in my towel. Her eyes widened. “Did something...?” Her words trailed off.

“Let’s just go. We’ll talk about it after. Please?” Sandra looked pleadingly into Gwen’s eyes.

With all the other women staring at me, I felt the need to say something was even more important since I didn’t want to leave them to fill in the blanks, especially with Mr. Levine’s lies about me in the news.

“Look, Sandra. It’s okay,” I started.

“Oh dear,” she sighed, patting her cheeks. “It’s okay,” she breathed. “I’m a grown woman. I don’t need to run away in shame. I misread the signals and tried to kiss him... in his

house after we came in here without his permission,” she admitted as I breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that I didn’t have to say much after all.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, clearing her throat, trying not to break eye contact with me when I could tell she wanted to rush back through the door.

“It’s okay. You didn’t misread the signals. It’s just that... I uh... I’m seeing somebody,” I said, with a head shrug.

The words didn’t come out right. I wasn’t sure what Tiffany and I were at the moment. She claimed me as one of her men on national television. We slept together after I told myself once again that I wouldn’t, and I ran away because the guilt of the consequences of my actions made it hard to breathe and swallow.

But whatever we were had changed me. And I wasn’t sure if I liked it if that meant I could no longer give in to the recklessness and curse all the consequences just to be in her bed again. Or be with someone else if I couldn’t have her.

It would have been easier to fuck Sandra in the kitchen. Old Anthony would have been able to do so without guilt. And while it wouldn’t have helped me erase the image of Tiffany, it would’ve made it just a tiny bit easier to sleep tonight if only because it would tire me out.

Old Anthony was slipping away, and the newer version taking his place wasn’t someone I was accustomed to. Simply put, I didn’t know who I was anymore. The change was terrifying; old Anthony was my identity forever. Being

Anthony meant running away from the seriousness and the difficulties of anything. Be it the memories from my childhood or the day to day of my work, friends, attractions, whatever.

I'd know what to do to make it through the day. The answer was always a quick fix. Maybe some drinking. If I wanted a clear head and didn't want to be hungover, some fucking. But now, here I was with a willing woman in my home, and I was more lost than I'd ever been. What was this current Anthony supposed to do now? Maybe new Anthony could drink. But drinking didn't give me the same kind of high that sex did. Honestly, I'd be glad if I never saw the bottom of an empty glass ever again after today.

So, what was I supposed to do? Sit with it. Sit with the agonizing pain of loss, confusion, loneliness, hope, desire, need, fear, and guilt? My heart beat with a tender ache as if I'd been punched in the chest a few hours ago and was feeling the aftermath.

"It's not you," I said to Sandra to reassure her. I wasn't lying. It wasn't her. It was just that *she* wasn't HER. "You're beautiful, and you're sexy. I'm just..." I started.

"Heartbroken?" Gwen finished.

I nodded.

"Is that why you were so reckless today?" she asked.

Running a hand through my hair, I sighed.

Sandra smiled. "Thanks for not making me feel like crap. And we're so sorry for barging in," she said, eyeing Gwen.

That brought a grin out of me.

“Whoever she is, she’s a lucky girl,” Sandra said with a wink before walking away.

“Oh, I’m not sure about that,” I said in response.

She didn’t hear me, whispering to Gwen, “I’ll be in the car.” The other women filed out after her, but Gwen remained for a bit.

“Hey, you sure you’re going to be all right?” she asked, moving to stand in the doorway, studying me as if she was scared to leave.

I smiled. “I’m sure. Thanks a lot.”

She was about to turn away when she paused and looked back at me.

“Look, I don’t know who this woman is, and I don’t know what you’re going through. But going by what could’ve happened today if we didn’t stop you just in time, I want you to know that you’re never alone even if it feels like you are. No matter how low you get, don’t judge yourself too harshly. Even in your darkest moments, there’s something in it you can learn. And what you learn can transform the rest of your life. Try to pull something out of the lesson that will turn your life into something that helps you rather than ruin you,” Gwen said.

“Thank you,” I said, though her words just sounded like a bunch of rambling to me. Like too many inspirational quotes wrapped into one. Too confusing to understand as if she were

saying a lot without saying anything at all. But I got her intention. She was trying to be nice, and she wanted to make sure I'd be fine, so I reassured her. "I'll be okay."

"You're sure?" she asked.

"Yes." I nodded.

"Come here," she said, opening her arms wide.

Not wanting to be rude, I went in for a casual hug, keeping my distance, but her arms wrapped around me warmly. "You're going to be okay," she said.

Though I was only wearing a towel, I knew her intentions were kind and friendly. She wasn't flirting or trying to cop a feel. She was genuinely trying to comfort me, and I needed to be comforted. My body melted as the tension I had been holding onto fell away, and I hugged her closer, thinking about how surreal it was to be sharing a hug with a complete stranger on my doorstep.

We hugged for what felt like minutes and when we pulled away from each other, my eyes were damp, and my heart was filled with gratitude. Sometimes, strangers could be kind without wanting anything in return.

"Take care of yourself, Anthony," she said, squeezing my hand before hurrying away.

"You too," I said.

Just as she opened her car door, she yelled, "And I promise you, we won't be dropping by unannounced again." She grinned.

I smiled. “Thank you so much!” I raised my hands in a pleading sign to her begging her not to.

Not that she could drop by ‘announced’ since we hadn’t exchanged numbers. She was just a stranger who saw someone in need and decided to help. A good samaritan, I heard that’s what they were called. She laughed once more before getting into her car and driving out after the other women.

And then there was one. The house was silent once more. There were no distractions from my thoughts. Instinctively, my skin itched for a drink, and my body yearned to fuck. But as I headed into my kitchen and reached into my cabinets for a whiskey glass and a bottle, I paused when Gwen’s words played again in my head. Hm. Maybe they did make sense after all.

Perhaps I’d need the drink tomorrow but tonight, after a hug from a stranger I’d never see again, it felt like for the first time in a long time, I would be all right. Even if it meant sitting with the pain.

Making my way up the stairs, I found myself filled with thanks for the lesson that sometimes what I craved more than anything was intimacy and understanding, not necessarily sex. And that sex with the right person was way more meaningful.

Funny that it took me nearly forty years to learn that.

Chapter 15

Jared

“**A**re you Jared Crawford?”

Looking up from another phone call with yet another litigation attorney, hoping to get the chance to represent Crawford & Beam against Levine LLP, I was met with the sight of two uniformed cops standing in my office.

“Yes,” I said, studying them while hanging up the phone. Over their shoulders, I tried to make eye contact with Melissa to see if there was any information she could give me with just a look. Her eyes said it was serious.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “How can I help you?”

“Where can we find Mario Sharpe and Anthony Whitlocke?” the cop standing in front of me asked while another stood about a foot behind him, completely silent, staring at me.

It didn’t take long for my confusion to vanish since with recent events, there was only one reason a complete stranger would ask for all three of us at once.

“Anthony had a medical emergency, and Mario’s just down the hall. What seems to be the problem here, Officer?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest, waiting for the ball to drop. The front cop nodded toward the back cop and off he went down the hall, presumably to look for Mario.

The one in my office stepped forward and unfolded a piece of paper before handing it to me. “We have a warrant to search all your properties as well as all the properties of Mr. Whitlocke and Mr. Sharpe,” he said before speaking into his black police radio.

“Commence search,” he commanded who I assumed to be the rest of his team.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on there,” I said, rising from my seat. Though the need to haul him out by his shirt collar did arise, I kept my hands in my pants pockets. I wasn’t an idiot. “On what grounds are you searching my properties?”

“We have reason to believe that a crime has been committed,” the cop responded, looking around my office.

“Oh, for the love of...” I muttered, rolling my eyes and sighing. “This is an invasion of privacy based on a false claim. What exactly are you hoping to find? Because it hasn’t been outlined in your warrant,” I said, noting the line that read, *‘seize anything that could be useful in the investigation’* at the bottom of the page. “A judge granted you this?” I asked, waving the piece of paper. “Seems a bit suspicious since by law, it is required to list exactly what you’re looking for. I’m

afraid this warrant isn't valid." My hopes soared with the thought of watching him leave, crestfallen, from my office.

"Read the second page," the cop said while examining the security camera in my office.

There was a second page? How did I miss that? With trembling fingers and sweat forming around my neck, I flipped over the first page, and there it was, an extensive list. I started reading it aloud.

"Desktop *AND* laptop? Phone, anything that stores footage, *Chains?* DRUGS? This is ridiculous!" I yelled, throwing the paper on my desk, knowing there was nothing I could do but watch them go through my stuff, unable to prove my innocence until the 'evidence' they seized didn't yield them the results they were looking for.

"Take it up with the judge. But I'm going to need to take this," the cop said, gesturing to the security camera. "Got a screwdriver?" he asked.

"No! I do not have a screwdriver," I said incredulously.

He studied me before deciding that perhaps I was telling the truth, or it wasn't worth forcing me to 'cooperate with the investigation.' What would I be doing with a screwdriver anyway? Did this office look like a repair shop?

"I'll come back for it," he said, moving over toward my computer. "You've got to have a box somewhere, right?" he asked, eyeing all the parts he'd have to gather and take with him downstairs.

Air escaped through my teeth, sounding like a whistle as my blood boiled in contempt for him. “Shouldn’t you be prepared to do your job?” I asked.

He wasn’t amused by my question. Tough luck—neither was I. He turned away from me and headed over to Melissa. He was probably explaining the whole warrant thing. She nodded and jumped up out of her seat to hurry away. A minute later, she returned with a large box.

My organs blistered at the pure heat bubbling beneath my skin as I watched this fucker leave with my computer storing all of my clients’ confidential information. My damn computer from which I worked.

“Oh yeah,” he said, halfway to the elevator before spinning around and heading back toward me. “Your phone,” he said with his hand stretched out as he stepped back through the door.

This piece of shit. The urge to test whether or not my phone could bounce off his forehead was alive inside me. Grudgingly, I reached into my pocket for my cell phone and handed it to him.

“Thanks. By the way, we have cops at your house currently searching it for more evidence,” he said, dropping it into the box.

“Evidence of WHAT?!” I exploded. “I did nothing wrong! This is absolutely crazy!”

The Levines were going to regret whatever they did to pull off a search when I hadn't even been charged with anything or brought in for questioning beforehand. This was more than just humiliation; this was complete and utter disrespect. And this was messing with my money. They were working for a beating, and I was working to give them one as soon as possible.

Marching over to Melissa, I demanded that she order me a new computer and phone with immediate shipping, taking out my frustrations on her for handing the cop a box even though I knew she was just cooperating with the law and didn't deserve it. But with the mood I was in, anyone could get my heat. I gave no fucks.

Downstairs on the associates' floor, searching for someone to draft the motion for me, I noticed cops leaving the filing room. Seeing red, I growled, catching the attention of the handful of associates who remained.

"Draft a request for an immediate trial in the case of Crawford & Beam vs Levine LLP. It's time to put an end to this rubbish once and for all. We're not prolonging this anymore," I grunted to the guy I thought to be the most competent associate amongst the few.

Like a zombie, I stormed off back to my office to grab my swim trunks and headed to the pool to yell in the silence of the water while trying not to romanticize the idea of fucking drowning myself. I was a strong man.

I would save the fight for the courtroom and use the anger to fuel my preparation so that whatever lies they could spin would be wiped clean by MY evidence.

Chapter 16

Tiffany

“I’m sorry. Can’t talk right now. I’m in the middle of trying not to lose my patience with these damn cops,” Mario muttered.

“Cops?” I asked, my ears perking up in confusion.

“Hey, watch out for the door!” Mario yelled before the sound of something heavy bumping into a hard surface echoed through the phone. “Yeah. Apparently, we’re dangerous predators, remember? Apparently, your parents got some phony judge to authorize a search of all our properties,” he said.

My parents did what?!

Oxygen drifted further from my reach. My heart clenched, and my chest constricted, cutting off the air supply to my lungs. My stomach burned from how hard my heart was beating behind my ribs. Tears climbed up my cheeks, forming behind my eyes. All I saw was red. I couldn’t even hear whether Mario was still on the phone.

Hanging up the call, I reached for my keys and marched toward the front door, shoving my feet into the pair of sneakers sitting by my doorway from my grocery run earlier. I was wearing my sulking outfit: baggy lavender sweats that fit like pajamas.

The amount of flyaways sticking out around the messy ponytail on top of my head could serve as wings on which I could travel the world. But changing was the furthest thing from my thoughts.

My parents had already done enough damage, but this... THIS was taking things TOO FAR. Someone had to stop them, and it would be me. I wouldn't hide away, sulking anymore.

My men didn't deserve any of this.

It all seemed like a nightmare that was holding me by the neck. The elevator ride down to the ground floor seemed to take forever even though I was the only one in there since everybody else seemed to have lives and jobs, except for me. With each passing second, it felt like I was losing more air. Tapping my key against the metal interior, I tried to match the pace of my racing heart, hoping that if I could keep up with the rhythm, I wouldn't explode.

When I got to the ground floor, relief was brief, quickly replaced with even more frustration. I was nowhere close enough to my parents. It felt like it was my mission to show up and remove the fuse from the bomb my parents just tossed carelessly into the open. But the bomb had already gone off,

and the only thing I had to hang onto was the delusion that I could somehow reverse it.

The cramping in my chest warned me to take some deep breaths before driving off. At the first sign of even an ounce of relief, I pulled out of the apartment parking lot, trying not to be reckless as I drove to Levine LLP. My parking was more just stopping as it paused diagonally between the parallel markers.

My feet took flight, but my mind was filled with fog as I raced toward the front door. I was barely two feet inside when two large security guards blocked my path forward. They worked for my parents' firm since I was a kid, and I was familiar with them on my visits here.

Usually, our interactions were respectful enough, but that wasn't the case today. They both looked over my head as if they couldn't look me in the eyes, and their faces were frozen with a warning. Well fuck the warning.

"Excuse me," I said, pushing between them, only to be grabbed by each of my arms and lifted so that my legs dangled.

"Let me go!" I yelled, trying to pull my arms from their hands, hurting my shoulders in the process. "Let me go! I'm here to see my PARENTS! Remember them?!" I screamed.

Past the shoulders of security, I could see that all the people in their lobby were staring at me with eyes wide open, as if they were witnessing something horrific or so disgraceful, they couldn't look away.

“We have strict instructions not to let you enter this building, Ms. Levine,” one of the security guards basically growled at me.

“Oh, great! A Levine can’t enter Levine LLP. Their own daughter can’t be treated with civility because her parents rejected her based on LIES?” I screamed, desperate for someone to hear me.

Just then, I could see my parents appear on the corridor of the fifteenth floor, staring down at me like I was an ant. A tiny thing they gave no thought to unless it was bothering them. An ant they could crush beneath their shoe.

My mother’s face reddened, but something told me it was more out of shame, not for her own actions but for mine. It had nothing to do with finding it hard to watch me be mistreated.

Damn, was my mother always such a psychopath? My dad reddened too, looking from her to me in what seemed to be an emotional tug of war.

They both sickened me at this moment but more than anything, they showed me that nothing was more important than the way they presented themselves to the world. Not even if they could see how much they were destroying me. They didn’t once tell the security guards to release me even though the guards exchanged looks with them as well.

It was as if even the guards couldn’t believe the fact that my parents were standing there so coldly, watching me as if I were a harmful threat they needed to remove. As if I had walked in there, guns blazing, threatening to shoot everyone. As if I

wasn't their child having an emotional breakdown, who needed them to stop hurting me.

When the guards tossed me out of the building like trash, I trembled on my way back to my car. By the time I locked myself inside it, I crumbled in miniscule pieces of what used to be myself. My fingers tingled, hell my whole body was tingling, and I could feel myself becoming two separate entities. One an empty body and the other a bodiless soul.

When my soul re-entered my body, when all the shattered pieces rose to create my solid form once more, the only thing I could do was scream. Scream like a madwoman behind the doors of my car.

This was no longer just about protecting my men or even just protecting our right to our relationship anymore, it was about saving my mental health. It was about making sure that my parents heard me and saw me as I was. It was about me not apologizing for something that wasn't my fault. It was about confronting them and standing up for myself, my truths, and my rights.

And if they wouldn't listen to what I had to say here, I knew the one place they'd have to. Their home.

Chapter 17

Tiffany

Several hours had already passed since I was sitting on the stoop at the front door of the house I could no longer call home. Luckily for me, they hadn't changed their front gate code, so I was able to walk right in. Not wanting to trip off the motion sensor that would send an alarm to my parents, I chose not to drive in. Walking slowly gave me the ability to dodge it somehow since I knew where it was located. Cops showing up to arrest me here would certainly claim the rest of my sanity.

My feet tapped against the pavement in fatigue, impatience, and passionate determination. My ass was both numb and aching from sitting on the stone stoop for so long. The outside lights came on, flooding the yard from the gate all the way up to the perimeter of the large American Craftsman style house. Night sounds kept me company, and the flowers in the polished garden were going to sleep for the night.

My stomach rumbled, but I used my phone to distract me. I was almost too distracted to hear the click of the garage door opening. They wouldn't immediately spot me on the drive from their gate to the garage since the front door was hidden

around a bend. It gave me time to prepare myself, although I was pretty much ready to go.

My mother's low heels clacked on the concrete as she walked around the bend. Her head was lowered to retrieve her keys. When she looked up and saw me, she jumped back, clutched her chest, and exhaled angrily. Dad was parking the car into the garage.

"Get off my property right this minute!" my mother yelled but not too loud. She didn't want to attract the neighbors' attention. Oh, a disagreement in the front yard? It was a disgrace!

I crossed my arms, resolute in my stance. "Why? Are you going to call the cops on me for trespassing?" I asked.

"I will if I must," she said, gripping the straps of her bags, snobbiness illustrated across her wrinkling face.

Just then, my father took the bend. His eyes were wide in shock when he spotted me and looked at my mother. We were like two cats sizing each other up, ready to attack.

"Will you two stop this nonsense?!" he said.

Well, good for him for finally growing the balls to say something for once.

"The only people who should stop this 'nonsense' are you two! What the hell is the matter with you?" I yelled.

"Watch your tone, young lady!" my father said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, I think we’ve gone far past the part where my tone is the thing you need to worry about! What do you care about who I sleep with? You’ve never cared about anything else in my life other than me being successful as a lawyer. Didn’t I already give you that? I had that until you took it away from me with your lies and your disgusting assumptions, muddying people’s perception of me and costing me my job! And for what?! For what?!” I screamed. “Because I like the company of more than one man?!”

“Get her off my property now!” my mother growled, looking nervously around her even though this house was on so much land, the neighbors would have to strain their ears to get even the slightest idea of what we were saying. That didn’t stop my mom from looking as if she would break out into hives.

“No, Mom. You’re going to hear this. Who I sleep with is NO ONE’s business, and you had NO right to air my private life to the public like that. To turn it into something it’s not,” I said, directing the last sentence to my dad. “You guys are the ones who caused this! Couldn’t you just leave it alone?!”

Mother rolled her eyes. “Oh, it was hardly private! If it got back to us, it was surely going to get to the public. No one gets information like that and just sits on it! Especially someone who works at the bottom of the totem pole. They could make a fortune using it to their advantage to blackmail us or who knows what else. We had to say something!” My mother spoke to me as if I had no intelligence whatsoever.

My heart beat a sick rhythm, and I fired back. “Oh, and speaking up in support of me wasn’t an option?”

“How could we support you if you were in danger?” my father said, his face pained and serious.

My mother rolled her eyes again at that. I was guessing they hadn’t come to an agreement on whether or not I was a victim.

“Danger? DANGER? I’m not in any danger! I mean, knock on wood with all this claiming of danger over my life. What the hell is wrong with you? Are you deaf or did you not watch the press conference? I chose these men. Me. I saw them. I liked them. I wanted them,” I said, not in the least bit embarrassed by professing my desire for them to my parents because well, they were the ones who imposed themselves into my sex life and made it about them.

They grimaced in disgust.

“What is it? Huh, Dad? Do you need to feel like a hero? Does it give you something to make you finally feel good about yourself? Playing the savior this late in life when all the other times you could, you failed?” I said, feeling regret instantly when I saw the look on his face.

He shook his head. “I pity you, Tiffany. I really do.”

They started to walk away but I wouldn’t let them as rage took over.

“Pity me!” I screamed. “Pity me? You’re just as bad as each other. You’re both out of your minds!”

My body shook again as it felt like reality distorted itself. As if I deserved this punishment despite how much I yelled and screamed to help them see sense. As if I was the one who should feel guilty and embarrassed, not them. My chest tightened, and tears sprang to my eyes. I couldn't control them as they poured out. It was like they were on the other side of an invisible box that I was trapped in, screaming my lungs out, but they couldn't hear me.

My body swayed, and it felt like I was about to faint from the sheer pressure of all the emotions beating up my body.

Chapter 18

Tiffany

At the sound of my tears, my parents paused. The look of concern they gave me wasn't the soft and warm kind. Their looks held judgment... and exactly what they said, pity. They looked at me as if I were a poor thing who had just completely lost my mind. I was beginning to believe that I had, looking back up at them feeling broken and fragile as every single part of my body shook, including my brain.

My voice was lower when I spoke again.

“All my life, all I've done was try to make you proud of me. To live up to your expectations. The first twenty-one years of my life, I lived for you. I lived your lives, the lives you chose for me. And I'm so grateful that I actually love law; otherwise, it would've felt like a prison. Or at least I would've been aware of the prison I was trapped in sooner. But my love for the law doesn't make the way you've enforced your control over my life okay. And though I'm grateful to have reached the milestones I have, it doesn't make your distance and coldness acceptable.” I sniffled.

“As long as I was perfect, I was worthy of your ‘love,’ right? As long as I didn’t step out of the line you drew for me, then I had value and worth. And as soon as I showed that I have my own mind, that I have desires outside of the ones you chose for me, that I am human, suddenly, I’m dirty, disgusting, pitiful, and unworthy?” I asked, the words feeling too heavy on my tongue, bringing my voice to a whisper.

As I looked at them, they said nothing though my mother’s lips were pressed together as if admitting any errors in her ways would kill her, and she had to keep her mouth shut to not just save face but save her own life. Because the fantasy she created in her head about how life was supposed to be, how parenting was supposed to look, and how her children should behave, *was* her life. Anything outside of her fantasy was death, and she couldn’t accept it.

My father’s eyes reddened as he turned his head away from me, but tears didn’t fall. He was still holding onto his pride, I could see it. The need to be right about all of this. Because being wrong was too terrifying. Loving me for who I was, was just too much to ask.

I continued, “Even now, you’re trying to control my life, with the publicity, with the attack on my men, with this lawsuit. Don’t you think it’s time you stop? That you just let me be and let me love who I want without getting involved unless I’m in harm’s way. And no, I’m not in harm’s way now, at least not when it comes to the guys.

“Deep down, I think you know that. You can look in my eyes and know that when I tell you I chose these men, and they chose me, that it was mutual, it was consensual, it was legal, I’m telling you the truth. You can see the truth, can’t you? Because if I were lying, you’d see it in my eyes. Everything else can lie, except for the eyes.

“And I’m not saying that if I were in danger, I wouldn’t appreciate your help but if I were in danger, help wouldn’t look like disgust, would it? It wouldn’t look like kicking me out of the firm. It wouldn’t look like publicly disowning me. It wouldn’t look like threatening to call the police on me for ‘trespassing’ when I’m just here to talk to you,” I said. My mother gulped.

“You wouldn’t even know how to love me if you wanted to. But you don’t want to. This isn’t about whether or not you care about my life, or if I’m in danger. This is about you, your image, what people will think of you, control, scaring these men out of my life, scaring me away from them. And because I resisted your control and stood up for my truth despite everything you’ve taken from me, your response is to punish me further.

“Why? Because you didn’t get your way. This isn’t what love looks like, Mom... Dad. You can be disgusted by me, you can disapprove, you can dislike the fact I’m seeing three men at once. It’s different, I get it. But I’m an adult and whether or not you do any of those things, you can also respect the fact that at the very least, if you can’t love me through it all, you

have no right to determine who I'm sleeping with," I finished my soft rant.

My dad's voice cracked. "I do love you, sweetheart," he grunted, choking back tears, but mine had already dried as my body grew numb to prevent me from having a nervous breakdown.

"Then drop the case, Dad. Don't you see that the only thing harming me right now is this? You, my family, the ones who are supposed to love me, you're the ones bringing me the most pain." My voice shook.

"Please. You can make this pain stop with one simple decision—dropping the case. You can keep the money. You can even stick to publicly disowning me. But please don't punish the three innocent men in my life who have done nothing to deserve this. Just take back what you've said about them. Say there was a misunderstanding because there was. Tell the truth and drop the case."

Dad shifted his eyes from mine and looked at Mom. Her face was steeled when she said, "I can't do that."

I looked to Dad to say something, but he didn't. Still. After all of that. Nothing had changed. The message was clear, and it was like I'd been looking through gray-tinted glasses this whole time and just removed them.

Before spilling my guts to them, there was that tiny spec of hope I tried to do away with. The hope that maybe, if they could see how much pain they were causing me, maybe if they could hear it, they'd find it in their hearts to move past their

ego and stop. That tiny possibility had been in the back of my mind even though the forefront of my mind knew the truth. That they wouldn't budge.

But now, after laying everything out in front of them and having them do the same thing they'd always done, which was whatever the hell they wanted, it became clear to me that I had nothing left here anymore.

"Fine," I said. "Well, I guess we'll see each other in court."

As I turned around to leave, I jumped in shock to see Chris standing behind us. "Shit," I said. "How long have you been standing there? Couldn't you say something?" My annoyance with him was obvious as well.

"I didn't want to interrupt," he confessed.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I felt exposed and vulnerable, but I challenged him with my gaze. "How much of that did you hear?"

"A lot," he said.

Shifting on my feet, I almost waited for him to say something, but I didn't want to be disappointed again.

"Good," I said. "I won't have to say it twice. Everything you heard applies to you too. If you can't love me unconditionally, then just don't love me at all."

My voice trembled, and it broke my heart to say that to Chris, but he deserved it too. He abandoned me just as much as they had. He stripped the apartment from under my feet and left me without somewhere to live. And the fact that he was

over here told me he was supporting my parents in their attempts to bring us all down.

As I walked away, leaving them with those words, something else hit me. They all probably knew deep down that they were being ridiculous, but their pride was too blinding for them to pull the brakes made my heart break even more. This time, it wasn't for myself or my men. It was for them. With newfound confidence, I turned to them and returned the words they used on me earlier.

“You know, it's a pity you couldn't drop the case. Something tells me the embarrassment of losing in court and having the truth be revealed is going to hit a lot harder than the respect you could've saved yourself if you just owned up to your mistakes. *You're* the ones I pity.”

With that, I left feeling far lighter than I did earlier.

Chapter 19

Valerie

As I stared at her departing frame, a soft voice inside me screamed her name, calling her back. But the even louder voices overpowered it, quietening it. The louder voices were focused on her parting words. *You're the ones I pity.*

Chris and Ben turned to face me, and I knew what they wanted to say before the words even tumbled from their quivering lips.

“Don’t even think about it,” I said, turning away from them to open the front door and hurry inside. I could only imagine what the neighbors must have been thinking, and the last thing I wanted was to become their new entertainment source. Heaven knew they must have already had so much to gossip about.

“But honey, she’s got a point,” Ben said. “We would be doing ourselves a much bigger favor in the eyes of the public if we came out in support of our daughter.”

My daughter. The child I carried for nine months. The woman I birthed, kept alive, and gave everything to. Something deep within my belly ached. Perhaps it was my

womb. My skin grew warm with many feelings including regret, shame, and anger. Regret that I wasn't the mom she needed me to be even though I tried to be everything I could for her. Shame that I hurt her the way I did. And anger that she didn't appreciate everything I'd done for her.

She didn't even know the half of it. It wasn't like I came from money. My mother and father tried their best, but they couldn't make ends meet. Some days, we went without food. I went to school with holes in my shoes and sometimes lost the bottom of a shoe on the way home. It wasn't easy and though I knew my parents tried, deep down I resented them for not trying harder. It took a while to develop thick skin when all the kids in school would make fun of the clothes I wore or the digestive issues I had due to improper eating.

The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that one day, I would make it out. I vowed to myself that I would. And when I did, I vowed that I'd never return.

I'd never break that vow. Not even now.

When I was eighteen, I met Benedict. He came from money, and his parents' parents came from money. Oh, they didn't like a single hair on my head. Not one bit. But I proved to them that I was worthy of respect through the way that I carried myself, by my ambitions, by the fact that I kept my grades up, my shoulders straight, and never mixed in with the wrong crowd. When we finally got their blessing, Ben and I got married. Together, we started Levine LLP with money from his family. At first, no one knew us, so it was hard to get

clients. Eventually, with my tenacity, I was able to get clients and keep them. Building trust and respect with them until we became what we were known for today.

Still, after all that, I looked in the mirror and behind the wrinkles and gray hair, my child self never left. The scars of the ridicule I faced still lived on. Oh, it wasn't that I didn't love Tiffany. It's just that I never subscribed to the idea of gentle love. I preferred tough love. The world was harsh, and gentle love did nothing but keep you stuck.

My parents were a great example of that. Once I left home, I never looked back. Being around my parents terrified me. I was afraid if I didn't make the cut then and leave immediately, I'd never leave. And the thought of living the way they had comfortably lived, forever, felt like a death trap. I had to get out of there and create a life for myself without their voices and their beliefs in my ear. I never built up the courage to return.

In the kitchen, I reached for a glass and a bottle of wine, sighing. If that's what Tiffany had to do now, more power to her. She was right. She was an adult. She was big enough. She could take care of herself, but I had to focus on taking care of me, the company, and the reputation I had built.

“And let everyone look at me like a loose parent? As if I represent the same lifestyle she does? To have them speculate about whether or not she learned that from us and push their noses into our sex lives? Are you crazy?” I kept my back to my husband while I took a sip of the wine I just poured.

“But Dad’s right, Mom. If you guys lose, it’s going to look as if you’re liars and schemers. That would look worse for your company and could do even more extensive damage,” Chris said.

Exhaling heavily, I set my glass down on the counter. My throat felt dry despite the wine that just passed through it. It felt like someone just dropped a huge chunk of lead on my chest.

“We won’t lose. I don’t lose,” I said, wondering if my throat was closing up and pushing past the panic rising up within me. I was Valerie Levine. I wouldn’t let myself down.

“Neither does Jared, Mom,” Chris said.

I shot daggers at him. “That little boy has never been in a courtroom with me and Ben. He doesn’t know what he’s getting himself into. Isn’t that right, honey?” I asked Ben who smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“What are you even doing here, Chris?” I turned an annoyed gaze back at him.

“I stopped by for a chat with Dad concerning the investigation,” he said. “But after hearing Tiffany today, I think she might be telling the truth.”

My shoulders grew heavy as I spun around to pour myself another glass of wine. “Hate to say I told you so, Ben,” I said.

The whole reason we were going to court was because Ben wanted to try to save Tiffany’s image by assuming a different angle, to prove to the court that she was a victim rather than an

active participant. Play the sympathy card so we wouldn't have to disown her. I told him I didn't believe she was a victim. He didn't believe me. Now, here we were.

Look, I didn't care if Tiffany wanted to screw twenty guys at once. Just as long as she kept it private. I didn't want to know about it, and the public didn't have to either. But she was sloppy. That was her mistake.

She let it escape into the public. She was careless and left everyone else to clean up her mess. If she wanted to be reckless, she could be reckless. On her own. Without our support. She could do what she wanted but whenever those actions affected us, someone had to jump in and do something. And her recklessness did affect us; her name wasn't just hers, it was ours.

She made her private life public when she let herself be discovered by someone outside of their dynamic. Someone with nothing to lose. I was only doing what I had to do to save what we had built.

So let Tiffany be Tiffany. But she could no longer hurt the Levine name. I did my duties as a mother, and now my duty was to myself, our name, our company, and our reputation.

No one, not even my own child would break down what I had built and leave me with nothing.

Chapter 20

Benedict

“Chris, why don't you uh, head on home. I'll call you later.” Patting him on the shoulder, I ushered him through the kitchen and toward the front door.

Before I could even step back inside the kitchen correctly, my wife was accosting me on my return. “You're having second thoughts about this case, aren't you?” Thankfully, the ringing of my cell phone which I fished from my pocket in a desperate rush, saved me from answering.

“Uhm.” I made way past the obstruction in my throat to speak. “Hello. Yes. I understand. Yes. Yes. Thank you,” I uttered before hanging up.

My wife was staring at me, waiting for an answer to her question. But I didn't have an answer. At least not the one she was looking for. Especially now.

“That was Jared Crawford's assistant,” I said, feeling a sting at the back of my throat.

Val's eyes flew open. Her eyes demanded I let her know what was happening.

“Crawford & Beam pushed for an immediate trial, and it looks like they got it. We have to be in court tomorrow,” I said.

Her eyes grew even wider until it seemed as if her pupils would pop right out of her head. She put the wine glass she was holding down on the table with a swift clink against the counter and reached out to take hold of my arms.

“You can’t back out now, Ben,” she said. “Oh! They’d slaughter us tomorrow if you did.” She released me in a panic, throwing her arms up in the air as she walked across the kitchen. “We’ve got to keep a united front. You understand that, right?” she asked as if I were senseless.

Her touch still burned in my skin from when she grabbed hold of my arms. Memories of when she used to hold them with sweetness and affection washed over me. When did we lose that? As I looked at the older version of the woman I fell in love with all those years ago, it felt like no time had passed and too much at the same time.

She still looked like her, even with the added wrinkles, graying hair that she liked to dye, and her age spots. But she no longer felt like her. It had been awhile since she had felt like her. I just couldn’t remember when that began. It seemed like since then, I’d just been holding onto the moment she’d return again, the woman I fell in love with. The woman I could still see, could no longer feel but missed so much and yearned for.

When I fell in love with her, it was because she was so different from what I was used to, she intrigued me. And with

her belief, her visions, her hopes, and her dreams, she inspired me. She amazed me with how she saw the world despite not having as much as I did. And although many would have said that the world hadn't been as kind to her as it was to us because we came from money, she had a kindness within her that felt like it could've only been a part of her if she'd experienced it.

She didn't quite see it that way, though. She saw it as they did. That the world hadn't been as kind to her, and she had her reasons, I suppose. We bonded over the fact that we were so different. I wanted what she had, she wanted what I had, and we became something until we became nothing.

Each time something great happened, I waited, hoping it would bring that thing back. That spark, that love, that affection. Like when we got married and started our law firm together. We celebrated, and it was great until it wasn't. And when we had children, we experienced such a high. It was amazing, until it became mechanical. No high, no joy lasted long enough to bring us back to the love and affection we once shared.

The truth was that I was still waiting for that moment, even as she walked around this kitchen, going on and on about tomorrow and whether or not we were prepared enough. Trying to figure out whether we could fight to get the case pushed back until we could build up some evidence against the men at Crawford & Beam. Or until the police found something, anything to at least breed suspicion.

My own thoughts drowned out her chatter as a greater need was born inside me. The need to know whether I had made a mistake. Tiffany's words cut through me like a serrated blade. Guilt marinated my bones, simmering deep within my muscles. Did I falsely accuse those men? Was Tiffany telling the truth? A sick rhythm beat within my stomach churning out nausea. If I'd been wrong, then she was right. I'd been a horrible father.

And if I were right, she was also right about me being a horrible father. I wouldn't have stood next to her mother as she publicly disowned her. Her mother would've heard my disapproval of her ordering security to toss Tiffany out of the law firm. Tiffany, my daughter would've been my first priority today as she screamed her lungs, trying to get us to listen. She was right either way. I was pathetic.

"Are you even listening to me, Benedict?" my wife said, forcing me to look at her.

"Yes, yes, I'm listening," I said, running a hand through my graying red hair. The left side of my chest tightened, prompting me to lean up against the kitchen counter to steady myself.

She rushed over to me, rubbing my back as I took a seat. "Do you need some water?" she asked.

"Yes, please." I nodded.

She returned with it, standing before me as she watched me drink it, patting my hand when I was done. "You see, you're just letting yourself overthink things. Don't worry about what

Tiffany said. When it's your turn to go on the stand, just say what you believe happened. You remember what you believe happened, don't you? You remember why you basically challenged the men to a lawsuit?"

For a brief second, as she stroked my back, brought me water, and squeezed my hand, it was there. That moment. Fleeting and bittersweet since I knew the show of compassion was just because my faintness had gotten in the way of her talking, and she wanted my full attention. See, I knew my wife. It wasn't as if I weren't aware of her manner. I would have had to been blind not to see her true self but knowing her didn't make me love her any less. And I still clutched to some hope that I wasn't trapped into a marriage of doom.

Placing my hand over hers, I asked, "What are you afraid of, Valerie?"

The words fell from my lips. They'd been sitting there for so long. She froze before attempting to pull her hand from beneath mine, but I seized it. "Val," I said. "Don't run away. Talk to me. What are you afraid of?" I asked, tugging her toward me.

Redness filled her cheeks as she fell forward in my arms. Yet she stiffened in my embrace, pushing herself from me. "What is this, Ben?" she asked, scrunching her face up in annoyance as she answered my question with one of her own. She adjusted my collar that had gotten messed up from her fall.

“This is not the time for foolishness. You’re just trying to distract me from what’s happening tomorrow, and we need to spend all night preparing.” She began to walk away.

“When does it stop, Val?” I asked, resting my elbow on the table so I could lean my face into my palm. “When do we stop preparing for something big and just go back to the moments when being with each other actually made us happy?”

She brought her brows together before rolling her eyes. “Oh, Ben. We’re too old to be happy.” She laughed as if the idea was naive and immature.

“I miss you Val,” I said.

She rolled her eyes again, crossing her arms across her chest. “This is ridiculous,” she scoffed. “I’m going to the library to do some more preparation. We have to be up early tomorrow, and we have to make sure we don’t look like fools when we show up. So, if you won’t pull your weight, I guess I’ll have to pull it for both of us.” She stomped across the fluorescent-lit kitchen.

Shaking my head from fatigue, I said, “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone anymore. Look at you. You’ve done it. Everything you said you ever wanted to do. You’re no longer that kid who struggled. You haven’t been that kid for a long time. You don’t have to keep running. What would you lose if you showed up tomorrow and told everyone that the lawsuit was a mistake?”

She paused as if she’d just been shot in the back by an arrow. Slowly, she turned around on her heels to face me. Her

eyes were red and strained. “The fact that you even have to ask me that makes me wonder if you even know me at all. I’d lose everything, Ben. Everything.”

The quickness of her feet to escape me and the slamming of the library door brought an end to our conversation. Scratching my brow, I rose up from my seat, knowing this was a bad idea as I walked to the library to knock on the door and ask for her forgiveness.

Chapter 21

Chris

Though the aching, sinking pit in my stomach craved a drink, the needs of my son took precedence. Sitting on the back porch in the early morning when the sun was soft, with him snuggled in my arms, drinking from a bottle, filled me up so much more than the beers would have. His sleepy eyes fluttered closed, and his small, delicate body made the protective side of me jump to the forefront of my mind as I stared at him.

“I hope that no matter what happens in this world, whatever your choices and how we feel about them, you’ll always feel loved by me and your mother,” I whispered to his blissfully ignorant face. It made me happy that he was blissfully ignorant. He was a baby. He shouldn’t have any cares whatsoever. He should just be cared for, full stop. But what would change when he grew older and had things that bothered him? I’d want him to feel safe enough to come to either his mother or me to talk about anything.

It made me reflect on my own relationship with my parents. The fear I felt growing up when it involved coming to them

about things that I knew they wouldn't approve of. Hiding some of those things from them to avoid their upturned noses would come with so much guilt. I felt like, regardless of my fears, I should have been honest. But the environment never felt safe enough for honesty. My thoughts, if they weren't favored by my parents, would have been met with such contempt, I'd have felt ashamed for speaking about them.

It was my desire that my kids would feel as if I had their back, no matter what, even if I didn't approve of certain things. They shouldn't have to feel as if they were stupid or gross for coming to me about anything. Even if I didn't approve, I wanted them to know that my disapproval wasn't because they weren't loved. My actions should speak louder than my words, and they should feel my love for them rather than just hear me say it.

It was my desire to create for my kids the family I didn't have. And if they did the most unimaginable, worst thing on the planet, they'd be reprimanded by me, sure. They'd have to face the consequences, one hundred percent. It wouldn't be love if they were made to feel as if they did nothing wrong when they did. They'd know they did but throughout it all, they should also know deep down that they were loved, and they'd never lose my love. Even if I disapproved of their actions. Even if I supported the consequences they'd have to face.

To be honest, at the moment, that was just an idealistic thought since I was lost on how to ensure they'd always feel that when they were all grown up. Now that they were so

young, it was so easy to make them feel loved. However, thinking about the future brought out a deep-rooted fear of failure.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!”

The pitter patter of my daughter’s feet racing through the house interrupted by thoughts. She burst through the back door with a grin on her face. The babysitter just brought her home from school.

“Look what I’ve got!” she said, producing a drawing of me, her mother, her brother, and her.

“Let me see that.” I smiled, placing the bottle on the column before me and reaching for her drawing. My son didn’t cry. He just smacked his lips and tongue together as he slept. The photo brought forth an unexpected well of emotions from me.

“Daddy, are you okay?” she asked.

I reached forward and pulled her into a hug. “I’m more than okay, sweetie. This is perfect.” My heart bloomed because it was.

My little family.

Family was all I ever wanted. And for a while, Mario, Anthony, and Jared filled the hole my parents left open. They became my brothers. In some ways, they had helped me to understand what it meant to be a brother and to jump into that role for my little sister. In college, they were there for me and when I chose a different path, they didn’t judge me even though my parents did.

But brothers didn't sleep with their sisters. And maybe knowing they were sleeping with Tiffany woke me up to the fact that though they felt like my brothers, they truly weren't. It broke through my illusion of the family bond I thought we shared. Before I could even get the chance to come to terms with that realization, I found out they were banging my sister. I didn't get the liberty of being eased into the idea of losing them as brothers and seeing them only as my friends who perhaps had a thing for my sister.

They couldn't even be my friends and at least consider my feelings, much less be brothers. They robbed me of the time to come to terms with everything. They just tossed me off a cliff, hoping I had a parachute to keep me suspended in the air. Because of their selfishness, I lost my brothers and best friends all at once, in the blink of an eye. They neglected my feelings in the same way my parents did.

Yet as I looked at my daughter, I was reminded of Tiffany's words. My daughter took after me in some of her features, and my son took after his mother. But since my daughter looked like me, and Tiffany and I looked alike, I could see Tiffany in my daughter, and it broke my heart. My daughter just wanted to be loved and taken care of. That was all both of my children needed. And maybe Tiffany needed that too. Perhaps, even in the previous perception of her perfection, she felt just as lost and as empty as I did. And maybe like me, Jared, Mario, and Anthony filled the empty space within her that our parents failed to.

Should she be punished for that?

Okay, we weren't kids anymore but no matter how old we got, there would always be a kid within us. And the kids within us needed nurturing. It was the reason I ran from the betrayal of my best friends and my sister back into the arms of the parents who emotionally neglected me. It was so painful, I sought shelter in their cold and distant arms, knowing they knew how to cause pain. And I wanted to cause pain. To the replacement family that was Jared, Mario, and Anthony and to my sister, with whom I was trying to build a family bond.

In some sick and twisted way, my pain and my need to cause pain made the original family who hurt me not appear so bad after all. And through it all, I ended up losing myself in the dark.

But today, holding both of my children in my arms, the light turned on again. My sister and my ex-friends didn't deserve to have their whole lives turned upside down because of what they consented to do with each other in private, did they? Tiffany was right about what she said last night. It was nobody's business. And though she didn't consider my feelings, maybe she didn't have to take on that responsibility since she wasn't necessarily doing anything wrong.

My daughter shuffled out of my arm, and my son grew fussy, so I moved him to rest against my shoulder as I burped him.

"Where's Mommy?" my daughter asked.

As I patted my son's back, I smiled down at my daughter in her yellow poofy dress that she chose to wear to preschool

today. “Mommy needed a little self-love day today, so she’s out relaxing,” I told her.

She scrunched her nose up. “But I wanted to show her my drawing,” she said in her sweet baby voice.

“Oh, and I’m sure she’ll be excited to see it when she gets home. Why don’t you go and ask the babysitter to put it in our room,” I said, and her eyes lit up before she took off running through the house, calling the babysitter’s name.

My wife got a few relaxation days every now and then because she deserved it. She was the one home with the kids most of the time and even with a babysitter, it got a bit hectic at times. She needed a break, and I loved to ensure that she got it. Maybe in that way, I understood my dad. He loved my mom and would do anything for her, while I loved my wife and would do anything for her. But the difference between me and my dad or at least the difference I was trying to cultivate was that I didn’t love my wife more than my kids. I loved my wife just as much as my kids. With everything within me. And while as an adult, my wife was capable of tending to her own needs most of the time, our kids relied on us for guidance, for us to help them move through the world as they grew into their own person.

There was a different responsibility toward my wife and kids. But the amount of love I had for them was equal. My dad must have forgotten about the part where my mother was a capable adult responsible for herself emotionally and mentally. While I was sure that she needed him in some ways, we

needed him in other ways. Ways in which he failed to show up for us. Just like she did. So, as much as I may have understood that my dad loved my mother, I wouldn't make any excuses for the way they both neglected to love us.

“Okay, so I just made her a sandwich,” the babysitter said, startling me as she referred to my daughter. “Would you like me to put him down for a nap?” she asked me, stretching her arms out for my son.

I was about to tell her I'd do it, so he could stay in my arms a little longer, until my daughter ran through the door once again.

“Daddy, Daddy, wanna play dollhouse?” she asked.

Smiling at my daughter, I nodded at the babysitter, handing my son to her.

“Thank you,” I said before turning to my daughter and scooping her up in my arms. “I'd love to play dollhouse!” I said, realizing how silly it sounded for a grown-ass man like myself to be saying that, which made me grin at myself. Any game with my kids was fun for me, even if it meant playing with dolls. “But first, you've got to have a bath and eat your sandwich. Then we can play. Does that sound like fun?”

“But Daddy, I wanna... But I wanna play dollhouse now, before I eat and... and, before I shower,” she said with her adorable pout.

“I know you do, sweetheart. But if you have your bath and eat first, we'll get to play even longer before bedtime.

Wouldn't you like that?" I asked her.

She nodded, but she didn't smile because she wasn't entirely convinced, and it made me laugh again. Moments later, she was racing to find me in my home office after the babysitter gave her a bath.

"Daddy, I'm ready to play now," she said, bursting through the door.

"Is that right?" I asked. "Did you eat your sandwich?"

She nodded swiftly.

"Okay, well, I guess it's time for dollhouse!" I said, jumping from my seat and lifting her. Her laughter echoed against my eardrums as I ran toward the playroom with her in my arms. Sitting before her, I picked up one of her dolls and jumped into character, sighing as a profound thought pounded through my head. I didn't have to keep chasing 'family.'

The family I always craved was right here. This was my home. My daughter. My son who was on his way upstairs for a nap, and my wife who would soon be here. That knowledge filled my heart.

Hm. Maybe I could forgive my sister for sleeping with my best friends. It wasn't the most horrible thing she could have done. And maybe I could forgive my best friends for lying to me or going behind my back.

Yet, my stomach grumbled in protest. Forgiving my friends wouldn't be so easy, especially since I still couldn't justify their age difference. It just didn't sit well with me.

Chapter 22

Tiffany

“Are you okay?” Jared asked me with a hand on my arm. Mario pulled in his brows, staring at me in concern.

My eyes were puffy from crying for the past couple of days. During that time, an hour didn't pass without me squirting tears from my eyeballs without any warning. My pillow was soaked this morning from tears. Yet as I stood outside the courtroom, I felt queasy, but there were no more tears left to cry. It was like they'd been used up or were too afraid to fall in public. I was still subconsciously holding onto the need to appear perfect to avoid rejection.

“We can do this without you if this is too hard,” Mario said, reaching for my hand and holding it in his.

Both he and Jared saw through me though. They sought to comfort me, but their touches ran through me like a shock to the tender fragility rocking beneath my surface. Deep within me, loose pieces clamored to the floor of my heart as if everything inside me had come apart, and nothing was connected. Nothing inside the operating system of my body

made any sense. My body hummed from sensitivity, and any contact at all was alarming to my system.

Still, I appreciated their touch. It forced me back into the current, screaming at me to face what was happening. To stop hiding from rejection and the fear of imperfection.

My mother walked past us, watching as Jared stroked my arm, and Mario held my hand. She wore a deep purple skirt suit that almost appeared black. Her graying dark hair was tied up in a loose, low bun to keep it off her shoulders. She wore pearls in her ears and around her neck. Her slender legs appeared poreless in nude-colored pantyhose, and she wore low heels that cost a pretty penny. She turned her nose up in such disgust when she saw the display of affection between Jared, Mario, and me, I thought she might throw up. Whipping her head around surprisingly fast, she stormed into the courtroom.

My father passed us just a minute later, raising his head as if he were about to acknowledge us but quickly tucked his chin into his neck. He looked older than he did two days ago when I saw him last. His face looked pained and reddened. His wrinkles were more prominent. Still, he tried his hardest to hold his shoulders straight upward, though I could tell it was like he was carrying a heavy load in them. A sense of guilt rushed through me as I berated myself for putting him through this. But that guilt was quickly swept away by the reminder of what they were putting me and my men through. In some fantastical dream world, I would've hoped they'd show up today and call everything off. This was reality, however. And

the real world was harsh sometimes, whether or not we wanted it to be.

“No, I need to do this,” I said, squeezing Mario’s hand before reaching for Jared’s. As fragile as I was, so sensitive that any touch at all made me feel like I’d crumble, just having them there helped me feel a lot stronger. It didn’t make any sense but giving into the contact felt like throwing myself in deep water, knowing I couldn’t swim, yet I was driven to learn by my determination not to drown.

Court itself didn’t make my legs tremble the way they were now. But going against my family felt like someone had just carved through my chest and robbed me of my heart.

“Where’s Anthony?” I asked, peering over the guys’ shoulder and to the left of me inside the courtroom. Throughout all the mess happening in my head, it just hit me that he hadn’t shown up.

Jared and Mario exchanged looks before lowering their heads.

“Where is he?” I asked again when they didn’t answer.

Having them both here meant so much to me. But we were a team, all four of us. Everything felt more complete when I had all three of my men with me. And on a day like today, I needed all the support I could get.

Plus, I could do with his flippancy. Although he’d been a lot moodier than usual the past few days. Not that I could blame him. We were all feeling the effects of this senseless war.

Mario twisted his lip, and Jared ran a hand through his hair before they both shrugged. “We tried to call him, but he wouldn’t pick up,” Mario said.

“Yeah, the last time I saw him, he was on his way to the doctor. That was two days ago,” Jared admitted.

My heart raced so vigorously, I could feel it in my back as worry about his well-being echoed past my own worries of what awaited us in that courtroom. “Is he okay?” I asked, more stressed than ever.

“Let’s try not to focus on that today,” Jared said.

“Have any of you gone to check up on him?” My breathing increased, and my chest tightened.

“Breathe,” Mario said. “Look, Anthony does this sometimes. He disappears. And sometimes when he shows up, he’s on Anthony time. So maybe he’s just running late. I’m sure he’ll show up,” he finished.

After studying them both, I wasn’t entirely convinced. But they were his best friends, and they knew him a lot longer than I did. If they weren’t freaking out, then I shouldn’t be either.

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“Okay?” Mario smiled as Jared ushered me toward the courtroom.

“You go ahead. Give me five minutes,” I said.

They nodded and headed to their table. They were representing themselves today, and I was a part of their team,

representing them as well. My body shook. After being tossed out of my parents' firm and confronting them at their house, being in the same proximity as them brought forth something that felt like terror within me. It was as if my mental health was being held at knife point, and I was being threatened.

Several deep breaths later and a reminder that I was doing this to stand up for myself and save my mental health, I collected myself and walked into the courtroom. Chris was sitting in the gallery on the side of my parents. A chill ran through my body, and something deep within my chest curled up and tried to hide. But I shook it off.

Faking it until I made it would have to be my strategy today. My weakness was to my family what blood was to a shark. They couldn't sense it once I stepped into lawyer mode, or they'd attack, so I put on my poker face and kept my head straight, walking past Chris.

Even if everything were crashing and burning around me, there was one thing I knew I'd always be, and that was a lawyer. When my parents carved out this path for me, I was sure they didn't picture this. That one day, I would be going against them. In some ways, that gave me a false sense of confidence and instead of hiding away by ignoring their existence, I raised my head and watched them.

My father's hands shook as he straightened out papers. My mother's face was smug for some reason. The other lawyers on their side had no ties to me, and they had nothing to lose, so they were talking and smiling with each other as if this were a

day out at the beach with old friends, having a picnic, catching up.

“All rise,” the bailiff hollered, and the doors bellowed open to reveal the judge in her black gown, stalking toward her seat. Her face held no expression as she placed her files on her desk before sitting.

As if we’d just appeared in front of her, she raised her head and smiled. “You may be seated,” she said. “We have Crawford & Beam suing Levine LLP for defamation. And oh! Tiffany Levine representing Crawford & Beam. Well, this should be interesting,” she mused, looking over her files before looking at both of our teams as if she were waiting for the games of war to begin. Like she couldn’t wait for one of us to take an arrow through the head.

My neck flooded with heat, and I gulped, trying not to let my internal voice get the better of me. Mario grabbed my left hand, and Jared grabbed my right.

“Everything’s going to be okay.” Mario leaned forward to whisper in my ear. And although it wasn’t professional, Jared raised my hand to his lips, kissing me on the back of it.

“Yeah, I second that. You’re okay,” he said.

The breath that was strangling me was released for a moment, even as I turned to look toward the door to check once more for a missing Anthony.

Chapter 23

Jared

“**H**ow old are you, Mr. Crawford?” Mr. Levine cleared his throat to ask as he raised his head to study me with creased eyes.

Mrs. Levine stared at me with her hands clasped on the desk before her and a smirk on her face. Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I fixed my mouth to answer. Tiffany got in there before me though, speaking into the tiny microphone before her.

“Objection, Your Honor. Relevance?” she asked, giving into her urge to roll her eyes. Her mother quickly turned her head, tightly pursing her lips as if the need to reprimand her was difficult to suppress.

“It is relevant, Your Honor. The case is about predatory behavior, and age does factor into this,” Mr. Levine defended, tugging at the neck of his tie. Mrs. Levine did what seemed to be a subconscious nod as she looked at the judge.

“Your Honor, Mr. Crawford’s age is irrelevant since his sexual partner was a consenting adult,” Tiffany argued, referring to herself objectively.

“Your Honor, there’s no way of knowing whether his sexual partner was always able to consent when they first got together,” Mr. Levine started.

“Objection, speculation,” Tiffany interrupted him.

“I’m trying to establish a foundation,” Mr. Levine finished, pressing his lips together as Mrs. Levine studied him with disapproval.

“Your Honor, may we approach the bench?” Tiffany asked, narrowing her brows in irritation. The judge’s head was swinging from left to right during the exchange. She looked like she was about to call order in the courtroom, but she almost swallowed her tongue when she quickly shut her mouth and opened it to speak again.

“Yes, yes, you may,” she said, waving her hand in the air, appearing to be both flustered and entertained.

Meanwhile, I watched in admiration as my woman stormed toward the bench, seemingly more confident than an hour ago when her skin shook beneath my fingertips. It warmed my heart to see how hard she was fighting for me, for us, for herself. Knowing that she was on my team as an attorney made me feel safe because as much shit as I’d given her in the past, I knew she was fixing to be one of the best. Pride also overtook me as I watched her walk back to her seat.

She didn’t look happy, though.

“You may restate your question,” the judge said to Mr. Levine as Tiffany tugged at the pen in her hand. Mario reached

over to soothe her with a touch, resting his hand on top of her fidgeting ones. She sighed and turned to him, smiling as her cheeks heated up with a blush. Watching her made me smile without thinking. Even in such a serious and threatening situation, I felt connected to her. Her emotion found me like metal to a magnet deep within my chest.

“I’m almost forty,” I responded with that rather than saying my actual age. I knew the narrative they were trying to paint, and I wanted them to know that I wasn’t afraid of it. There was nothing to hide.

“Right, almost forty,” Mr. Levine said, shuffling some papers before him. “And at almost forty years old, do you think it’s appropriate to sleep with someone younger than you?”

“Mr. Levine, I think if the person I’m sleeping with is of the legal and moral age of consent, then of course it’s okay,” I responded, slitting my eyes at him.

“Uh huh. So just to be clear, you think it’s okay for a man your age to sleep with someone younger as long as they’re of the age of consent. Did I understand that correctly?” he asked.

“You understood that perfectly, Mr. Levine,” I replied. But something I said must have caused him to perk up a bit. His shoulders straightened, and a smirk appeared on his face, along with his wife. Ah, shit.

“So, Mr. Crawford. Are you telling me that you think it’s okay for a man of your age, nearly forty years old, to engage with an eighteen-year-old?” Mr. Levine asked.

“Objection, relevance?” Tiffany jumped up out of her seat, and her chair knocked against the floor, prompting everyone to spin around and look at her. “What does this have to do with the case?”

“Ms. Levine, I’m going to have to ask you to contain yourself,” the judge responded, staring at a chest-heaving Tiffany. Mario pulled on her hand, and she quickly took her seat again, apologizing to him. We couldn’t exchange eye contact during testimony, and it was so hard not to try to reassure her from where I was sitting.

“Mr. Levine?” the judge asked.

“Your Honor, we’re talking about the age of consent, and eighteen is the age of consent in our state. I’m trying to establish his character,” Mr. Levine said.

“Overruled,” the judge responded.

“Well, Mr. Levine, I don’t have any personal attraction to teenagers but if a man of forty years old engaged with an eighteen-year-old, he wouldn’t be committing a crime either, in certain circumstances,” I said.

Mr. Levine nodded, pushing out his bottom lip. “I see. So, you’re taking the hypothetical route,” he started.

“Objection, speculation,” Tiffany said in a tone of exhaustion and annoyance, pitching heavier on the beginning of her words.

Mrs. Levine leaned back in her chair as if she were having the time of her life.

“Overruled,” the judge spoke.

A heavy sigh escaped me. Okay, I was growing irritated.

“So, let’s continue on that hypothetical path. You’re saying, that if any other forty-year-old engaged in sexual relations with an eighteen-year-old, that would be okay because it’s legal?” Mr. Levine asked.

“I didn’t say it was okay, I said it wouldn’t be a crime,” I responded.

He seemed to ignore me, rushing to his other question. “So hypothetically speaking, let’s take a trip to Alabama or Arkansas. Hell, let’s say we take a trip to Nevada. The age of consent is sixteen in those three states. Am I right?” Mr. Levine said.

“Since I last checked, I assume so, sir.” I shifted in my seat, trying to suppress the need to storm out of this courtroom, away from this nonsense.

“Ah. So, same question. Hypothetically speaking, do you think it’s perfectly all right for a man who is almost forty to engage in sexual activities with a sixteen-year-old if they’re in Nevada on a ‘boys’ trip,” he said with air quotes.

“As a lawyer yourself, Mr. Levine, you know the answer to that question isn’t as straightforward, and it all depends on circumstance. Legally, in some cases, it’s fine, sure. In others, it’s not. Personally, I think it’s disgusting and would never be caught dead with a sixteen-year-old or an eighteen-year-old for

that matter,” I responded, my voice pitching louder than I intended for it to.

“Why not?” Mr. Levine asked, staring at me with his hands casually resting against the pulpit before him.

“Excuse me?” I asked, dropping my brows and looking back at him.

“Why not?” he repeated. “Why twenty-one and not sixteen and eighteen? If the age of consent is all that matters, what’s the difference between twenty-one, sixteen, and eighteen?” he asked.

I scoffed at the ridiculous, lame attempt to paint me as something I wasn’t. “Well, for one. Twenty-one is older.”

“But come on, three years older? What’s the big deal?” he prodded.

“Sounds like there’s something you want to confess, yourself, Mr. Levine. Do you have something you want to tell the court?” I poked back.

There was a grumbling in the court. Chris was furious with me. A glance toward Tiffany told me that regardless of what was happening between us and her family at the moment, that was still her father, and she didn’t appreciate that retort. Even Mario’s mouth formed an O.

Mr. Levine wanted to reprimand me. I could see it in the way he raised his brows and tightened his lips butthole tight. But I was irritated, damn it, and I wanted him to feel a bit of the heat he was blowing down my neck.

“Order in the court,” the judge said in response to the grumbling gallery. “Mr. Crawford, please stick to answering the questions you’re asked.” She turned to me.

“Right. I’m sorry, Your Honor.” Closing my eyes, I turned toward Mr. Levine. “I’m sorry, Mr. Levine. It’s not my place to try to paint a picture of you that probably isn’t true.” I made eye contact with him while stating the irony.

“Mr. Crawford. Please refrain from making any comments that are not in response to questions asked. This is your second warning. If you do it again, I will have to ask you to leave this courtroom, and you will not have a chance to state the rest of your case. You are a lawyer for goodness’ sake,” she breathed. “There are rules in this courtroom. Obey them.”

“Right. I’m sorry, Your Honor.” I straightened my shoulders and tie, awaiting Mr. Levine’s questions. The room was quiet for a moment, and everyone stared at me.

“Your answer, Mr. Crawford,” Mr. Levine demanded.

Turning to the judge, I whispered. “I don’t remember the question. Is it okay if I...?” I gestured toward Mr. Levine.

The judge rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. “Yes, Mr. Crawford. You may ask a question,” she said with exhaustion. It felt like I got my own back for a small moment, as petty as it was. Hell, if I were uncomfortable, they could be too. “I’m sorry, Mr. Levine. Do you mind asking the question again?”

“Most certainly, Mr. Crawford.” Mr. Levine cleared his throat and softened his pressed lips before looking at me as if

he were mocking me. “The difference between eighteen years old and twenty-one years old is only three years. What difference does it make for you to engage with someone over twenty-one and someone under twenty-one if both ages are consensual?”

“Well, Mr. Levine, the difference is a twenty-one-year-old is considered an adult, not a consenting teenager. In some circumstances, say in a supervisory position, a twenty-one-year-old may be arrested for sexual misconduct with someone under eighteen in the states you mentioned, even if the age of consent is sixteen. Even if that sixteen-year-old consented. As long as the twenty-one-year-old is in a position of authority over the teen.

“Meanwhile, an eighteen-year-old is closer in age to a sixteen-year-old and in those same states could safely engage in intercourse with the sixteen-year-old seeing that they’re only two years apart in age under similar circumstances.

“But a twenty-one-year-old, regardless of circumstances is able to consent to engaging in sexual intercourse with any other consenting adult regardless of the positions they’re in. In short, when it comes to consenting to other grown adults, it would be safe to say that they have the same legal requirements as a forty-year-old does and could face the same legal consequences.

“Of course, in certain circumstances.

“As you know, the law isn’t clear cut, and we could sit here and talk all day about the ins and outs of the law, but you

know as well as I do that legally, however it's spun, twenty-one years old is considered a legal adult, three years past the maximum age of consent and therefore, my sexual engagement with your daughter wasn't a crime. That's the difference, Mr. Levine." I leaned back in my seat, mimicking the same 'comfortable' position Mrs. Levine took a few moments ago.

She huffed and if I didn't know any better, I'd think there was smoke coming from her nostrils.

Mr. Levine's face reddened, and it was as if his pores would start bleeding fire. "Mr. Crawford, how long have you been best friends with Christopher Levine, Tiffany's brother?" he asked, this time not doing much to hide the curl of his lip and the flare of his nostrils.

"Objection, relevance?" Tiffany shot up out of her seat.

"Overruled," the judge said without a glance in Tiffany's direction. She flopped back in her seat, scrunching her hand through her hair and scalp.

"Since college," I said, clearing my throat and cracking my neck from the build-up of tension settling in my nerves and bones.

"How long would you say that was? About ten years ago?" he asked, turning pale with the question as if the realization of what he would be implying started to take shape in his mind.

"Yes, about. Maybe longer, Mr. Levine. And no, Mr. Levine, I did not..." I started.

“You’ve answered the question, Mr. Crawford. Please wait until the next question is asked before you answer again,” the judge said, staring daggers at me.

I didn’t want him to ask the follow-up question.

“I have no further questions, Your Honor,” Mr. Levine said.

Relief rushed from my mouth in a breath. Oh, thank goodness.

Except, he left the question hanging, leaving others to speculate. And that made me feel ill. It took everything in me not to scream aloud in the courtroom that I wasn’t what they were painting me out to be. To be thought of as something so grotesque, it was torture, and I needed it to end. But most importantly, I needed the truth to win out in this case. I needed to prove them wrong.

Chapter 24

Tiffany

“**I**’d like to call Tiffany as our witness.” Mario stood and spoke into his mic before turning to me and mouthing, “Are you okay?”

I nodded.

It was torture sitting here and watching my parents badger Jared when I knew the truth about our relationship. Anger built up inside me at the way they were trying to paint him, and it felt like I was constantly on the edge of just detonating. As he made his way down from the stand, I fought off the need to rush over to him and wrap him in my arms. So, I waited until he was close, tapping my heels impatiently, holding eye contact with him, until he was standing in front of me.

“Ms. Levine,” the judge called as the court waited for me to approach the stand, but I took a few seconds just to pull him close, tipping on my toes to try to hug him around the shoulders. He bent to pull me closer as well, and I could feel the pulse of his heart hammering through me.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, running my hand through the back of his hair as I held onto him.

“It’s okay,” he said, stroking my back.

“Ms. Levine,” the judge huffed in impatience.

“It’s okay,” he repeated before letting me go.

My legs shook from the energy coursing through me at a hundred miles per hour, and I reached for the bottle of water Jared had forgotten on the stand, taking a sip to ease the sting in my throat.

“Good day, Ms. Levine,” Mario said, smiling at me. From this angle, he looked so damn good, I hated the situation we were in. I couldn’t even enjoy watching my men in court since we were fighting for our lives here, and our rivals were my very own parents. It was surreal.

He was wearing a gray suit that almost appeared light blue with a crisp white shirt on the inside. His suit looked brand new, seamless. His skin was shaved clean, which brought attention to his pink lips against eyes that were so bright and blue, they appeared almost translucent. His white shirt made his teeth appear even whiter, and my heart flipped over in my chest at the sight of him and Jared next to him. Jared looked like he was about to throw up, and his grayer hair was rugged from him running his hand through it. He looked a lot cleaner before he took to the stand. Now, he looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but here. And boy, did I understand.

“The opposition asked a question about how long Mr. Crawford knew Chris Levine, implying...” Mario started.

“Objection! Speculation,” my mother yelled at the mic.

Rolling my eyes at my mother's objection, I knew what Mario was trying to do. He knew what my father did by leaving the question hanging in the air, and he wanted to draw attention to it.

"My apologies, Your Honor," Mario said, resting his hand against his chest, smiling and bowing ever so slightly. The judge cleared her throat, appearing flustered even though she was about my mother's age. She did her very best not to let it show though.

"Sustained," she said, fixing on her poker face.

"Thank you, Your Honor," he said before turning to me. "Ms. Levine, when would you say you met Jared Crawford?"

I smiled at Mario as he got the question out of the way so that it wouldn't sit with the judge for too long. He was so charming about it too. Damn, he was so attractive. "This year," I responded.

The weight that Jared held on his shoulders seemed to fall off, and I glanced at him as he took a deep breath in and out. Oh, my sweetheart. My heart.

"Just to be clear, are you sure that you've never met Jared Crawford before that?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. My brother and I are more than fifteen years apart. He was already away at college and by that time, he didn't make a habit of coming home. I barely knew him growing up. I even forgot I had a brother most of the time. I knew he existed, but we didn't have a relationship. And when

he did come home, times I could probably count on one hand, he came alone. So, yes, the first time I met any of his friends was this year,” I said.

“Thank you, Ms. Levine.” Mario smiled. “And why don’t you walk me through what it was like when you first met Mr. Crawford,” he continued.

I grinned. “Uh-oh.” Well, that probably wasn’t the appropriate response. And Jared covering his face briefly, hiding away a smile in embarrassment, wasn’t helpful in our portrayal of the truth either. I filled the silence quickly.

“Well, um, we didn’t like each other. Not one bit,” I said, and it seemed so long ago and so far apart from where we were today that a smile escaped me as I fought the need to grin.

Mario nodded and hid a smile—he knew. Oh, he knew how rough my feelings for Jared were then. It was hilarious now.

“God, I couldn’t stand that man.” I laughed as Jared made an awning with his hands to cover his face, staring at the desk before him. “He drove me up a wall. The first day I stepped into his office, he wanted me out, and that drove a fire in me that made me want to stay even more because well, it was Crawford & Beam, one of the best law firms, and it would annoy him. He got under my skin, so I wanted to get under his. But one day, something changed, and he became irresistible to me,” I said.

Jared lowered his hands from his face now, clearing his throat. I knew he did because it echoed through his mic as he

straightened his tie and shifted in his seat. My skin had grown hot, making me shift. The memory of that day we kissed for the first time sizzled through me. We did a lot more than just kiss.

“What changed?” Mario asked.

“Hm,” I sighed. “You know, there’s something hot about someone who irritates you so much, you want to either punch them or rip their clothes off. I chose the latter.” I grinned.

My parents’ faces grew red. Well, what did they expect us to talk about during this case? Besides, they were the ones painting gross pictures, not me.

Jared ran his hand over his short beard, and I could tell from the glint in his eyes that the memory just shot through him in the form of a feeling, but then his eyes went dusky and pained. Damn, this was hard.

“At any point in your relationship with Jared, did you feel coerced into having sexual intercourse?” he asked.

“Objection, leading,” my mother said.

“Overruled,” the judge responded. “It’s a legitimate question. Isn’t that why we’re all here?” she asked.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Mario and I said at the same time.

“No, when we had sex then and whenever we’ve had sex since, I’ve always wanted him *just as much* as he wanted me,” I responded, making sure they understood from my tone how much I desired him.

Mario cleared his throat, and his voice rasped when he spoke into the mic. “No further questions, Your Honor,” he said before returning to his seat.

Taking a deep breath, I straightened up in my seat, trying my best not to make eye contact with them while I was on the stand, though I ached for them.

Like throwing cold water on a flame, however, my father took to the podium again. I was preparing for my mother to cross-examine me since my father examined Jared, but it seemed they had their own strategy going. With my mother, I knew she’d be harsh, and I could prepare to fake resilience with her. But my father took me by surprise with the way he handled Jared, and now I was worried about the way he’d handle me. It shouldn’t keep shocking me how similar my mom and dad were even though he seemed like the victim. He knew better, and he didn’t do better.

“Hi, Tiffany,” my father said when he approached the podium.

“Please, Mr. Levine, call me Ms. Levine,” I said, wary of being manipulated.

That seemed to hurt him with the way his face crumpled, and his voice got hoarse. “Right. Ms. Levine. How are you doing today?”

“You don’t actually care, so let’s just get this over with,” I said.

Interestingly enough, the judge didn't say anything to put me in place and when I spun around in my chair to look at her, it seemed like the only thing she was missing was a bucket of popcorn. Ugh. Great. I had become their laughingstock. But I wouldn't let it worry me like it would worry my mother. I didn't want to be anything like my mother if she could go to these lengths for the sake of reputation.

My father composed himself. "Ms. Levine, you mentioned that when you were first employed at Crawford & Beam, Jared Crawford didn't want you there. Is that right?"

"Yes," I responded.

"So, if Mr. Crawford didn't hire you, who did?" my father asked, dropping his brows in confusion.

"As senior partners, Mario and Anthony were able to hire me," I said.

"Is that right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, crinkling my brows at him.

"Interesting," he sighed. "So, correct me if I'm wrong, but are you telling me that if it wasn't for Mario and Anthony, you wouldn't have gotten a job at Crawford & Beam?"

Oh, I saw where he was going with this. Ugh. This was exhausting.

"Yes, D...Mr. Levine," I said.

"And what happened after that? Was Jared Crawford okay with you being employed there without his approval?" my

father asked.

“Objection, speculation,” Jared’s heavy voice tumbled into the microphone, moving over me like waves.

“Your Honor, I’ll rephrase the question,” my father said.

The judge nodded.

“At any point did he express his disapproval over you being employed at his company by Mario and Anthony?” he asked.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “Yes.”

“Were you grateful to Mario and Anthony for getting you a job at Crawford & Beam?” my father asked.

“Of course, I was.” My voice was a monotone of boredom.

“So, is it safe to say that you were grateful to Mario and Anthony for your job, but you were still on Jared Crawford’s wrong side?” he asked.

He kept asking the same questions. Why didn’t he just get to what he actually wanted to ask already? Taking a deep breath in and out, I tapped my feet in impatience. “Yes,” I responded.

“Was it a case of you feeling as if you owed Mario and Anthony? That you wanted to find a way to repay them?” he asked.

And there it was. At least the first bomb.

“I was grateful to Mario and Anthony for the job, but I never felt obligated to do anything with them to keep it,” I said, hoping to shut him up.

“What about with Jared Crawford? Was your position threatened at the company? Did you sleep with him to save your job?” His questions were rapid, and it felt like they were coming at my face, trying to knock me out.

“No! My position wasn’t always secure with Jared, sure, but he never even seemed to like me, much less want to sleep with me. He never brought it up. It just kind of happened one day. We were both into it, and we both went for it,” I said in defense. “Never once did I feel as if my job would be jeopardized if I didn’t sleep with him.”

“Hm.” That was all he said for a few agonizing seconds before he spoke again. “What can you tell me about the sexual harassment claim that was filed against Jared Crawford? And him firing you from his company.”

There was the second bomb. We knew it was coming.

“I never filed a sexual harassment claim against Jared,” I said.

“No. You didn’t. A coworker filed it for you on your behalf, didn’t they?” he asked.

“Yes,” I responded.

“Is that because you were terrified of filing the charges yourself?” he asked.

“Objection, speculation.” Jared’s voice pounded the mic, bouncing off the walls.

“No, it was a misunderstanding,” I said.

“Wouldn’t be the first time we heard that, would it, Ms. Levine? A victim claiming that it was a misunderstanding to protect her attacker?” Mr. Levine said.

“Objection, argumentative, badgering the witness, speculation,” Jared said.

“Overruled,” the judge said.

My nostrils flared, and I clenched my teeth together, staring my father down. Enough was enough, damn it.

“Do you want to know what really happened, Dad? It was the same day we’d slept together for the first time and when he called me into his office, I thought it was because he couldn’t get enough of me. I couldn’t get enough of him. I wanted more of him, and I started to seduce him, but he stopped me. He didn’t want to go for a second round, then. Called what we did a mistake. Turns out that he had called me into his office to fire me instead of another rendezvous, which was cold, I’ll admit, but it was hardly a crime. My feelings were hurt, and my hate for him returned. We had an argument, and I stormed out of the office crying. With all the blinds down, my buttons were undone from my failed attempt to seduce him, and tears were streaming down my face, people jumped to the wrong conclusions.

“When I found out they’d jumped to the wrong conclusions, I knew it was my duty to clear up the misunderstanding. While I may not have liked him in that moment, I didn’t have the heart to let him go down for something he didn’t do. Unlike some people, I care about the truth,” I said.

“And the truth is that Jared Crawford stands for integrity. He stands for earning your place through your merit, by pulling up your bootstraps and getting to work, not by sleeping your way to the top. He’s slow to trust, which might make him come across cold when you just meet him. When you get to know him, he’s so warm, and he cares so much. He cares for his friends, it’s his love for his father that caused him to pull Crawford & Beam out of the gutter and make it what it is known for today, and he cares for me. Jared Crawford wouldn’t have stooped so low to get me to sleep with him to secure a place in his company because quite frankly, that’s beneath him. And I wouldn’t defend him if he were a creep because that’s beneath me.”

Pressing my lips together, I looked at my parents who seemed to experience several emotions all at once: shock, disgust, fear, and shame.

My body shook from the buzz beneath my skin, and my chest burned with the boiling blood inside my veins. My father swallowed, and I saw him look at his notes before raising his head and looking into my eyes. “I have no further questions, Your Honor,” he said, and my mother’s mouth fell open. As he made his way back to her, I could see her mouth the words, “What?”

Ooh, she wasn’t pleased. My guess was that he had a lot more questions to ask, and my answer just rendered them pointless. Great.

Chapter 25

Jared

Well, that was honest. My cheeks hurt from smiling. It was crazy to think about our first interactions with each other. The fact that I ever doubted her brilliance was confounding. She was nothing short of perfection.

Even if her parents thought otherwise.

If that's what they called imperfection, well imperfection had never looked so exquisite.

She was strong and held her own in a situation that would've driven others mad. It probably was driving her mad, but she was fighting it. She was fighting them, and we were right there with her. We were all helping each other remain sane and stable. Without her or Mario by my side, I would've surely been closer to the edge.

'You should see Tiffany in court, man. She's a star. Where are you?' I sent that text to Anthony, but he hadn't read it yet. It would've been great to have his support as well, but it was my guess that this hit him hard, harder than any of us would have thought. It was driving him a little crazy. Not that he wasn't slightly already there to begin with. In a world like this

one, who didn't have a screw loose? If only he would choose to lean on us.

Anthony was the type to play it cool when deep down, he was spiraling. When he was spiraling, it was best to leave him to it. Anthony couldn't be made to do anything he didn't want to do. If we were to push him, he'd push back even harder, and it would only make things worse. It was one of the reasons why I was so easy on him at work, for the hardass everyone said I was. While somehow, he always managed to turn things around for his clients and bring in incredible billable hours, he also didn't set the best example for our associates. He came in whenever he wanted to, he'd drink on the job, with the decency, thank goodness, to have the drink off the property. He'd show up to work hungover, and I'd caught him several times before Tiffany came here, having a bit too much fun at work with some of our employees.

And no, I wasn't cutting him slack because he was my best friend. If his work was as lousy as his attendance, I couldn't justify him working at my company. We'd have to figure out another way to help him work through his wounds. But I knew those wounds made him do the things he did, and I didn't judge him for it. Though I was sure he thought I did. So, I'd check in on him later if he didn't show up.

Luckily for him, we were able to drop him from our team so that he wouldn't face any consequences for not showing up. With him being missing in action and all over the place since this whole debacle, I made a last-minute decision. Putting my phone away, I turned my attention to the here and now. Tiffany

was on her way down from the stand after Mario's redirect, and I noticed that she'd chosen to bring the skirts back as well as color. I had no complaints.

She wore an emerald-green skirt suit with a blazer that buttoned all the way up to her neck. The shoulders were a tad pointy, and her skirt was slim fitted. The color deepened the green of her eyes and made them appear sultry or maybe that was her darkened eye makeup. Half of her reddish-orange hair was up and tucked away. The other half flowed with soft loose curls down her back. Wisps of hair framed her face. And her lips were peachy. She looked like she came to make a statement. It was as if she knew people would stare at her today, and she wanted to give them something else to look at. Something that would hold her together if she fell apart at their intense penetration of her every move.

Her smooth legs crossed over each other on her way back to the desk and man, I found myself staring at her with my lips parted. If her strength and the way she stood up for herself and for us on the stand today wasn't enough to admire, the way she looked made me curl my toes as heat flushed my skin. Giving her up, after all of this, sounded crazy to me. I couldn't wait for us to put this behind us, maybe start over. Because damn, I was in awe of this woman and as confused as my feelings had been these past couple of days, fuck, I was just thankful to be seated in her company.

She sat next to me and let out a breath, allowing Mario and me to see the nerves she hid from everyone else. I reached over to brush her hair off her shoulders. To be honest, I wanted

an excuse to touch her, to feel the softness of her hair move over my skin. There was no way I could bring myself to walk away from her, could I? After all this? The thought was ludicrous. She smiled at me as she felt my hand on her back.

“You’re doing great,” I said. “And thanks.”

“For what?” she asked, organizing her papers. Mario was up next, and she would be questioning him.

“For seeing me. For saying what you said about me having integrity and all. It really means a lot that you said that,” I said, moved with emotion that made my voice deeper.

She reached over and squeezed my leg. It wasn’t sexual; it was reassuring. Comforting. “I was just telling them what I’ve experienced with you and how that makes me see you. You know, everyone said the same about you when I just met you. I’m glad I stuck around to see it for myself.” She smiled and rubbed my leg before getting up and heading over to the podium, hitting me with a view of her ass and those shapely calves in soft pink, almost nude-colored heels.

Mario approached the stand, and their eye contact caused the molecules in the atmosphere to sizzle. Keeping my eyes on her, I prepared myself to be just as dazzled by her brain as I was by everything else about her.

Chapter 26

Mario

“Well, hello, Ms. Levine.” I smiled at Tiffany.

The confidence I exuded today had nothing to do with the fact that I wasn't worried but at this point, we could only do our best, and the rest was out of our hands. Besides, when you had nothing to hide, it was easy to remain poised.

“You, Mr. Sharpe, can call me Tiffany,” she said, smiling back at me.

“Why don't you all just stick to calling each other by your last names?” the judge chimed in, giving us both a look that reminded me of my teachers in middle school.

Tiffany and I giggled. “Yes, Your Honor.” We both spoke in unison.

Tiffany took a deep breath before addressing me again. Yet, I couldn't stop smiling at her and as her eyes connected with mine, a huge grin crept up on her face, and her cheeks reddened. Man, I loved her. And damn, was it hard to pretend that I didn't.

“Mr. Sharpe, I’m going to ask you some of the same questions Mr. Crawford was asked. Is that okay?” she said.

“Ask me anything. I’m all yours,” I responded with a wink.

It was hard not to flirt with her even though I knew that as much as I wanted her to be all mine in return, that would never happen. She was ours. That was something I was still wrestling with. Or perhaps she was no one’s, and I needed to grasp that—be grateful that she was choosing to fight for us because she’d chosen us.

Her parents didn’t like my response. Her mother kept looking toward the judge as if she wanted her to do something to stop us. And her dad ran his hand through his hair, keeping his head down.

Tiffany cleared her throat. “Well, I’m glad to hear that, Mr. Sharpe. When did you first meet Ms. Levine... Tiffany... me? Your Honor, is it okay to refer to myself in the first person? It feels a bit silly doing otherwise,” she said.

The judge paused and lowered her head before raising it again. Shrugging, she responded, “I suppose there’s no harm in it. This is unlike many other cases.”

Tiffany smiled back at her, and I found myself focusing on her lips. Kissing her for no other reason than to do so because I felt moved to was one of my favorite things to do. And now, my own lips tingled with need. I had to bite down on my bottom lip to keep myself in check.

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Tiffany nodded before turning to me. She must have seen my desire for her in my eyes; her own eyes flickered in response as she let out the softest gasp over her microphone. “Hm,” she said. “Mr. Sharpe, when was the first time we met?”

“The first time we met was this year at your graduation party from law school,” I said. The memory of the way she captivated me at first glance rushed through my body.

Tiffany nodded, and her voice grew a little bit shy when she asked, “Why don’t you walk me through what was going through your mind that day when we met?”

“Objection, Your Honor! Relevance? And why on earth is he flirting with her? This is a court setting,” Mrs. Levine roared.

“To be fair, Your Honor, this is how we speak to each other. We just can’t help it, but I can try to tone it down a bit if it seems as if we’re flirting. However, the question itself is relevant to establish his mindset in relation to Mr. and Mrs. Levine’s accusation,” Tiffany said.

The judge looked between Tiffany and her parents before nodding. “Please try to tone down the flirting. Overruled.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Tiffany beamed. “Mr. Sharpe?”

Tiffany tried her very best to monotonize her voice and fix her face to appear objective.

I mimicked her. “Yes, Ms. Levine. Chris had invited me to his sister’s graduation party. He had bought an apartment from

me to give to you and wanted me to stop by with the keys as well as hang out a bit and catch up.”

At the mention of the apartment, I saw her wince, and her cheeks puffed up with sadness as she lowered her eyes. My heart took a hit in response.

Clearing my throat, I continued, “I’d never met his sister before. I didn’t even know what she looked like but when I laid my eyes on the stunning redhead across the garden, she made the flowers around her pale in comparison to her beauty. And when Chris invited that same redhead over and introduced her as his sister, I knew I was a goner.”

My head was down as I spoke because well, we already got in trouble for flirting. However, when I raised my head without thinking, I was hit with the image of Tiffany’s parted lips. She was staring at me in shock as she blushed so hard, it was impossible to hide. She kept me frozen in her gaze.

“I knew Chris wouldn’t approve, so I told myself I wouldn’t go there,” I said, breaking the trance between me and her to look at Chris, who was clenching his jaw so hard, I could see the bones in his face standing erect. His entire face was red as well, but his eyes held no admiration for me. It was hard to watch him while speaking, so I lowered my eyes again.

“A little later on, Chris got too drunk to drive home on his own, so I got him a cab, and he asked me to keep an eye on his sister for him. I should’ve told him no because by that point, I was already attracted to her, and I knew it was too close for comfort. But I told myself I wouldn’t act on it because I was a

man of discipline. Upon my return, I spotted Tiffany's stuff laying on an empty seat by the outside lounging area and figured she might have been missing it, so I sought her out. If I'm being honest, it was just an excuse to see her again." Raising my head unconsciously once more, I caught Tiffany staring at me like she wanted to eat me up on the spot.

Shaking my head to keep myself from flirting back, I grinned. I didn't want us to get in trouble again because my desire for her was so strong. My heart raced just as it did that night when I was already a complete fool for her and was fighting it so hard.

"She'd had a drink for the first time that night." I grinned before catching Chris' burning gaze. "I guess she must have had one too many; she was a bit tipsy when I found her trying to get into her car with her friends. They said they were on the way to a club. Her friends were talking about it being her first time. They all seemed too tipsy to drive as well. So, I suggested they go home and maybe hit the club another night. I offered to put them in a cab because they were in no state to drive. I'd had one drink, and I was trying to set a good example, which is why I didn't drive them home myself."

My brows kicked up at the whole 'trying to set a good example' part, knowing the Levines must have been thinking how full of shit I was.

"They were adamant that they wanted to go to the club, and Tiffany was upset because she felt like Chris left me there to spy on her. To prove that I wasn't trying to spy on her, I

accepted their invitation to go to the club with them. I wanted to be there because Chris asked me to keep an eye on her, and I didn't want anything to happen to her. It being her first night at a club and all. And let me not bullshit you, it gave me an excuse to be in the company of the beautiful woman I was attracted to but knew I shouldn't approach. I tried to convince myself that I was there on Chris' behalf. But honestly, it felt like luck was giving me a chance to be next and to her so I could get to know her a bit more, even if it had to be from a distance. Man, that night was wild." A grin escaped me. The memory of finding her friends in the sex room of the club hit my funny bone.

However, the memory of finding her in that room and having to restrain myself hit me in the groin. "That night was wild," I repeated. My voice had grown husky and when I looked at Tiffany, she gulped.

"Anyway, her friends were, um, distracted. And she was ready to go home, so we left together, in a cab which took us back to the garden where the graduation party had been held to pick up our cars. I'd offered to drive Tiffany's car back to her apartment for her, then go back for my own car. I hadn't consumed anymore drinks during the night and by that time, my one drink was out of my system. But when we showed up there, Mr. and Mrs. Levine halted our plans. Tiffany was afraid of getting in trouble with her parents, even though she was twenty-one and old enough to drink. But we agreed to let Mr. and Mrs. Levine know that she had left her car behind so they could take care of it. She didn't want to go back to her parents'

house drunk, so I offered to drive her to the apartment Chris had bought for her, since it was in the building I own. And yeah, that was how we met,” I said, shifting in my seat.

Tiffany bit her lip and lowered her gaze to her paper, clearing her throat. “Right. Thank you, Mr. Sharpe. You were the perfect gentleman that night,” she said.

“Objection,” her mother started before Tiffany cut her off.

“It’s not speculation. I was there,” she responded, with an eye roll.

Her mother quickly closed her mouth, adjusting her skirt before sitting, looking as if she wanted to crawl into a hole.

I smiled at Tiffany with my eyes; we both knew where the rest of that night ended up, and a gentleman would’ve never slept with a lady on the first night they met. So perfect gentleman? Eh. Not so much but man, did I try.

“Your Honor, that’s all the questions I have for Mr. Sharpe for now,” Tiffany said, her cheeks red as she walked away trying not to smile.

“Okay, Ms. Levine. Cross?” The judge called to the opposing counsel, and Mrs. Levine stood.

Shaking my head, I suppressed the need to roll my eyes as she approached the podium. She was still Tiffany’s mother, even if she did disown her and was the reason for the pain I watched Tiffany endure this week.

“Well, you’re quite the charmer, aren’t you, Mario Sharpe?” Mrs. Levine began.

“Objection, argumentative,” Jared spoke through his microphone.

“Sustained,” the judge responded.

“I’m sorry, Your Honor,” Mrs. Levine whispered even though I could tell it pained her to say it by the way her lip kicked up on one side.

“So, what I heard from your testimony, Mr. Sharpe, and do correct me if I’m wrong,” she started. “...was that you met Ms. Levine at her party, knew it would upset Chris if you pursued her, knew you should have stayed away from her, but you had no self-control and found any lame excuse in the world to be around her. Is that right?”

“I wouldn’t put it exactly like that,” I responded.

“Mr. Sharpe, please answer the question,” she countered.

Well, apart from the fact she stated the question in such a contemptuous manner, it was basically what I said earlier. Exhaling, I nodded. “Yes.”

“Sounds a bit like stalking, doesn’t it, Mr. Sharpe?” Mrs. Levine said.

The nerve. My heart was set ablaze at the offense. “Excuse me?” I responded. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Sounds like you couldn’t help yourself, so you pushed your way into her path when you should’ve stayed out,” Mrs. Levine said.

“Objection, speculation and argumentative,” Jared said, and I could hear him trying not to lose his temper.

“Overruled,” the judge responded.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and counted to three before opening them again.

“Tell me, Mr. Sharpe. What happened after you took Mrs. Levine home that night?” she asked. “And let me remind you, Mr. Sharpe, that you are under oath.”

With my hand resting on the wooden surface before me, I could feel my blood pumping against it with force at how impossible she was. “She asked me to stay on her couch because it was her first night on her own,” I said.

“Oh, how chivalrous. So, you want us to believe that you were the perfect gentleman, this knight in shining armor the whole night. And even though you were a stranger to Tiffany, she was the one who asked you to stay in her apartment with her without you coercing her?” Mrs. Levine asked.

“I never called myself her knight in shining armor or a perfect gentleman, the latter were Tiffany’s words. And yes, she was the one who asked me to stay with her that night,” I responded.

Mrs. Levine paced next to the podium. “What did you want to happen in that apartment when you were alone with a vulnerable young woman, Mr. Sharpe?”

Sighing, I looked up at the ceiling and asked for patience. “As I stated before, I found Tiffany attractive, but I was

conflicted. I was trying to do what she asked me to do, but it was hard.”

“Why was it hard?” Mrs. Levine asked.

“I just told you. Because I was attracted to her, and I was conflicted,” I said.

“But if you were a perfect gentleman, it shouldn’t be hard for you to be decent and spend the night on her couch to protect her, unless you were obsessive and couldn’t control yourself,” Mrs. Levine stated.

“Objection, argumentative,” Jared hissed.

“Sustained,” the judge said, and I relaxed a little bit.

Mrs. Levine stopped her pacing and leaned against the podium. “So, what happened after that? You just spent the night on her couch?”

For the most part, yes. Damn, it. “Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“And nothing else happened that night. Let me remind you again, Mr. Sharpe, you’re under oath,” Mrs. Levine pressed.

“When it became too hard for me to stay, and I knew that staying there could lead to something that it shouldn’t, I tried to leave, but Tiffany caught me sneaking out,” I confessed.

“How convenient. And then you left, like the perfect gentleman, did you?” she asked.

“No,” I breathed.

“What was that? Speak up for the court,” she said.

“No,” I grunted.

“You had sex with her that night, didn’t you?” she asked.

How did she know that? Unless she didn’t, and she was just fishing. Either way, this whole case was about the truth, wasn’t it?

“We had sex with each other, yes, Mrs. Levine.” I straightened my cuffs and smoothed out the wrinkles in the sleeves of my jacket.

“So, let’s recap, shall we? You met Tiffany Levine that night, and you didn’t have the willpower to leave her alone, even though in your own words, you said you knew you shouldn’t go near her. Your lack of self-control led you to...” Mrs. Levine was cut off.

“Objection, argumentative, badgering the witness.” Jared jumped up, and Tiffany was looking at her mother with her mouth opened wide and her head shaking in disbelief.

“Overruled,” the judge said, and my head whipped around to face the judge before I could stop it. What?

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Mrs. Levine smiled.

This was absolutely insane.

“Your lack of self-control led you to hang around her, flirt with her that night...” she continued.

“Objection, speculation.” Jared stood again.

“Sustained,” the judge responded, and it almost looked as if Mrs. Levine bit her tongue in shock. She smoothed down the

front of her jacket and skirt, whispering something to herself before looking back up.

“You planted yourself in her path so that you could be around her, didn’t you, Mr. Sharpe?” she asked. I could almost hear the sensors going off in her brain, recalibrating.

“I was asked to keep an eye on her, and I enjoyed spending time with her, yes,” I said.

“You made her think it was her idea to sleep with you, didn’t you, Mr. Sharpe?” she said, and I let out a long sigh that bounced off the mic like a heavy wind during a storm.

“I didn’t make Tiffany Levine do anything. I enjoyed her company, and we both wanted to be with each other. We were both equally responsible for what happened between us that night,” I responded.

“Mr. Sharpe, is it safe to assume that you were the first one she slept with out of the three of you,” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, clearing my throat.

“And is it true that before you, Tiffany had never engaged in sexual...” Mrs. Levine’s voice grew louder, but Jared’s voice made hers sound like a squeak amongst roars.

“Objection. Speculation,” he responded.

“Sustained,” the judge said. She leaned back in her chair with her fingers at her temple, watching this whole shit show.

“Mr. Sharpe...” Mrs. Levine started, but no other words followed. She seemed to think long and hard about what she

would say next but couldn't seem to frame her sentences correctly. Even she looked dumbfounded when she whispered, "I have no further questions, Your Honor."

The judge didn't even ask her to repeat or speak louder. "Thank you, Mrs. Levine. Redirect?"

Tiffany jumped up from her seat and rushed over to the podium. Her body was rigid, and her face was stiff as if she were using all her strength to contain herself and not combust before us all.

"Mr. Sharpe, you said that Chris asked you to keep an eye on me that night and along with your attraction for me, that's the reason you were hanging around me that night. Not as the opposition implied, to stalk me but to do what your friend asked of you. Is that right?" Tiffany asked.

"Yes." I nodded.

"Would Christopher Levine be able to confirm that?" she asked.

"Yes. Although he was wasted that night, so I'm not sure he remembered what he said. But Chris was very concerned for you. He always was. So, I'm sure he'd be able to confirm that," I admitted.

"Thank you, Mr. Sharpe. Your Honor, we'd like to subpoena Christopher Levine, Mr. Sharpe and Mr. Crawford's former best friend, to testify as a character witness," she said.

"Okay. Let's reconvene at eight tomorrow morning." The judge nodded.

Releasing a breath, I stood and straightened my suit out before leaving the stand. Whew. My heart was hammering. It was now up to Chris to not let his biases keep him from speaking on what really happened. Fuck, I was beginning to lose confidence in the truth.

“Are you okay?” Tiffany asked when I returned to our table.

“Are you?” I asked.

“I still can’t believe this is happening,” she said, opening her arms and allowing me to walk into them.

Letting the scent of her hair wash over me, I closed my eyes and held her closer, taking a single solid moment to pretend that it was just her and me standing in this room. That the world wasn’t spinning, and we would be all right.

Chapter 27

Chris

There were several missed calls on my phone this morning, and all of them were from my mom. Last night, I turned my phone off and rested my head on my wife's breasts for comfort as we talked about being a character witness for the men. After she convinced me that the best thing to do was just to be honest, regardless of what that meant, we made love for the first time since she gave birth. Well, not in the typical heterosexual type of love making since she still had a week or two left to recover from her c-section. She jerked me off for seven minutes, and I ate her out for eight.

We got caught up in the moment for fifteen whole minutes and a couple of orgasms later, we were passed out in bed, only to be woken up again no more than four hours later by our baby shift. Tell you what though, that was the best fucking nap I had in a long fucking time. And well, this morning, arriving at court, I was in a more uplifting mood, one could say.

"Mr. Levine," Tiffany said. She seemed to be looking right at me but somehow managed to not be looking at me at all. It

was dismissive as if I were an inconvenience to her. Well, two could play that game.

“Ms. Levine,” I answered with the same lifeless tone of voice.

Her nostrils flared as she proceeded. “It’s my understanding that you were once best friends with Mr. Crawford, Mr. Sharpe, and Mr. Whitlocke, is that right?”

Yes, that’s right.” I straightened my shoulders and looked right past hers.

“Would you mind telling the court what caused your friendship to end?” she asked, moving to cross her arms but relaxing them when she seemed to realize where she was. She fidgeted with the papers before her instead.

“Their relationship with you,” I said.

She cleared her throat, but it was pretty aggressive. She almost coughed when she spoke again, and I knew she was hating every moment of this. The truth was that I was too. We were too damn old to be this petty or at least I was. And after hearing Jared’s testimony yesterday, it became hard to argue away her ability to consent to three grown men at her age. As uncomfortable as it made me, it was her fucking right, damn it. Even if I hated it.

“Why did our relationship bother you so much?” she asked.

“Objection, relevance?” our father responded.

“Overruled,” the judge stated.

“There were several reasons,” I started.

She waited, shaking her head at me and tipping up her brows. “Yes?” she asked.

“Well, for one thing, I didn’t need the image of my sister with three men, and now, I’m scarred from it,” I said.

She sighed, and it sounded impatient. “And?” she asked.

“Your Honor, he already answered the question,” my father said.

“Your Honor, he said there were several reasons. He only gave one reason. I’d like to know what the others are just to see if it supports the claims made by Levine LLP in this case,” Tiffany argued.

“Overruled,” the judge said.

Running my hands across my beard, I sighed. “It was even worse knowing that it was my three best friends, second of all. And third, they never cared about how it would affect me. I was hurt,” I said, and my voice cracked. I let it crack, damn it.

“I’m a bit confused. Maybe you could clarify something for me. Why would a brother be so affected by his sister’s sex life?” she asked.

“Well, because I care about you,” I said, creasing my brows and shaking my head at her. She pressed her lips together as if she were trying to prevent herself from responding as she tipped her head to the side dismissively.

“I don’t know how you don’t get why it would affect me that my best friends, all three of them, were sleeping with my little sister behind my back. I’m your big brother. I’m supposed to protect you, even if it would’ve had to be from my best friends,” I said. My heart felt like a puddle swishing around my chest.

“Do you feel like your friends are harmful people?” she asked, wiggling her neck at me as she posted up one side of her hip.

“You never really know someone. I’d at least have appreciated the chance to get to know their intentions with you,” I said.

“Doesn’t sound like you have much faith in your friends, Mr. Levine. If you didn’t think they were good people, why were you friends with them?” she asked, scratching her nails across the side of the podium.

“They never gave me any reasons to think they were bad people, but you are my little sister, and they were my best friends who I knew for a long time, which meant I’d seen them go through relationships. Sometimes those relationships didn’t work out, and I don’t know, we’d been through some stuff together, and you were so innocent, I just felt like you deserved someone as innocent as you,” I rambled.

There were a million questions running through her mind, and I could see them moving across her face. She pressed her lips together even tighter before releasing a breath.

“Didn’t you think I was capable of deciding for myself who I was getting in bed with and whether or not I thought they were worthy of me?” she asked, cocking her head.

“I know you’re capable, but I’m also your big brother. I don’t know what else to say. I want to protect you,” I said.

She sucked on her tongue and tilted her head from side to side. “Ja— sorry, Mr. Crawford said you’ve known each other for over ten years. Is that right?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Have you also known the other guys just as long?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Would you say you guys were pretty close?” she asked.

At my agreement, she continued, “Means you would’ve seen them in all types of settings and situations, is that right?” she asked.

“That’s right,” I responded, studying her and taking a breath.

“So, you should be able to answer this question. In all the years you’ve known these men, have you ever seen them force a woman to be with them or have sex with them?”

My head could have spun off my body with how fast and instinctively I shook it. “No. Never. Even with as many women Anthony had slept with, they always seemed to want him just as much as he wanted them. He had that way about

him,” I said, recalling my ex-girlfriend and scowling at the memory. “Of course, I couldn’t know everything but no, I never witnessed anything like that.”

“And have you ever heard any of the women your friends slept with complain about being coerced?” she asked.

I didn’t rush to answer. Instead, I sat and thought on the question for a while, going through as many memories as possible over the past fifteen years. “No,” I responded.

My mother was biting her bottom lip so hard, it was a deeper shade of red from her top lip. I wasn’t sure what she wanted me to say. I wouldn’t lie about what I didn’t see.

Tiffany sighed and nodded in relief. It was as if she were also holding her breath and was just given confirmation on her belief about my three former best friends.

“Thank you, Mr. Levine. There has been doubt around when the guys and I met, so maybe you can help to clarify something for the court and the opposition. Can you confirm when the guys and I met?” she asked.

Gulping, I nodded. “Yes. On the night of your graduation party was the first time I’d ever introduced you to Anthony and Mario.” A heaviness hit me in my ribs, and I took a deep breath, trying to get past this unnecessary sense of guilt I felt, for what I now realized was absolutely no reason. “And you met Jared Crawford on the day of your interview, I assume, because I set up that interview for you. But you would know better than I would.”

My mother's veins were bulging from her forehead, and she shoved my father's hand away from her when he tried to offer her some comfort. Getting Mom upset was hardly anything new, so I honestly didn't even feel affected by her reactions. I had a few realizations over the past few days, which prevented my wounds of rejection and abandonment from being triggered.

"Thank you, Mr. Levine. Take us back to my graduation night. As Mario mentioned, you were a bit wasted. Do you recall much of that night?" she asked.

"Yes, I do. I can handle a few drinks," I said, defensively.

"Okay, great. That serves us well. Can you confirm whether or not you asked Mario to keep an eye on me that night?" she asked.

"Yes," I responded. Not that it gave him an excuse to use to get into her pants.

"Why is that? Had I ever been reckless or given you the impression that I couldn't take care of myself?" she asked.

"Before that night, no. You had never been reckless. You'd been next to perfect. And you were soft, sweet, and agreeable. I asked him to keep an eye on you to protect you from Mom and Dad. I wanted you to have fun that night, be twenty-one. They were treating you the same way they treated me when I graduated from law school. I knew the burden of their expectations, and I just wanted you to be twenty-one for one night. So, yes, I remember asking him to keep an eye on you, so that our parents wouldn't ruin your night," I admitted.

There was no way in hell I was taking a look at my parents after having said that. Their eyes must have been shooting laser beams at me, trying to turn me into ashes on the spot.

“Would you agree that a person should feel the safest with their parents?” she asked.

I nodded. “One hundred percent.”

“So why would you feel the need to protect me from them?” she asked.

Damn, I had to give it to her. She was brave as hell. Super brave.

“Our parents have a way of um... hm... being controlling. Wanting to decide our lives for us. It can be damaging,” I said as emotion threw a blockage in my throat. “And to escape that, I’d abandoned you and left you to deal with it on your own. I was desperate to fix that and be your big brother again. Protecting you from them was one of the ways in which I could do so,” I said.

I was on the verge of saying that was the reason why I got her the apartment, and the realization ran through me like a truck. The words, ‘I’m sorry’ were on the tip of my tongue. Sorry for taking her apartment away and failing to protect her from our parents, no matter what.

Her lips trembled, and her cheeks reddened, but she bit down on her lip and recomposed herself. I messed up. And looking at my little sister facing all this on her own came crashing down on me in waves. Fuck.

“Thank you, Mr. Levine. I have no further questions,” she said, walking back to her seat.

Stunned for a moment, I just sat there, getting ready for the interrogation of my life from our parents but luckily, it was time for a recess.

I couldn't get away from the stand fast enough as we waited for the judge to leave the room first but as soon as we were allowed to leave, I headed straight toward the bathroom to look myself in the mirror and let it all out. Shit. Did the guys deserve an apology too?

Chapter 28

Val

*U*ngrateful, backstabbing, rat of a boy! I thought, looking at Chris from my place at the stand. Of course, he would choose them over me, proving to me once again that the only person I could trust in this world to get the job done was me. My hopes weren't even pinned on my husband anymore. Why should it have been? It wasn't their responsibility to save my reputation. It was mine.

Settling in the seat, I acknowledged the judge with a nod and turned my head stiffly toward Jared Crawford.

"Mrs. Levine," he said, his face tense like an old brick, too old to be dating Tiffany.

I bristled in response to him even saying my name.

"Mr. Crawford," I responded, wiggling in my seat as my nerves set off, sending racing, nauseating waves throughout my body.

"Would you mind reminding us of the reason why we're in court today?" he asked.

Fluttering my lashes in annoyance, I stared at him. “Because you’re suing us,” I said, curtly.

“Right. My apologies. Perhaps I should have asked you to remind us all of why we’re suing you,” he responded just as rudely.

“For defamation,” I said, straightening my shoulders and holding my head high.

“That’s right. And you’re opposing that you or your husband ever defamed us, is that right?” he asked.

“Yes.” I nodded.

“So does that mean that you stand by your husband’s statements about us?” he continued.

“Obviously, or I wouldn’t be here,” I responded. He could speed this up in honor of the court’s time and mine.

“Right. Bear with me, Mrs. Levine. Can you remind us all of your husband’s statements?” he asked.

Turning my eyes over in my head, I reached for my glasses that were hanging around my neck and placed them on my face. The blond-haired boy, Mario, took the liberty of distributing some papers to the judge and my team before delivering one of them to me. I pulled it from his hand.

“Do you mind reading that, Mrs. Levine?” old, brick-faced Jared asked.

I kept my nose at the paper and didn’t turn to acknowledge him while reading.

“This doesn’t sound like our Tiffany, and I think it’s because those three men—Mario Sharpe, Anthony Whitlocke, and Jared Crawford at Crawford & Beam—did something to my daughter. I’m not sure what it is, but it doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together here. Three grown men, nearly forty years old and a twenty-one-year-old. What could they have in common? Nothing. They are... They are... Well, you know what they are. I don’t have to spell it out for you. I’m going to rescue my daughter from your hands. You’ve done something to her to make sure she won’t leave willingly, but I’m going to...” I read.

“The statement isn’t complete,” I scoffed, tossing it on the surface before me.

“Mrs. Levine, this is a television transcript of your husband’s words on national television. Are you telling me they aren’t an accurate representation?” he asked.

Well, how could one be sure? It wasn’t like I replayed the tape over and over to memorize what he had said, and the last thing I would do was make it easy for them. “I can’t recall,” I answered.

“Even though you were standing next to him when he said those exact words?” he asked.

“That’s right, Mr. Crawford. As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I am getting older. My memory isn’t as spry as it used to be,” I responded with a taunting smile.

He flashed one back at me, and I tightened my face in response. “I thought that would be the case, Mrs. Levine. Your

Honor, we would like to move the court's attention to exhibit 114, already admitted into evidence," he said.

The judge turned to nod at the bailiff standing by the teleprompter I noticed but wondered what it was for. Up on the screen in front of everyone, my and my husband's face were projected, playing the exact words written on the paper. I knew they were exact because I followed along, reading with my pen.

The teleprompter paused, and there was silence as Jared Crawford turned to look at me with a stupid, idiotic smirk. "Does this tape refresh your memory, Mrs. Levine?" he asked, all smug.

I exhaled an impatient breath and twisted my lips in annoyance. "Yes, it did, Mr. Crawford."

"Great. I'm glad to hear that, Mrs. Levine. What do you suppose your husband was implying about myself, Mr. Whitlocke, and Mr. Sharpe in his statement? Would it be safe to say that it was a clear and straightforward accusation, Mrs. Levine?" he asked.

"Objection, speculation," my husband said, finally speaking up for heaven's sake.

"Overruled," the judge responded.

What? What kind of hole did this judge climb out of? He clearly expected me to speculate over whatever my husband was implying.

Swallowing and breathing heat, I responded, “Implying something is hardly a basis for defamation, Mr. Crawford. He could be *implying* anything.” I leaned back in my chair.

“Right. But he wasn’t implying just anything, was he? He said, in his own words, that he would, quote ‘rescue my daughter from your hands.’ Whose hands were he referring to?” he asked, standing with his hands hugging the podium, without nerves. Where were his nerves? Damn it.

You, you stupid baboon. That’s what I wanted to say. “Give me one moment, let me check. Memory problems.” I smiled at the judge who gave me a sliver of a smile back.

“Oh, that’s right. It says it right here, ‘Mario Sharpe, Anthony Whitlocke, and Jared Crawford.’ I suppose he was referring to you,” I said.

He shook his head and laughed. His laugh irritated me. Immediately, I was met with a flashback of middle school, and I wanted to wipe his stupid smile off his face.

“Thank you, Mrs. Levine,” he said, and the front, left side of my head twitched and ached. “So, to clarify, he wanted to rescue his daughter from our hands? Why is that? Was she in danger?” he asked.

“He thought so, and I support him,” I responded.

“Oh, we’ll get to that soon enough, Mrs. Levine, but let’s stay on this for a while. What did he believe she was in danger from?” he asked.

“Objection, speculation,” my husband said. He was stingy with his objections, and it was driving me nuts.

“Sustained,” the judge said.

Finally, I was losing hope in the judge’s intelligence for a moment there.

“Right. I’ll rephrase the question, Your Honor. Is it safe to say that your husband was doing a lot more than just implying or suggesting, and he was in fact making a statement that his daughter was in danger around us?” he asked.

“It’s possible.” I shrugged.

“And based on the statements made here in court and the cross examinations your team partook in, is it safe to say that your husband made those statements with the intention of painting Mr. Sharpe, Mr. Whitlocke, and I as predators?” he asked.

If it wasn’t for the age-related questions my husband asked, I could’ve shaped his intentions in a way that allowed me to dodge this question. However, it would give Mr. Crawford and the others more reason to laugh at me if I did, given the obvious. So, I stared Jared in the eyes. “Yes, Mr. Crawford.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Levine. And earlier you said that you support your husband’s statements. Is that right?” he asked.

“Yes,” I bit out.

“If you support your husband’s statements, Mrs. Levine, why would you publicly disown your daughter if you believed

she was in danger?” he asked, tilting his head at me mockingly.

My nostrils flared, and I felt it. “I disowned her before my husband made those statements and when he did, I realized he had a point,” I said, sticking my neck out at him.

“Oh, you did, did you? So, why didn’t you take it back? Why did you continue to disown her? Please remember, Mrs. Levine, that you’re under oath,” he said, squinting his eyes at me with a smirk. “Is that because you don’t believe that your daughter was in fact in danger around us, Mrs. Levine?”

“Well, I don’t know what to believe, do I?” I responded, clasping my hands before me and fiddling with my wedding ring.

“Even so, if there was a single part of you that believed she was in danger, wouldn’t you come out in support of your daughter? In fact, isn’t the reason you’re even here in court today is because you’re ashamed of your daughter’s sexual habits, and you want to punish her?” he asked.

“Objection, speculation and argumentative. Your Honor, my wife had no way of knowing at the time and now, she just wants to get to the truth,” my husband responded.

“Sustained,” the judge responded.

“Thank you, Your Honor.” My husband sighed. I turned to look at him with a nod of gratitude, and he smiled, though his lips were shaky.

“The truth, Mrs. Levine, is that you had no way of knowing then if your husband had any grounds to stand on, and you still have no way of knowing now, do you? So, why are you here?” he asked.

“As my husband said, I want to get to the truth,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

He tilted his head. “I suppose that’s fair. But I have one more question. Would you agree that the accusations made by your husband are baseless? And by baseless, I mean, lacking foundation, not founded on fact but simply assumption?” he asked.

My heart beat sickeningly as I looked back at him, fighting my lips to speak, but they couldn’t find any words that would work in our favor. Grudgingly, I breathed out the words, “Based on the literal definition of baseless, I would agree that the accusation wasn’t made based on fact.”

If I said otherwise, I would’ve looked like a dumb attorney. And I wouldn’t dumb myself down as an attorney to win a case. As long as my husband didn’t fold, we could still win this. Jared’s questions were soft and didn’t prove whether or not they were innocent either. We just had to plant reasonable doubt, and I did my part. Now, it was my husband’s turn to stand by his words and not, excuse my language, fuck us over.

Chapter 29

Benedict

My hands were shaking, and my knees were knocking as I approached the stand. My wife had given me quite the pep talk in preparation for my direct examination and as she got through with questioning me, Mario took to the podium. He was smiling and charming with everyone else but with me, he was angry. I could tell by the hardening of his face, the disgust in his nostrils and the vein standing up in his neck, peeking out over his collar.

“Mr. Levine. The man of the hour. The man responsible for this magnificent waste of time,” he said.

“Mr. Sharpe!” the judge gasped in surprise. “Please. Control yourself,” she said with both the need to instill discipline and shock.

Tiffany’s eyes widened though she seemed to be holding back a chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Your Honor. I’ll control my outbursts,” he said. “Good day, sir.” He turned his attention to me. “Mr. Crawford touched on a very important point earlier with your wife. He

drew attention to this whole foolish exhibition being based on an unfounded accusation.”

“Objection! Argumentative and quite frankly just rude.” My wife slammed her hand down on the desk.

“Order!” The judge responded to my wife’s show of dramatics. “It seems as if everyone in this courtroom is slowly losing their mind and forgetting the laws of the court. I understand that this is a very sensitive and emotional time and not a very typical situation, but you will control yourselves in this court, or else I will have this case thrown out!” she ordered.

Closing my eyes, I shook my head at the decision my conscience was pushing me to make. After hearing everything over the past couple of days, how could I blame Mario for being this upset? It was obvious to me at this point that the relationship between them was consensual. In fact, I’d known this before we even stepped into court, and everything else just confirmed it for me. But I couldn’t let my wife down. She’d shatter. Look at her. Her skin was pulled so tight, it looked uncomfortable, as if it would rip apart any second now.

“Yes, Your Honor,” all the attorneys murmured at once.

“Mr. Levine,” Mario said, taking in a sharp breath. “Would you agree that you made baseless accusations against us?” he asked.

Looking at my wife, she was pleading with me, using her eyes to beg me to be vague and cunning with my answer. But

this wasn't the time for that. "At the time, yes I did. I didn't have any proof so yes, it was baseless."

"And you, yourself, had never seen anything or heard anything that would give validity to your accusation, correct?" he asked.

"Except for the shocking discovery of you..." I cleared my throat, not wanting to go into details to describe the collective reference of 'you.' "...in that filing room, no. I'd never seen or heard anything."

"And when you heard this discovery, did you pull your daughter, Ms. Tiffany Levine aside to ask her about what you heard?" he asked.

"No," I admitted.

"Mr. Levine, what exactly did you hear? And why did it make you jump to that conclusion?" he said, tapping his finger against the podium.

Shivers of discomfort ran through my spine and pulled at my cheeks. "I'd rather not repeat it," I responded, shaking off the memory and running away from the imagery.

"Mr. Levine, I get that this might be uncomfortable, but this whole court case has been brought together based on Ms. Levine's sex life, and it is necessary to know what you heard to establish a foundation as I'm sure you understand," he said.

There was no objection from my wife. I'd never been so desperate to hear her object in my entire life. Instead, everyone just stared at me and waited.

“Mr. Levine, can you please answer the question? What did you hear?” Mario asked.

It felt like things were crawling over my body as I closed my eyes and took a deep breath in and out. “I heard that um... Tiff... uh, Ms. Levine had been discovered um... hm... whew, okay, in an um sexual position with my son’s three best friends,” I managed. A shudder ran through me, and I cleared my throat in an attempt to shoo the discomfort away.

“Thank you, Mr. Levine. Did you also hear that she was being forced to be in that situation?” he asked, dropping his brows at me.

Scratching my brow, I shook my head. “Not exactly. It was shocking for the person who came upon such a sight, and it was shocking for me when they said it. I couldn’t imagine Tiffany chose to do that, and I assumed that it must not have been her choice,” I said. A pain sliced through my head out of nowhere. “The statement I made really came from a place of fear and concern for my daughter,” I added.

“So, you rushed to the news station to put a claim out there that you had no proof of and hadn’t even spoken to your daughter about?” he asked.

“I didn’t exactly rush. The news people were out there, and I was so angry. I didn’t think,” I confessed.

My wife’s gasp was audible; the whole reason the news people were outside our firm was because she called them to make her statement. And when I looked at her, she was twisting her mouth up as if she wanted to rip me apart. My

cheeks reddened apologetically, but I sighed in resignation. I was just being honest.

“In my defense, I assumed that even if she were in trouble, she probably wouldn’t admit it,” I responded.

He smiled. He smiled? Why did he smile?

“With all due respect, Mr. Levine, that statement did nothing for your defense. But let’s continue. A few days ago, you somehow were able to get a search warrant authorized for our properties. Many things of ours were seized as a result of your assumptions. Tell me, Mr. Levine, did you find any proof whatsoever that your daughter was in any danger in our presence?” he asked.

“In all honesty, there hasn’t been enough time for the police to come back with a report on what they might have found since it’s still early days,” I said.

“Well, I for one, appreciate your need for honesty. It’s honestly refreshing, and I’d like to seize the opportunity to dive into some more of that honesty of yours,” he said.

My mind spun with the number of times he said the word, mocking me.

“Just a moment ago, you said ‘even if she were in trouble’, why did you say that?” he asked.

“Is that what I said?” I asked. “I don’t recall exactly what I said,” I responded. It wasn’t a lie. Heat was building beneath my collar, and the room was getting smaller with the pressure.

It was hard to keep track of every single word leaving my mouth.

“You don’t remember what you said less than five minutes ago?” he said, incredulously.

“No, I don’t. I can’t be sure.” I shrugged. It felt like I was lying even when I wasn’t, and the need to prove myself was going off inside me like a smoke alarm preceding an explosion. The truth needed to get out of my body.

“Well, isn’t that convenient. Have you and your wife been tested for dementia recently?” Mario asked.

“Objection!” My wife jumped up, unamused. “Relevance?” she asked.

“Sustained. Please move on to the next question, Mr. Sharpe,” the judge said.

As Mario looked down, presumably to find his next question, I stared at the top of his gelled, swirly coif on his head, as my heart beat out an impatient rhythm. My conscience howled like a wolf in the night. It must have only been a second or two that he was standing, facing his papers before him, but it felt like everything was happening in slow motion. My mouth went dry, and my tongue went heavy, but the words rolled off it, nonetheless.

“Mario, you’re right. This has been a magnificent waste of time,” I started, looking over to apologize to my wife, who looked so pale, I might have thought she’d just died on the

spot with her mouth frozen wide. But her heavy panting gave it away.

“Aww, come on, Val. Pick your mouth up off the ground. I know it. You know it. We all know it,” I said, and there was a collective gasp in the room as I held my heavy head down, stroked my forehead, and raised it again.

Getting up out of my seat, I turned to face the judge. “Your Honor, I’d like to apologize for this enormous waste of time.”

She was also not amused, tightening her face until her nose and mouth were as narrow as a mouse’s snout. “Mr. Levine,” she started and turned to face my wife. “Mrs. Levine! There are consequences for wasting the court’s time!” she said.

“Yes, Your Honor, I understand, and we will deal with those consequences,” I started.

“Your Honor, I do not understand what has gotten into my husband, but I do not stand for...” My wife jumped up from her seat and hurried to approach the bench.

“Valerie, enough. Give it up,” I grunted, shocking myself. I shocked Val as well because she stood, frozen, staring at me,

“What the hell? Way to go, Dad.” I heard Tiffany’s voice in the background but couldn’t bring myself to face her yet.

“Your Honor, when I first made the statement, I genuinely believed it. It was out of fear and concern as I said. But it became clear after Tiffany poured her heart out to us, we’d made a big mistake that we were too proud to take back. Coming to court was a bad idea with all the doubts but deep

down, I was hoping for something to stick. Nothing did and after hearing Tiffany, Mr. Sharpe, and Mr. Crawford's testimonies, I knew for sure that I'd messed up. I couldn't keep up this charade any longer. The truth had to come out. I apologize, Your Honor, for wasting the court's time. I apologize to my wife Val for letting her down and most of all... whoo!" I said, turning around and bracing myself for the guilt that was about to race through me as I faced my daughter.

Taking a few deep breaths didn't help, and my body shook with emotion. Choked up, I raised my head to look her in the eyes as she deserved. "I'm sorry, Tiffany, for joining in on the parade of your personal life, disgracing you in public, and for hurting the people you care about. I'll never be able to forgive myself for that." My chest shook as I breathed and pulled my eyes away from hers.

Nodding toward Mario and Jared, I could only bring myself to utter a couple of words. "Apologies, gentlemen," I said, turning toward the judge and my wife for my ultimate judgment.

The judge slammed her files down in front of her and breathed into the mic, "What a load of cock shit!"

She didn't seem to realize that her mouth was still that close to the mic and when everyone froze and stared at her, she blinked a couple of times in shock. "I mean, court is dismissed, and the case is thrown out. Mr. and Mrs. Levine, you need to come and see me after," she said.

I nodded as my wife scowled at me. The judge's assistants around her were younger interns, and they looked like they wanted to lose their minds laughing, as they exchanged glances with each other, holding it together. Like a bat in the night, the judge stood from her seat, her black gown flowing as she exited the room and left us all to deal with the aftermath.

Swallowing and groaning, I contemplated whether or not sleeping in a hotel tonight would be my best option as I watched my wife stomp off.

Chapter 30

Tiffany

Mario, Jared, and I turned to face each other when my father decided to shut it all down. All the weight Jared had been holding into those broad swimmer's shoulders tumbled off him in a heavy, audible sigh. He played with his tie and with the way he swallowed, it was like he'd just been rescued from drowning.

Mario sat frozen in his chair with his mouth open in shock. His only movement was when he grabbed my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. My heart was beating so fast, it felt like my lungs would collapse with the pressure. It was hard to believe that my father did that, and that it was all over until the judge left the room, and we were all left to wake up out of our trance.

The first thing I did was jump into Jared's arms without thinking. My being was enraptured with relief and when I kissed him with force, it was in celebration of our release from what seemed like a mental prison. Leaning into him, the room went silent for me. The kiss consisted of a lot of face grabbing

before turning around to launch myself into Mario's arms, all the while sobbing and laughing and kissing him.

"I can't believe this," we all kept repeating to each other until reality broke through for a solid minute in awareness of where we were. Camera lights flashed, bringing my attention to the journalists sitting in the gallery. Chris was nowhere to be found, and my mother was frozen in dismay, looking at us. My father was just frozen, period.

Feeling self-conscious with all the attention, knowing we were standing in the courtroom basically all over each other, I wondered whether it was too much. Perhaps, I should've saved the kiss for a more private moment. But my worries were soon put to rest as Mario reached for me with one hand around my head and the other around my waist, pulling me back in for the kiss of a lifetime.

"Let them watch," he whispered with a smile, and I grinned. We all had already been through too much to care at this point. Our show of affection was a symbol of our strength and freedom. Jared came up next to us, pulling my lips away from Mario's for a bit. Thinking he was about to get mad at me for kissing him like that in public and scolding Mario and me for continuing, my body froze. Instead of reprimanding us, he tucked a finger under my chin and raised my lips to his before giving me a smile that sent thrills down to my toes.

"Let's get the hell out of here." Jared nodded toward the door, and I jumped up and down as if there was a pogo stick under my feet, grinning and clapping my hands together like a

seal. They grinned as well, and I felt like if we weren't so exposed in public, they would have joined in and jumped up and down with me.

We shoved files in our briefcases as if we were all worried this was a fluke or a dream. That the judge would walk back out and yell, 'sike! Gotch yo ass' like some villain in a movie who thought themselves funnier than they were. Alas, she didn't come back out, and my heart flipped over and over in my chest with pure joy as I held both Mario and Jared's hand on our way out of the courtroom.

As soon as we stepped through the door, however, it swung open again just moments later, almost slapping my men in the back. My mother huffed and puffed, clapping her heels down the hall in pure rage. Not even an insincere apology. Wow.

We watched her dodge the news crew and their cameras as she barreled through the courthouse exit. The door to the courtroom opened again, this time a lot gentler, revealing my father who looked first at my hands holding Mario's and Jared's. Then up at us. He fixed his mouth to speak but closed it quickly again, turning red in the face and neck before dropping his head and continuing forward.

My feelings put me in a tricky situation. I was overcome with gratitude that this was finally over, and that was thanks to him. But at the same time, I was so angry that he didn't do what he did earlier. As for my mother's rejection, it still hurt, but it was like a soft pang, gently echoing amongst the joyful noise occurring within my mind and body.

Releasing a long sigh that felt like medicine to my bones, I looked up at my men. “So, what do we do now?”

They both mirrored me, releasing a breath of their own and looking up at the ceiling as if that was a loaded question. “Well, now, we celebrate and focus on all the good things we lost during this...” Jared started.

“Magnificent waste of time?” Mario added, and we all grinned.

“Yeah, now we focus on what makes us feel good,” Jared responded with a smile.

“Mm, I like the sound of that,” I said.

“Me too,” Mario said, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me into his side for a hug.

Jared chuckled. “Hey, we can do that too, but I was thinking more along the lines of relaxation.”

Sighing and smiling, I nodded. “That sounds nice.” But soon, the high became a little muddied. Don’t get me wrong, happiness and relief still set off inside me like I’d just received the most wonderful gift, but there was also a numb sort of ache within my heart center. It didn’t take me long to figure out what that was about.

“Hey, did Anthony ever show up?” I asked, on our way out of the courthouse.

They both shook their heads with an apologetic smile.

“But I’m planning to go check on him later,” Jared said. “I’ll let you know if I hear from him.”

Smiling at him, I reached for my phone to check if Anthony had even tried to get in contact with me. No missed calls. No messages. No Anthony. And it wasn’t like I even knew where he lived; he’d never invited me over. So, my only option was to whisper a soft prayer in the echoes of my heart for his safety and trust that Jared would keep his word.

“Please.” I nodded at him.

“Of course.” Jared nodded in return before pulling me into the warmth of his solid body as we all walked back to our separate cars.

Mario kissed me quickly on the cheek and hurried over to his car, making me already long for him but by the time I turned from Jared to look back at him, he was pulling out of the parking lot.

As I stared after him in confusion, Jared turned me toward him to give me a kiss on the forehead. “I’ve got some stuff to attend to at the office now after all of this.” He waved his hand to encapsulate my father’s confession to the court and the week that had been wasted. “But can I call you later?”

“You most certainly can.” I smiled at him and turned to look again for Mario, who was well and truly gone.

A sense of worry crawled within me as I stood by my car, alone once again. It blew my mind, and I could hardly believe

it but were they still avoiding me after everything we just went through together?

Chapter 31

Chris

Letting go of a breath that sounded like the engine of a motorbike, I stepped into Lion's Bar because damn, a drink was very much needed. What the fuck was today? It must have been the longest day in history. Hell, my head felt heavy, and my body felt weak.

There was one thing I was certain of for sure now; there was no way of ever getting back into my mother's good graces after this. I may as well consider myself disowned along with Tiffany and you know what, who gave a fuck? My actual family was waiting for me to come home, which was why I wouldn't get bat shit drunk. Just a few drinks, nowhere close to my limit. If my body felt relaxed, that was enough for me. Nice and easy, that's all my body needed.

There was an orange glow lighting up the room as the sun reflected off the transparent windows and bounced off the brown liquor sitting on the mirrored shelving. As I wandered toward a seat right up in front of the bartender, the music was loud but not so loud that it would be a shouting match just to order a drink. The television was on mute, but it was on a

sports station, which gave me something to look at as the thoughts of today raced in my head.

You know what, cheers to my father for growing some balls. And well, perhaps the day of reckoning had finally come for my mother. It had to at some point, right? She needed the wakeup call and hopefully, it did what it was supposed to. Hopefully, she learned something from today. That was if she weren't too proud to learn which well, one could never mistake Valerie Levine for being humble.

“Hey, man, tough day today?” the bartender asked me. He recognized me though he was only one of the many on staff. He was dark haired and Italian looking. He sported an impressive mustache and no beard.

“Not exactly for me,” I said, allowing my ego to take a backseat and acknowledging that today had been way tougher for my sister. And my former best friends. “I’ll have a mug of light beer.”

“Light beer? Well, that’s different.” He raised one brow.

Grinning, I shook my head. “Why does everyone think I’m an alcoholic?”

He cocked his head and pursed his lips before turning away from me with a smile. He filled my mug with the cold, refreshing beverage and placed it before me. “Anything else you want, you know where to find me.” He winked and wandered away. Laughing in return, I took a sip and shook my head once more.

He had flirted with me so many times that at this point, there was an understanding between us by now that there was no chance in hell. Not that he would be hurt by that as he was already on his way to flirt with the next good-looking guy sitting by the bar. To be fair, it did give me quite the confidence boost knowing that I hadn't lost my looks with fatherhood and the far too many beers, which thank goodness hadn't given me a beer belly just yet. Eh, there certainly wasn't a six pack under my shirt, but I mean, it was decent.

Already halfway through my beer, I looked across the room to order another one when my hands stilled on my glass, while it was still perched at my lips. My gaze locked into Anthony's, and I froze. He rolled his eyes upon seeing me and sighed, turning his head back to his drink.

It took me awhile to look away as I sat there unmoving and unsure how to react. Maybe it was the tension my gaze created, but he seemed to decide that perhaps being in the same space as me wasn't worth it as he tossed some money on the bar counter and rose from his seat. The bartender looked between him and me, picking up the money before sauntering over to me with curiosity dusting his expression.

Clearing my throat, I dropped my eyes back to my own glass and planted them on the mirrored shelf where Anthony could be seen walking past me on his way to the door. Biting down on my teeth and closing my eyes, I sighed.

Groaning and jumping up from my seat, I turned around just in time to see his hand on the door.

“Wait,” I said, stopping him.

He paused and took his time turning around, studying me. If he had fur, it would be standing on end like a cat’s.

“Hmm, oh, so that’s why you’ve never given me the time of day,” the bartender said.

Whipping around to look at him, my lips quivered in my attempt to hold back a smile of disbelief. He gave Anthony a once over and nodded. “To be honest, I get it. He’s fine,” he said.

“What?” Anthony and I said at the same time which caused us to look at each other.

“We’re not...” I started.

“Yeah, we’re REALLY not,” Anthony continued with his eyes wide open.

“I’m married,” I said, showing the bartender the ring on my finger.

“Hasn’t stopped some guys,” he said with a head tilt.

“Well, it stopped me,” I started. “Not that if I wasn’t married, there would be ...” I groaned in frustration. “Can you just get me another beer?” I said, needing him to stop looking at me and Anthony in that way.

“Yes, sir.” The bartender smirked before turning away.

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head and turned to face Anthony. At this point, with the number of times I shook my

head, it was just going to come loose from my neck and fall off.

Anthony looked like he'd been through hell and back. His curls lost their luster. In fact, they looked just a tiny bit matted. My leg shook against my stool in indecision as I looked him over. He didn't smell, but he looked like he'd slept in that plaid shirt and black pants for sure, and he'd just thrown the black jacket on top of it to leave the house. His under eyes were dark, and he looked like hell. My lips twisted up in guilt, sadness, and resentment. My chest grumbled like thunder with the conflicting emotions that overtook me.

Clearing my throat and taking a deep breath, I decided. Tilting my head to the seat beside me, I invited him to join me. "We need to talk."

He looked between me and the door, narrowing his brows.

Chapter 32

Anthony

Okay, what was he up to this time? It felt like he was a lion, and I was his prey. The bass and intervals of the bar music made me feel like I was watching myself on a wildlife documentary about to be devoured.

The last time we were in this bar together, he seemed friendly to begin with, and then he attacked. And honestly, I wasn't in the mood to be attacked again today. My legs trembled, not necessarily out of fear of him. But well, with my body entering fight or flight and my mind being drained, I wasn't in the frame of mind to take a couple of hits and walk away. And hurting him more than I already managed to do didn't interest me.

It wasn't that I didn't understand his fury. His wrath was justified. To be knocked around a few times by him, that was expected. He was betrayed by me and my intimacy with his younger sister. Okay, understood. But I came here for some peace, was avoiding Tiffany and him, and had been minding my own business. So, if he called me back just to attack me

again after he stopped me on my way out of this motherfucker, my guilt wouldn't win this time. This prey would fight back.

He looked at me in confusion as I hesitated, still standing in the doorway.

“Come on, sit down. Please,” he said.

Meanwhile, the bartender looked at me and him with a smirk on his face. He'd served another customer and was hanging by the counter, pretending not to watch us. Whenever my eyes caught him, he would look down at one of the coasters or grab a cloth to “wipe.” If he thought this was drama, he should've been here when Chris knocked my lights out.

How he could even think that Chris and I were a thing was beyond me. The fight was on the other bartender's lips the other day, and the reason must have spread like wildfire throughout the rest of their staff. Unless he thought that the whole reason Chris got so angry was because I'd cheated on him with his sister. Uh oh, plot twist.

Or maybe a fight wasn't of much interest to him. But a possible relationship with gay lovers on the downlow definitely was. Ooh, he was eating it up.

Eh, I supposed Chris was the male version of Tiffany if I squinted hard enough, and if I had no other choice, he could be an option. If I was drunker than the time when those women had to rescue me from committing a drunk driving felony or worse. So basically, if I were on the brink of death, maybe I could consider sticking my you know what into his hoo ha.

Damn, I needed a drink just thinking about it. If being near Chris wasn't so damn nerve wracking, I would've laughed with the bartender. It would have been worth paying money to hear all the stories the bartender had made up in his head about us on the spot. But as it was, my eyes were focused on Chris the entire time, while I gingerly approached the stool next to him.

He was in his white button-down, long-sleeved shirt, which was wrinkled and rolled up to his elbows. His black tie was swung over his shoulder, and his short red hair looked like he'd run his hand through it a thousand times. By his whole sunken demeanor, I was guessing he just had come back from court.

It struck me as strange that he would be back from court so early though. Unless he pulled a 'me' and never bothered to show up. I wouldn't ask him; he'd think my interest was a ploy to find out how Tiffany was holding up, which it would have been. And well, that wouldn't lead to the best results.

Hovering on the edge of the seat, my ass barely touched the chair in case I had to jump up and defend myself. He wouldn't catch me off guard this time.

"What are you drinking?" he asked. His face was calm, and it seemed as if he even attempted to smile at me. If he planned to hit me again, he was being sinister and cruel about it.

"I'm all right, thanks," I responded.

As much as another drink would've made this interaction far more bearable; there were enough drinks in my system, and

there was no need to become impaired. If he swung at me, I had to be ready to block him. My heart was beating out of tune, and my nerves were on the edge of cracking.

My awareness and sensitivity made the hairs on my skin vibrate. “What do you want?” I asked him.

“Hmm, come on, hot stuff. I could tell you that,” the bartender whispered from behind me.

“Please, could you give us some privacy?” Chris said with a shocked exhale, and there was a sense that he was holding in his laughter, which made me want to laugh too but well, I held it. Grinning on my way to the morgue wasn’t an aspiration of mine.

“Aww, you guys are so cute. I understand. My lips are sealed, cuties,” he said with a wink before hurrying away.

Chris let out one of those breathy sighs again, and the smile he was fighting became more evident.

“I felt like we needed to talk about everything,” he said, tapping his fingers on the side of his cold, frosty beer glass. Damn, that beer looked good as bubbles of water drizzled down the glass mug. The thought of it trickling down the back of my throat was so real, and it made me regret not getting one for myself.

“Okay?” I said, studying him.

“You can relax, you know? I’m not going to do anything,” he said, reaching toward me. Maybe he was just going to give me a pat on the shoulder, but I flinched, and he froze before

dropping his hand. “Yeah, I guess I haven’t been so kind to you the last couple of times.” He nodded.

Waiting, I watched his hand, wondering if it would fly up out of nowhere and knock my teeth out. For a split second, I got the image of one of my mom’s boyfriends punching me in the face as a teen. The memory made me shiver; it caught me off guard. I’d chosen to block out many of my childhood memories just so that I wouldn’t walk around like a raving lunatic.

Young Anthony didn’t deserve it then, especially from men who weren’t my father and with whom I never shared a bond. But perhaps, grown Anthony deserved it from Chris because I was an asshole to him.

Though my insides felt like they were being churned, I shrugged in return. “I get it. I understand.”

He looked at me for a few seconds in silence before nodding and taking a sip of his beer.

Regardless of the amount of beer in my system, which should’ve been acting as opium at this moment, my body still buzzed. I couldn’t relax. Not yet. Though my heart opened wide like a hungry hippopotamus being fed lunch at the hope of us squashing this once and for all and putting it behind us, my nerves had it closing up like a mimosa plant in response to the thought of trusting him again.

A light switch flipped on in the corners of my mind and like a church bell ringing in an ancient, small town, there was a

resounding recognition that perhaps that was the exact way he
felt about trusting me.

Chapter 33

Chris

This wasn't as easy as one would think. I wanted to apologize to him and needed him to apologize to me. Well all right, he already did and maybe I was just being a hardass. He'd settled onto his seat more comfortably and we had been sitting in silence for the past few minutes as I knocked back some beers.

The nosy bartender eventually got bored of us and found a new crowd to entertain and be entertained by, only topping up my drinks as I asked for them. By now, I should've ordered regular beers since my body had already consumed three mugs of light beers. But in my head, three light beers only equated to one regular beer.

Anthony still refused to get a drink, but he didn't look half as jumpy as he did when he first sat down. He was watching the muted television when he and I both knew we had no flipping clue what was happening on that screen. It just gave us an excuse not to speak to each other and when I tried to speak after taking a swig from my mug, the liquid went down the wrong pipe, almost choking me. Spinning around to face

him, my body sounded like a sputtering engine. He looked at me wide-eyed.

“So, uh. Why weren’t you at court today?” I asked, trying to suppress the cough building up inside my chest like too much air in a balloon.

That suppressed cough screamed at my throat, and my eyes watered in response to me still trying to hold it. Anthony shook his head and rose from the seat, raising both hands at first to show me that he meant no harm. He beat my back as if it were a conga drum. It certainly made that cough fly from my mouth as if he’d just given me the Heimlich.

“Thanks,” I said, rubbing my throat.

He nodded and proceeded to pretend as if he didn’t hear my question before. “Didn’t see you at court today,” I repeated.

He shifted in his seat, frowning in discomfort as he swiped his hand over his beard. “Yeah,” he said.

“How come?” I pushed.

He turned to look at me as if he weren’t sure he heard me correctly. I kept his gaze. He sighed and eyed the door again.

“What is this, Chris?” he asked. “I was minding my own business, and you stopped me. What do you want? To hit me again?” he asked.

My brows dropped, and I waved my hands in the air as if they’d suddenly manifested, and my dumbass wasn’t sure how they worked. “No, no, no. That’s not it. Look, I’m trying to

come to you in peace here, man.” I shook my head and ran my hand through my hair.

“So, that was a genuine question? No trick?” he asked, lifting one brow at me as he was halfway off his seat.

“No trick this time,” I said with a head tilt.

He eased back onto the stool and dropped his gaze from mine. After taking a deep breath, he responded, “I couldn’t show my face there,” he said.

“How come?” I asked, taking another sip of beer out of the need to do something as discomfort raced through me like different waves of current crashing into each other.

He tapped his fingers against the wooden bar counter in what seemed like anxiety. “I was ashamed,” he said under his breath.

Shock had me almost spitting my beer out in his direction and holding it back made it come through my nose instead.

“Ah, for fuck sake!” I groaned, and he got me a napkin. “Thanks,” I responded, cleaning myself up.

“You all right there?” he asked, looking as if he was trying his best not to show how amused he was, and I wasn’t ready for him to laugh at me right now. Sitting here with him and trying to do this was still sensitive. I appreciated that he hadn’t, though he obviously wanted to.

“Yeah, yeah. Ashamed? You don’t have shame, Anthony,” I responded, turning the attention back on him as my lips curled.

“Before all of this, you might have been right,” he said before turning his entire body around to face me. My chest tightened in response.

“Look, man, I know all the apologies in the world can’t make up for what I did, but I want you to know that I’m sorry, man. I’m sorry, okay? What I did was a loser thing to do. I should’ve stayed away from your sister, man. I let you down once before, and I did it again. I was a shitty friend, and I’m really sorry, man. I’m so sorry,” he started.

His eyes were reddened though he held his tears in, and I could tell he was being genuine.

My own eyes burned in response, and the sniffles came on as my throat grew gravelly. Throwing back the rest of my beer and taking a deep breath in and out, I considered what happened in court today.

Clearing my throat, I mustered up the courage to ask, “Did you care about her? Or was she just one of the women you had to have?”

He looked up at me in shock, but he didn’t answer, as if he weren’t sure how to respond. Just when I lost faith in his response and felt justified in my anger once again, he blew me away.

“I still care about her,” he responded.

Now, I was the one looking at him in shock and again, he seemed genuine. In fact, this was the most genuine he

appeared to be in all the years I'd known him. Today, Anthony was shining in a different light.

Did that mean I forgave him for lying to me and going behind my back? Absolutely not. But after sitting in that courtroom and seeing Tiffany's interaction with Mario and Jared as well as Anthony sitting here before me, it became obvious that I made a mistake judging their dynamic. Their dynamic. Not my dynamic with them. And unlike my mother, I could own up to my mistakes.

"Then you should've been there then," I sighed and shrugged.

He took a deep breath in before letting it out as he spoke. "I think I could use that drink now actually," he said, calling the bartender back over to us.

The bartender wandered over, eyeing us both. "Hmm," he sighed.

Anthony and I quirked our brows and looked at each other. "Hmm?" Anthony asked.

The bartender shrugged one shoulder. "Looks like you two made up and now, I'm jealous. For a while there, I thought there might be an opening for me and you," he said to me. "I've always had a thing for redheads."

Letting out a sigh and a laugh, I shrugged. "Sorry. Still taken."

"The good ones are always either gay or taken, unless they're both. And what's left? Straight people? Ugh," the

bartender said before leaving us alone.

Anthony finally laughed. It seemed he couldn't hold it anymore, which was fair. "You know when you say you're 'still taken,' he still thinks that means you and I are a thing, right?" he asked.

"Yup," I said, grinning lightly and for a moment, it almost felt like we were all right again.

But we weren't. There was a light that used to be there when the guys and I would hang out. In its place, there was an empty, cold darkness where the light flickered out. Nevertheless, I owed them an apology, so I put on my big boy face and started with Anthony since he was already here.

"Look, I'm sorry for the uh... punches and how I responded to you guys and Tiffany." A shiver ran through me as I said, 'you guys.' It still took some getting used to.

"What you guys do with each other has nothing to do with me. And I'm sorry I reacted as if it did. It's obvious that it was consensual between the um... four of you..." There was that shiver again. "And so, if she consented, and you guys consented, then it's not my business," I said, staring at the bottom of my empty beer mug, wishing it were still full.

To be honest, I thought Anthony would be a lot happier with my response but now, he just looked at me even more suspicious than he was when I stopped him earlier.

Chapter 34

Anthony

Chris must have thought I was the biggest fucking idiot that ever lived. There was no way I would believe that the man who wanted to knock my fucking lights out just a few days ago was all of a sudden now ready to forget all about his hate for me. Let bygones be bygones.

But man, he almost got me. The thought of everything being chill between us again, on top of having him approve of my relationship with his sister, filled me with butterflies or some shit. Enough was enough though. In fact, it would've been better if he had walked up to me and punched me instead of stringing it out like this just to amuse himself. I wouldn't sit around for it.

Scoffing, I spun away from that stool so quickly, the front of my foot got caught in the bottom footrest, and I stumbled forward, crashing into Chris' side. Okay, I thought for sure he would punch me now but instead, he steadied me with two arms on my shoulders and pushed me back onto the stool. It wasn't an aggressive push either, and it had me stunned and confused. Wait, was this for real?

“What the hell happened in court today?” I asked, looking at him flabbergasted with my face contorted in confusion and my heart beating out of tune.

He raised his brows and shook his head a few times before grinning and raising his beer mug. “A lot,” he said, staring ahead of him.

He didn’t divulge much more, so I pressed. “What does that mean?”

He turned to look at me and let out a breath that had his upper lip moving in a sort of wave.

“Well, where do I start?” He laughed. “Ah, hell, the best place to start is with the juicy bits.”

He cleared his throat. “Well,” he continued. “My father finally grew some balls, and my mother wasn’t happy about it. My father got the case thrown out today,” he said.

Spinning around to look at him, I wanted to celebrate but wasn’t sure if I was allowed to show my joy. So, I repressed it, nodding at him while thinking about Tiffany and how happy she must be right now and how much I wanted to see her.

Shaking my head in disbelief, I asked him, “Why?”

“Well, Tiffany, Mario, and Jared fought for their lives in court the past couple of days,” he said, tipping his head. “Kind of seems like you should’ve been there too to carry your weight.” He turned his eyes upon me as if he were... reprimanding me? What in the world was happening?

“She was brilliant, wasn’t she?” I asked, my eyes lighting up in memory of the text Jared sent me earlier today. It popped up in my notifications on the drive over here.

“Yeah.” He nodded, looking down in what seemed to be shame.

His cheeks turned a subtle shade of pink which must have meant he felt a hint of embarrassment. His and Tiffany’s skin were like mood rings and if he were beating himself up, he’d look like a strawberry. But he was definitely feeling a sense of guilt, however much he might have been trying not to.

“You missed a lot,” he continued, raising his head but failing to look at me. “But I guess you have them to thank for convincing my dad and basically everyone else in court today that whatever all three of you share with my sister is consensual and real,” he said.

“Was real,” I responded as my own sense of guilt slapped me in the head and gut like I’d just tried to walk through a transparent door. “I’ve been avoiding her since this whole thing came between her and her family. It felt like if I continued to see her, I was betraying you and destroying her chances to patch things up,” I started.

“That ship’s already sailed, man,” he interrupted, huffing before finally turning to look me in the eyes.

“Look, it’s obvious that you guys care a lot about each other and as I said, it has nothing to do with me. Don’t try to make me feel guilty for getting upset over my friends going behind my back and disrespecting our friendship in so many ways,”

he sighed, as if the magnitude of how many ways I messed up and managed to hurt him was too colossal to even fathom.

“I already apologized for punching you and getting in the way of your relationship, but I won’t apologize for how I felt and expressing how your betrayal made me feel. Your decision to not show up for Tiffany wasn’t on me. That was on you,” he said, rolling his hand in a fist that strained at his knuckles before relaxing his fingers and sighing heavily.

“I wasn’t trying to make you feel guilty; I just wanted you to know that I cared about hurting you. I still care, man. We were like brothers,” I started.

He scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Don’t say that. Because that would make Tiffany your...”

“Ugh, you’re right. But you know what I mean,” I rushed. My words faded as it hit me that if we were to really become a thing, Tiffany and I, then he and I could still be brothers... in law. But well, there was no need to mention that now, was there? Because that would involve a higher level of commitment that none of us were ready for. I wasn’t ready for marriage, but I was ready for something deeper with Tiffany.

He nodded, turning away from me again to stare ahead of him. We sat in silence for a while, ordering a few drinks before I turned to him and confessed.

“I just lied to you again,” I said.

He turned his entire body around, crooking his head while staring at me as if he thought I was out of my mind.

“It’s still real. What I feel for Tiffany. But I will not act on it this time without your blessing. I want you to know that. I’ve been avoiding her and even if it hurts, I’ll continue to avoid her if you want me to,” I said.

He seemed to release a relieved breath before turning back around on his stool and waving his hand. “Look, I already told you, it’s not my business. As long as you guys consent to each other, I don’t want to be involved. Your relationship has nothing to do with me,” he said.

My heart burst open like poppers on New Year’s Eve, and I couldn’t believe my luck. “Does that mean you’re giving me your blessing to date your sister?” I asked. “That’s if she still wants to date me.”

It became clear to me that in my hopeless state, I may have sabotaged everything between us by not showing up for her when she needed me. Maybe she didn’t even want to be with me again. It was the least I deserved for everything. Chris’ forgiveness was far more than I’d ever hoped for. And another chance with Tiffany? That would mean everything to me.

“Yes, Anthony. That’s basically what I said,” Chris sighed, rolling his eyes before taking another sip of his beer.

Hope was renewed, and joy rushed through my veins like a shot of adrenaline. Grabbing his arm in pure gratitude for another chance I didn’t think I was worthy of, I shook him. “Thank you, man. Thank you so much!” I said, trying to restrain myself from hugging him.

Clearing my throat, I rested my dancing hands next to my mug. “What about us? Think we could ever be friends again?” I asked, taking yet another chance.

His response was immediate, and he shook his head so fast, he could’ve had whiplash from the movement. “Hell, no,” he said.

Oof, that one hurt. It hit me like a numb thud in my heart center. “Never?” I asked.

The brokenness in my voice must have been what caused him to look at me with a sigh. “Look, don’t push it. You have my blessing. That’s all you’re getting out of me today. Friendship?” He tilted his head to the left and the right.

“If it’s even possible, it wouldn’t be now. I’m not sure you’re my friend, man. I can’t trust you. You convinced me to give you another chance before, but you lied to my face when we went over to Tiffany’s place together, and I can’t tell if this,” he said, waving his hand around my face. “...is all another act. Just another lie for no fucking reason.” He raised his shoulders up and laughed in dismay. “I don’t think I can ever believe another word out of your mouth ever again and if I can’t trust you, then how can you be my friend? It doesn’t make sense, does it?” he asked.

Now, he looked like a strawberry, and there was irritation registered in the slight raise of his top lip. Gulping against the pain of his rejection and knowing that I was the cause of the hurt in his eyes, I shook my head. He was right. There was nothing I could say or do in this moment that would ever give

him a reason to trust me again. There was no friendship between us even if nothing had changed for me on my end.

He was still my friend, but I was a bad friend to him. And a bad friend was equivalent to ‘no friend.’ Since there was nothing more I could do here, I decided to focus my attention on the other person I let down this week. Tiffany.

Fuck, I missed her. And I hoped she was willing to take me back with open arms. But first, I needed to get myself together.

“Thanks, again,” I said to Chris while getting up off the stool. Pressing a soft fist against his shoulder, I walked away.

There was still heartbreak here, for sure. It sucked. And it would take me a long time to heal all the shit that made me this way. But for now, I wanted to make things right with the one person who I went to sleep and woke up thinking about, wondering how she felt and worrying about messing things up for if I called her.

Now that I had Chris’ blessing, it felt like there was nothing standing in our way, unless she wanted me to step away so she could work on her relationship with her parents. In that case, I wanted to give her the chance to tell me that.

Waving down a taxi, I hopped in and made my way first to the hairdresser to get a trim. Yes, I went to a hairdresser. Taking care of these curls was no easy task, and I didn’t need a barber taking clippers to my hair. That had been done before, and I looked like a peanut.

After the hairdresser made my curls look like they weren't stranded out on a desert for days, I rushed back home to trim my beard, shower, and put on something flattering. A shirt that fit loosely and sleeves that could be rolled up. A bit of my chest hair was left out on show because hey, it wouldn't hurt my chances with her forgiving me. I knew she liked it. Oh, and flowers. I'd pick up some flowers on my way to see her.

Leaving the house, my stomach was in knots. I checked my hair and face several times in the rearview mirror before looking myself in the eyes and sighing. Man, I hoped she still wanted me... us. Whatever this was.

Chapter 35

Tiffany

Blowing out a breath of exasperation, I slammed the car door of my blue Lamborghini and clicked on the alarm to make sure it was locked before making my way through the parking garage. My shoulders felt heavy as I dragged my ass over to the elevator, flopping my head on the back of it as it moved.

That pang of loneliness was back, and I was trying not to think about it. Keeping my focus on the fact that at least the court case was over, I tried to keep up the celebratory spirit, but it was damn near impossible.

In my silly head, I imagined us celebrating this win a little differently. The deepening ache within my chest barked at me, and the elevator ride seemed to take longer than it needed to. By the looks of things, the rest of the day would find me cozying up to a bottle of wine and my pillow.

Pulling out my phone while stepping out of the elevator, I checked to see if at least Jared messaged me about finding Anthony. It must have been magic, luck, or something because just as I was about to put my phone away after not seeing any

messages from him, it vibrated. My eyes lit up when I saw his name, and my cheeks reddened at his message.

'Hey you,

I'm sorry again for dipping out on you. But I want to make it up to you. As soon as I can step away from work, why don't you meet me at my place? I want to do things a little differently tonight to show you how much I adore you. What do you say? Meet me at my place at 7:00 tonight?

Yours,

Jared'

That did more than just turn my frown upside down; it set me on fire. Waves of current danced through my entire body in excitement and anticipation. Oh, thank goodness. Gratitude brought tears to my eyes and a giddiness to my smile.

'Can't wait! See you in a few hours. XO' I texted back.

Smiling, I turned the corner to the hallway of my apartment and was almost knocked backward in surprise by the sight of Mario. He stood at my door and had his head down. He didn't see me immediately but when he did, his grin widened. There were at least five more apartments before I got to mine, but that was too far away. My heart started doing gymnastics in my chest, and my lips trembled.

My legs pulled me forward, and I took off running toward him in my heels. His eyes flew open along with his mouth and in a few steps, he was there to scoop me up in his arms,

cupping my ass as I threw my arms around his neck. He walked a few steps back to my apartment, and I buried my nose into the soft, warm crook of his neck.

“I was wondering why you left me,” I said.

“I couldn’t stay a second longer at the courthouse when all I wanted to do was celebrate by burying myself deep within you, if you’ll have me,” he breathed into my hair.

“Oh, I’ll have you,” I moaned, and he put me down so he could kiss me properly, groaning in frustration; my skirt was too tight for me to wrap my legs around him.

His lips came down on mine soft and slowly but deep and coaxing. Feeling the magnetism of him through my nipples, I leaned into him so they could press against his hard chest.

“Mm,” I groaned, tilting my head back as he pulled his lips from mine, nibbling my bottom lip a little toward the end.

Grinning, I opened my door. His arms were around my waist as we walked inside together with his hips pressed up against my back. I could feel his manhood through his pants, pushing against the small of my back as his breath came down against my ear. His soft kiss touched my neck, and I moaned, moving to unbutton my top. Breathing heavily in desperation for him, I kicked off my shoes, and he whipped me around to face him.

Panting, I watched him as he removed his jacket in a rush and took his time to undo the buttons of his shirt. At the sight of his naked chest peeking out, it was as if it was my first time

seeing the naked chest of a drop-dead gorgeous man. Remembering that his chest was the first I'd seen ever in my life made me even more wild for him at this moment. I couldn't wait for him to finish unbuttoning his shirt before pressing my palm into the warmth of his skin, running my hand over his pecs. He bit his lip and smiled at me. It was so sexy, I wet my panties.

Backing him up toward my golden couch bed, I walked into him so that he would fall into it. He groaned and watched me. Hiking up my skirt and climbing over him, I pressed my lips against the exposed parts of his chest. Taking over for a moment, I undid the rest of his buttons for him until the entire landscape was opened up to the exploration of my mouth. He tossed his head back and grunted before taking back control.

Pulling me up so that my lips and his were aligned, he kissed me before moving his coarse mustache and beard against my tender neck. Biting my lip, I shivered as he licked up the length of my larynx before pressing a sensual, damp, warm kiss against my lips as he undid the hook of my bra. My hips were going so wild for him, I almost wanted to skip the foreplay and get right to the penetration. But his mouth was oh, so, good.

He dipped lower in the chair, trailing his kisses downward until I could feel his breath against my nipple. Sighing and panting, I threw my hand in his hair, and he devoured me in an instant. Fuck, it felt so good, I was writhing against his lap as he tugged at my left nipple until it was hard and thrilling. Mm, desire flowed down my spine like a waterfall as he moved on

to the other one, licking the softness of my breast first before pulling my right nipple into his mouth.

Fuck, I was so slick between my legs, my vaginal lips moved against one another as if they were also making out, mimicking his mouth against me. Damn, I wanted to ride him so bad. Feeling his weight on top of me was also very high on my list of demands. Any way he could be inside me was acceptable to me. It didn't matter if I was on top, or he was. Or if he was lying next to me and fucking me from the side while I listened to his grunts and groans. He just needed to be inside me, now.

Jumping off him and smiling as he looked up at me in hunger and confusion, I wiggled out of my skirt and panties. His eyes went dark, and I hurried into the room so we could be comfortable. After all, we had the whole bed to ourselves for the first time in a while.

The light was off, and my blackout curtain was drawn, so there was only a tiny glow slipping through the cracks of the window where the curtain didn't completely cover. But it was okay; we didn't need to see each other. Our only goal at this time was to feel every bit of each other and savor every sensation. Besides, doing it in the dark made me feel a little naughty. We could do anything, and it would be our secret.

Hearing his belt buckle come undone awakened something wicked inside me. My breath came out in patches in anticipation for him, and I touched myself, cupped my breasts, and stroked my clit. Pulling an unexpected moan from myself,

I heard him gasp in return. His pants hit my carpet with a soft thud and soon, the bed was sinking from his weight. Mm, I craved pressing the pads of my fingers in his warm, soft skin and wrapping my arms around his muscles as he moved over me. Finally, he fed my desires, giving me the warmth of his body, of his breath, of his cock against my leg. The scent of his cologne being buried into my skin.

Damn. Moaning as his delicious weight pressed into me and his coarse hairs tickled my skin, I decided to take the time to just touch him for a bit. Run my hand across his back, rake my fingers through his hair, press my nose into his neck, trail a finger down his spine, and caress his ass so I could treasure him and this moment as I held him in my arms. He did the same. One arm supported his weight, but his other hand explored my body as if he were rediscovering it for the first time. He groaned whenever his hand found my breasts, my hip, my thighs, and my clit. Oh, so close. I thought he was going to jerk my clit into oblivion, but he just touched me there as gently as he touched the rest of my body.

“Hey,” he whispered in the dark, and I jumped, not expecting his lips to be so close to my ear.

My heart kicked up a delicious rhythm at the sound of his voice and how his breath moved against the peach fuzz around my outer ear.

“Hey,” I whispered back, and his hardness stiffened even more against me. He groaned in response, meeting my lips with his. It was like striking a match. My entire body was on

fire, and any thought that was in my head at that very moment was wiped clean. Once he found my lips, everything else lined up perfectly despite the darkness.

“Ready?” he spoke softly, and his breath tickled my brows. He was settled between my thighs and was pressing against my center but wouldn’t slip it in until he knew I wanted him.

“Yes,” I responded. “I’m so fucking horny for you, Mario,” I said, making him know just how much my desire for him roared.

With one push, he was in, grunting and moving against my soft flesh, and I was gasping and moaning aloud. Just that one push alone had my eyes rolling over into my head. Everything felt super sensitive with the lights off. He seemed to think so too because he moaned, kissing my forehead and lifting one of my legs, so that he could push even deeper.

“Yes,” I cried as the blessing he held between his legs moved against my wet walls so softly, it felt like I was teetering on the edge of an orgasm that kept teasing me.

“Fuck me, yes,” I whined, cupping the back of his head as he brought his lips down to mine again. This time, his lips were pressed so hard against mine, I had to grab onto him tighter to cope with the racing, competing tingles within every single inch of my body.

All I could do was sob, whine, squeal, and cry in pleasure with each of his thrusts until he was swearing beneath his breath, turning me into water. I spread my legs even wider so

that he could go deeper and take me as if all that I was, was made for him.

The deeper he got, the more tender he stroked me until I spasmed against him. My body was out of control as I clenched around him. One of my eyes was fluttering like a fucking bird from my release, while the other eye was wide open. I could feel my face twist while trying to catch my breath from the explosion that just erupted inside my body, and it made me thankful that the room was dark so he wouldn't be scared by my face.

It must have been the win and the relief that almost everything that had been worrying me since my parents made that statement was all over. Almost everything because well, I still didn't have a job. But I was celebrating my wins. It must have been that coupled with the fact I found Mario here after thinking I'd lost him and Jared again when we fought so damn hard for us. Maybe it was the fact they'd shown up for me when Anthony didn't and knowing that after this, I'd be meeting Jared for a romantic dinner. It might have been all of it that made this orgasm feel so damn freeing and fucking important. It had me leaning into the pleasure and letting it all go, leaving it all on this bed.

Rolling him over onto his back once I stopped having an orgasmic stroke against his chest, I straddled him and took him inside me once more. His shaky groan harmonized with my moan, and I took us both on a victory ride.

“Tiffany, baby, fuck,” he grunted as I ground my hips against him, trying to feel all of his length and thickness in my belly. “Tiffany, fuck, I... oh shit,” he said, reaching around to grab my hips to hold me steady so he could pound me hard for a solid minute, leaving me gasping and crying for more when he slowed his pace.

He held me in place for a moment, and none of our hips were moving. Still buried inside me, he rose upward to kiss my lips tenderly, moving on to my neck which he licked and kissed simultaneously. Breathing hard, I swallowed and closed my eyes, biting my lip and whimpering. He wrapped his arms around my back and held me close against his body.

“There’s something I need to say,” he said against my neck. “I know it’s probably weird that we’ve paused in the middle of this but just... I have to get this off my chest,” he sighed.

With him buried inside me, unmoving like this, it felt like we were one body. One heart beating. “What is it, baby?” I asked, hugging his head close to my chest while I massaged his scalp with my fingers.

“Fuck,” he moaned into my neck, and my body shook. “You know your touch, your face, your sex... it all sets me on fire, right?” he said, and I grinned, tilting his head back so we could kiss. When our lips met, my body remembered his strokes and needed to feel them. Pressing my hips deeper into him, I tugged on his hair as desire rippled through my veins. He groaned but broke the kiss.

“Wait, wait,” he whispered. “I promise I’ll fuck you until you’re screaming my name in a minute but right now, I need to say this. My chest feels like it’s about to explode. And when I say it, I don’t want you to feel like you have to say it back. Only say it if you mean it. If you don’t, that’s fine. It won’t change anything. You don’t have to say anything at all,” he said.

My heart pounded hard against my body, pulsing up to my throat as if it were on its way out of my mouth. I felt it coming. Enough romantic movies had taught me what came next after a person said, ‘You don’t have to say it back.’ Swallowing, I froze and for a moment, it felt like my heart stopped beating.

“I love you, Tiffany,” he whispered as if he hoped the dark would take the words away, like they were never spoken.

Stunned, I wasn’t sure how to react. There were so many big events and emotional moments this week, I didn’t know how to feel about anything. The only thing I was currently sure of was that being with these men, all three of them made me feel good. They made me feel even better when they were deep inside my body and after such a monumental and chaotic week, I needed to feel whatever it was they made me feel.

The truth was that my entire perception of what love was had been flipped on its head when my mother disowned me, and my father still stood by her as together, they tried to take my men down. When Chris turned his back on me and couldn’t forgive me for being with his best friends, when he

went even further to take the apartment away from me, it was like he just ripped a page from a book except the page was my heart, and the book was me. I wasn't sure I knew how to define love or whether I needed to come up with a new definition for the word.

Yet as Mario held me, as he pulsed within me, making me feel safe and cared for, I knew by his actions that he wasn't lying when he said it. Everything inside me wanted to say it back, but I was terrified. It all felt too big. Just too much. And I wasn't sure if I was ready to handle too much.

So instead of responding, I kissed him. Whatever I couldn't make of my words could be shown through my actions. Whatever it was that I felt, I wasn't sure how to label it. But my lips, my kiss, and my body was the most honest response I could give him. My kiss was patient, pulling a sigh from his lips. Our tongues slid against each other, making me clench around him. The prickliness of his beard tickled my palm, exciting me as I held his face. Time stood still.

"Mario," I breathed. Our mouths moved over each other, and our lips were pleased just as much as the bits between our legs.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I hung onto him, pressing my breasts against his sweaty chest, deepening the kiss. He groaned, and his arms moved up my back to flutter through my hair. My hips moved against him in response. My movement wasn't rapid. I could feel my slick folds moving apart to make way for his hardness, inch by inch with each

rotation of my ass and groin. Soon, we were taking breaks between kissing to breathe as the air we exhaled became unified. No more words were necessary between us.

He wrapped me in one arm and laid me on my back while he was still buried inside me. We lay there kissing until my brain became foggy. It was like we had just entered into some sort of dream state. As we kissed, he moved against me, but it seemed he couldn't help grinding into me even though his focus was on my mouth. The slow strokes of his manhood coupled with the agonizingly slow kiss was delicious. With each taste of him, I craved even more.

Our breaths grew shorter, and the only thing I could feel was the building pressure between my legs. Separating my lips from his, I reached for his ass, pulling him against me. He took note of my cue and kissed me on the lips before picking up the pace of his hips. My body grew wings, and I was soaring as each stroke moved against my walls, leaving me no choice but to wail in pleasure.

The smell of his sweat mixed with his cologne was dizzying, and his name fell from my lips. Over and over again, I moaned his name until we were both drenched, nearing our end. His grunt as his own orgasm rocked him, fed my own as I tightened my legs around his hips. Clutching onto his hard, muscled back, I milked him until we both shook, spent and satiated.

Chapter 36

Jared

“**T**hank you, Matteo. This looks amazing,” I said to the personal chef I hired for tonight. A personal chef wasn’t always present in my house. Usually, his presence would be necessary if I were trying to impress a client, and they were invited to come over to discuss business. But tonight was more special and more important to me than a business meeting. Tonight was about Tiffany. It was about us.

Picking up the remote to my sound system, I selected a playlist, wanting to make sure the right mood was set the moment she walked through the door. She was about to be here very soon, and I had just come down from a shower, dressed in a loose, long-sleeved white button-down shirt that was mostly unbuttoned, except for the ones at the bottom. My pants were classic, satin loungewear that looked good enough to wear out. My hair was freshly cut, and I added some conditioner to my beard, before spritzing my favorite cologne and aftershave.

Barefooted, I walked closer to the table, admiring Matteo’s work and feeling proud, nervous, and excited for Tiffany to

come over. Many years had passed since the last time I attempted to be romantic in any sort of way. That was something I did in my younger years when I didn't have a company to run. But after everything Tiffany and I had been through together and every moment she proved to me that she saw me in the past couple of days at court, she deserved this. We deserved this. More than anything, I wanted to do this, to see her face glow over candlelight and watch the flame dance in her green eyes.

The playlist I selected played in the background. It was a gentle mix of R&B, jazz, easy listening, and blues music. Matteo had lit candles throughout my dining room and between the plates arranged on my table. Silverware laid next to white plates, as well as an assortment of red flower petals scattered on white tablecloth. Wine glasses chilled in the fridge along with dessert that he would bring out toward the end. Chicken, filet mignon, steak, pasta, and salads were on the menu for tonight to give her options. Matteo would serve our meals to us as soon as we sat down. Whatever we didn't eat tonight would be my lunch tomorrow.

Hurried tension raced through my body, but it wasn't bad tension; it was anticipation. I hoped she liked this and was happy with the type of wine, food, and dessert I'd gone ahead to order. It was a surprise, so it would have been weird to call her to find out what she wanted to eat tonight. Or maybe it wouldn't have been. What did I know? Whew. Okay. Relax.

Checking my breath and my hair in the hallway mirror, I wondered if I looked okay or if my hair was cut too low and

didn't suit my face. The doorbell rang, and my body jumped a little, but excitement had me moving toward the door in a rush.

My mouth went dry at the sight of her in a bronze, knee-length dress that draped across her bosoms and slid over her smaller hips. It reminded me of a sexy nightgown, which had my heart beating irregularly. Tonight wasn't about sex as much as it was about sitting in her company and being mesmerized by the vision of her. It was about talking about whatever we wanted to and allowing ourselves to become even closer with each other.

But the way she looked in that dress almost made me forget there was dinner in the kitchen, waiting to be eaten. I was overcome with the need to pick her up and race upstairs with her to have her for dinner. Gulping, I stepped aside and let her in.

She smiled at me, whipping her straightened red hair over her shoulders. She was so close, the length of her hair moved against the opening of my shirt, fluttering across my chest. She smelled like an intoxicating cocktail. Absolutely heavenly.

Mint danced on her breath as she leaned into me. "Hi," she said close to my lips before kissing me.

Oh, hell. My pants tightened in response, and I pulled her against me, pressing my mouth into hers, nibbling her bottom lip. Fuck, it would be hard not to devour her tonight, but I was more interested in showing her that the way I felt for her was more than just about the sex. It was her that I wanted.

Still, I submitted to my urge to trail my finger against the thin strap of her dress, allowing it to fall over her shoulder, and I licked her clavicle before kissing her there. Her scent had my dick pounding, and it was hard as hell to pull away from her as she tossed her hair out of the way of my mouth and moaned.

Shit. Her braless cleavage was so close to the palm of my hand, but I was trying to be on my best behavior. We'd had sex before and if we were both lucky, we'd have it again but tonight didn't have to go there. A part of me also wanted to know if she'd want more than just sex from me too. Not that I'd ever complain about that.

Groaning, I pulled my head up from her skin and took her hand in mine. "I have a surprise for you." My voice was hoarse, and my heart was still galloping as we walked toward the dining room. All the while, I eyed the staircase, contemplating a change of plans.

"Do I have to close my eyes?" she asked, leaning into me and hugging me around my elbow. Her matching strappy heels echoed across my wooden floors.

I smiled. "Nah."

As we stepped inside the kitchen, her eyes widened. She turned toward me with her jaw dropped. "Wow," she breathed, and her eyes grew moist even though she smiled.

"Are you okay?" I grinned, cupping her chin.

"This is so nice." She sniffled. "You did this for me?"

Smiling, I gave her a quick kiss on the lips; anything more would have me succumbing to my weakness. “Yes. I did this for us.”

And just because I wanted to kiss her again, I raised her hand to my lips before leading her to her seat. “I’ll let the chef know we’re ready.”

As I walked away, I heard her gasp. “Chef?”

“Yeah, there was no way I’d have been able to pull this off without a chef. Unless you wanted flavorless food for dinner.” I grinned before leaving her looking at me with eyes that made me want to clear the table and take her on top of it. She looked at me in awe, gratitude, and admiration. That did something to me, arousing me wickedly.

Matteo walked out of the kitchen alongside me and as I sat, he greeted Tiffany with a smile. “What can I get for you?” he asked in his Italian accent before letting her know all the items that were on the menu for tonight.

“Ooh,” she said in response to his accent, winking at me as if she was teasing me.

I grinned as Matteo looked between us in confusion.

“I’ll have the shrimp pasta.” She smiled at Matteo.

“I’ll take the steak,” I said in return, smiling at her.

Matteo dropped his brow at me as if he were wondering why I didn’t overreact when it was positive he thought she was flirting with him.

“You know you didn’t have to do all of this. You’re still going to get lucky tonight,” she said, reaching for my hand.

“Having you here... I’m already the luckiest man in the world. I don’t need anything else but your company,” I responded although need and want were two different beasts. “Unless you think this is all too much, too pretentious?” I asked, wincing a bit in embarrassment at the thought.

She smiled. “It’s perfect. Wow, when did you get so romantic?” She leaned in.

Grinning and perhaps blushing a bit, I leaned in to her as well. I was sitting at the head of the table, and she sat on my right.

“Since I realized I’m not ready to let you go anytime soon,” I said, running my fingers through her hair and pulling her closer to me for a kiss.

She kept me locked there with her arms around my shoulders, thumbing my hair as she scooted even closer to me. “Do you mean that?” she asked, and there was a subtle tremor in her voice.

I nodded. “Yes, I do. I know I haven’t been consistent over the past few days, and you probably weren’t sure where we stood. I’ll admit, with everything that was happening, there were doubts on my end too. Not about how I feel about you. I never doubted that. But I was scared. Watching the way you fought for us, though? It made me feel safe. You make me feel safe, Tiffany, and I want to keep feeling safe with you.”

She kissed me hard, and everything around me disappeared until it was just us. She moaned against my lips, and my dick hardened again. Damn, she was delicious, and this amount of self-control I was trying to exercise with her was wild and exciting. I groaned into the kiss, struggling as my mind told me one thing, and my body said something else.

We sighed together, and my hand, needing to touch her skin, dropped to her leg. Everything inside me wanted to push my hand further up her dress, but in trying to hold myself back, I gripped her thigh. She gasped and broke the kiss, looking at me with ‘fuck me now’ eyes.

“Ahem.” Matteo’s voice broke through the haze, making us both jump in shock. We forgot that he was even here. “Your meals,” he said, and I looked up at him smirking as he held our plates in his hands.

Tiffany grinned and fanned herself, sweeping her hair over her shoulders to reveal her neck. Her sweet neck that I wanted to kiss. But hell, I was going to do my damndest to be a gentleman tonight.

Chapter 37

Tiffany

When I first arrived, Mario's words were still on my brain. They'd been playing over and over in my head as I wondered whether I should've said something in response, questioning what he may have thought of my silence. I didn't want him to get the wrong impression that I didn't care for him; that wasn't the case. The words were right on the tip of my tongue to say them back, but I didn't want to say them if I didn't know what they meant.

Concern over whether saying nothing would cost us what we were trying to build burned through my brain but at the same time, it felt nice to hear the words. Despite the fear that came with them, my heart had taken off flying like a gentle butterfly, and my cheeks had reddened as I walked up the three steps onto Jared's white-tiled porch. Mario made me feel his love in his actions and damn, did I feel his love tonight. Being loved by him made me light up. It made me feel perfect, special, cared for, and adored, and that was why it scared me. I didn't want to become dependent on that feeling, only to lose it in the end. Committing to such a feeling? Saying it back felt heavy.

Thankfully though, as Jared opened the door, looking even more delicious than I'd ever seen him, my racing overthinking thoughts were silenced. His cool, woodsy, and ocean-reminiscent cologne hit me as soon as he opened the door. The look he gave me made it hard to speak. He'd invited me in, and the lights were low. Bright enough though for me to see him and the black, long, L-shaped sofa over to my right, in front of a modern, lit fireplace. In the center of it was a sleek, low, wooden coffee table, and all except the fireplace sat on a clean, bright-gray carpet. The carpet was only in the living room though as the rest of his place from what I could see was shiny, wooden floors. The scent of pine mixed into the wood of his cologne was stimulating.

His subtle shed ceilings made the already large space appear wide and opened. A chandelier that wasn't too imposing hung from the center. The walls and ceiling were all painted white as far as I could tell from the dim lighting. Toward my left was a bending staircase with the steps painted white and the railings painted black. The staircase was all I could look at with thoughts of the bedroom when he wrapped me in his arms, melting all my concerns away.

When he traced his finger across my skin, dropping my strap around my shoulders to kiss me, I thought that was where we would have been heading. The smooth sounds of lovemaking music heightened that expectation. Instead, he led me toward the dining room. My folds begged to be spread open, and my nipples beaded at the sight of the table and the effort he put in for me.

Obviously, I knew what it was like to have a personal chef every now and then. I'd grown up with money and basically lived in a mansion for most of my life. But with everything we'd just been through, it felt a little different. Knowing he cared enough to do this much to make me feel special was doing something to me. Damn, I didn't think there was a moment I wanted to be fucked by him more.

Now, as I sank my teeth into my dessert of chocolate-covered strawberries and cheesecake, the juices against my lips were like a sweet tease, and the decadence of the cream cheese and sugar oozing into my blood was like being sexed. Man, I was dizzy from his charm, his smile, his kisses, this food, and the wine. My body and my mind were relaxed. Everything inside me felt loose as if the gentle current of the ocean swept it away.

Man, I needed him, and this whole gentleman business was turning me on. "How soon until Matteo leaves?" I asked him, while unstrapping my heels beneath the table.

"As soon as I pay him, why?" he asked, taking a scoop of his cheesecake, leaving some of that cream on his lips. My eyes became heavy with desire as I leaned forward, pulling him along with me so I could lick the cream. He groaned.

"I'm going crazy with desire for you," I said. "I want you all to myself." I bit my lip as the need to grind my lower half against the chair hit me out of nowhere. I'd much rather grind my hips against him.

His eyes darkened, and he smirked before groaning. “I’m trying to be good here,” he said.

“You are good, better than good, actually,” I said with a smile.

“Tiffany,” he breathed.

“Jared,” I said against his lips. Sighing, I kissed him and pulled away as the muscles in his face tensed. “If you don’t want to, it’s okay, but I’ll need a minute,” I resigned.

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” His voice was low and gravelly. It teased my senses.

“Then what is it?” I asked.

“I want you to know I respect you, and that I value our time together,” he said.

I shook my head. “Okay? Does fucking me, respecting me, and valuing me have to be mutually exclusive?” I asked.

His eyes lit up as he smiled. It was like he’d never thought of it. “I guess not,” he said.

Reaching up under my skirt, I scooted around on the seat until I was able to wiggle my hips out of my underwear.

He grinned at my movements, watching me. “What are you doing?” he asked.

With my panties around my ankle, I raised my foot between his crotch. He bit his lip and groaned. “Look under the table,” I said.

He moved the white tablecloth, and his face tensed as his breathing increased. “Fuck,” he said, running his hand up my leg and groaning in frustration when the table was in the way.

He pushed back his chair and reached for mine, pulling me closer to him. I gasped as my body jerked, and my tender breasts pressed against the fabric of my dress.

“Don’t you want Matteo to leave first?” I asked as his hand settled on my thigh.

“I’ll pay him soon, but I think it’s hot trying not to get caught, don’t you?” he asked, and my heartbeat raced.

Nodding, I leaned in to kiss him, and his hand moved up further. Pausing to breathe in anticipation, I licked my lips and listened out for Matteo. He kissed my neck just as his finger found my wetness. Gasping, I moaned, biting down on my lip.

“You know I get loud; do you think this is a good idea?” I asked him with patchy breaths as he went for it between my legs without much pacing or giving me enough time to warm up. He had turned the heat up on its highest level instantly and as a moan escaped me, he shushed me, pressing his lips to mine.

“Try to control it,” he said. “Trust me, holding yourself back is hot. You should feel how hard I am right now from trying to control myself all night.” He grinned.

“Shit,” I said as my hips rocked the chair beneath my ass. The legs knocked against the floor, and I tried to force my hips

to sit still as he worked my clit until I was on the verge of tears in pleasure.

“Oh, my goodness,” I whispered against his lips. There was a subtle stroke of his thumb across my nipple beneath my dress, causing another loud moan to escape me. He grinned.

“I don’t think I can hold myself back much longer,” I breathed as the pressure in my belly built.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

I shook my head so hard, my hair whipped across my face, causing pieces to stick onto my dampened skin. “No, no, please don’t,” I wheezed.

He smiled and kept going until... until.

“Will that be all, Mr. Crawford?” Matteo’s voice almost made me jump out of my skin, which somehow led to the most intense fucking orgasm I thought I’d ever experienced. I bit my lip and used my hair to hide my face. Covering my mouth with a hand, I came hard as Jared pulled away. Fuck, my body tried to shake as I fought to keep it still and shit, my eyes rolled over in my head as I tried not to make a peep.

Jared cleared his throat. “Yes, that will be all. Thank you. I’ll meet you in the kitchen soon,” he said.

The clinking of the plates being removed from the table told me that Matteo was backing out of the dining room. Finally able to not appear as if I was having a seizure, I whipped my hair away from my face, cleared my throat, and turned to smile

at him. “Yes, thank you, Matteo. The food was delicious,” I said.

“You’re welcome, madame.” Matteo smiled politely before he walked away. If he saw anything, he was being professional about it and man, was I grateful for that.

With Matteo’s back turned, I whispered to Jared, “You’re so... I,” I groaned and tossed the white folded fabric napkin toward his chest, unable to find the words as I scrunched up my nose and narrowed my eyes at him. He grinned.

“I’m gonna get you back for that.” I grinned back.

“Oh, I’m looking forward to that,” he said with a wink before getting up to cup my face in his hands and kiss me long and hard. He made a stop to wash his hands in the bathroom down the hall and headed into the kitchen.

Within a few minutes, Matteo was walking past me. “Enjoy the rest of your evening, miss,” he said with a bow before leaving.

“You too,” I said, smiling at him before looking up to see Jared standing in the opening between the dining room and kitchen. He leaned up against the wall and smiled at me. The kitchen light behind him cast something like a magical glow.

“I told him I’d clean up,” he said, nodding toward the kitchen, but I was already on my feet.

He watched me walk over to him, and his stare made my skin sizzle, burning through my dress. “Did I tell you how gorgeous you look tonight?” he asked.

My cheeks reddened as I moved even closer to him. “Did I tell you how sexy *you* look? You look so good, I suddenly have a craving for more dessert,” I said as one of my brows kicked up with a tease.

“Yeah?” he asked, smiling down at me as I stood less than a foot away.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding before reaching for the three bottom buttons and setting him free of his shirt. Licking my lips first, I dipped and kissed his Adonis belt, licking from his navel all the way up to his chest. He groaned, and I smirked to myself.

“Mm. Now I feel for ice cream,” I said, pulling away from him and walking toward the kitchen. “Do you have ice cream?”

The look on his face when he turned to look at me made me want to laugh aloud. “No, but I’ve got a popsicle you can suck on,” he said, biting his lip.

Twisting my lip, I pretended to think about it. “Hm, no. I feel for ice cream,” I said. “Do you mind?” I gestured.

He groaned and ran his hand across his short hair, waving it toward me. “No, go ahead,” he said as I pulled his freezer door open.

“You lied,” I said, pulling out a tub and reading it. “Ooh, butter pecan. Do you want some?”

He shook his head. “I forgot that was in there. Babe,” he groaned, walking toward me. “Do you really want ice cream, *now?*”

Suppressing a grin, I looked at him being pitiful and shirtless with a very evident hard-on that was too hard to hide in those silk-satin pants. It was far more desirable to me than butter pecan. But well, he had his moment with me in the dining room. And now, I would have mine.

“Yes,” I said, pulling a spoon from his drawer. His footsteps weren’t audible when he crossed the floor, but his breath upon my neck was. He pressed himself into me, and his bulge bore through my dress.

“I know what you’re doing,” he said before kissing my neck.

A tremor ran through me as I licked my lips and swallowed. “Yeah? And what’s that?” I asked, flipping the lid off and scooping up a spoonful.

His hands came up around my waist and cupped my breasts, rubbing them so well, I was tempted to spread my legs for him right there. “You’re teasing me,” he growled.

He kissed my neck again as he circled my nipples, and I almost dropped the ice cream. My chest heaved as I spun around and tried to be nonchalant.

“No,” I said, sucking on the spoon. “I just had a craving for ice cream.” The chill of it did nothing to temper the heat inside me.

“Well, I have a craving for you,” he countered, leaning forward to kiss my lips, but I intercepted, offering him a spoon of ice cream instead.

He grinned, groaned, and leaned into me so I could feel his hardness against my belly, wishing instead that it was pressed up against my clit. As he rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to take the ice cream on offer, I let it fall off the spoon onto his chest. The warmth of his skin caused it to slide along his belly and land on the waist of his pants.

“Oh no,” I said. “That’s perfectly good ice cream.”

Dipping my index finger in the dripping ice cream, I brought it to my mouth, sucking it off before dipping my finger again and raising it to his lips.

His brown eyes disappeared into the darkness and as his warm mouth closed over my finger, I melted. Licking my lips, I aggressively put the tub of ice cream aside, almost throwing it from me along with the spoon as I tipped on my toes to kiss his lips fast and hard before licking the trail the cream left behind. “Yes,” he moaned, running his fingers through my scalp.

Pausing at his waistband, I licked his skin beneath it and as his body jerked forward, I stood up straight.

“Oh, you’re cruel,” he said, breathlessly.

Smiling and keeping eye contact, I reached behind me and tried to unzip my dress. The back was low, so it was easy enough. “Wait,” he said with his hand on mine. “Let’s go upstairs?” he asked.

“Okay,” I whispered, and he swept me up into his arms and walked me toward the winding staircase, carrying me as if I

were his wife, and we were on our honeymoon.

Inside his room, the moonlight shone through his overarching windows as we stood before the bed. He did the honors, bringing my straps down my shoulders with gentle fingers, while he kissed my lips. Soon, the fabric was draped around my hips. He cupped one breast, kneaded it, and sucked on the other.

Whimpering from the wetness practically dripping between my legs, I pulled on the rest of the fabric until it was pooled around my feet. He groaned while kissing me, and his eyes were closed as if he were in heaven. Soon, he was sucking on the next nipple, moving his other hand down my belly and between my legs to finger me. I fell back in his bed as my legs became too weak to hold me and watched as he bit his lip while pulling off his underwear and pants.

He looked at me like he was ravenous, and I held the promise of satiated hunger. As he licked his lips, I thought he would press into me with his beautiful rod. Instead, he dipped and licked the inside of my thigh. He kissed my slick folds as if he were kissing my mouth. He tongued my labia before sampling my hole like he was trying to get melted ice cream out of the bottom of a cone. I cried aloud with the abandon I wasn't allowed earlier. He moved his tongue to my clit before sucking on it, and my breasts tensed, spasming as I jerked against his face. He was soon fingering me again when he raised up above me to look me into my eyes. "More?" he asked.

“Please.” I nodded, and his hard candy replaced his fingers, breaching me. I shook from the contact.

“Fuck,” he said, watching me as I came around his dick before he even got the chance to move inside me. This fueled him more, and he pounded me, intensifying my orgasm until it felt like it wouldn’t end, that was until another one rocked me. Liquid heat swelled up within me, threatening to erupt like a horny volcano, and caused me to utter all kinds of amorous responses.

“Shit,” he groaned, dropping his weight on top of me. Our sweaty bodies slid against each other. “You fucking like when I fuck you like this?” he asked, grunting and panting against my neck. It was aggressive, the way he spoke to me and breathed against my ear. Fuck, it heightened my arousal. My pelvic muscles tensed and pulled on his shaft. “Tell me how my dick makes you feel,” he said. “Your pussy makes me feel I’ve fucking grown wings, and I’m flying,” he confessed.

A laughing kind of moan left my lips as he shoved himself repeatedly against my hips, making me see beautiful stars. “Words can’t describe how good your dick makes me feel,” I managed through moans varying in pitch.

He kissed my neck in response, sucking on it hard, and I held his head there. I wasn’t ashamed of his mark, of any of them marking me or having anyone know.

He sobbed his pleasure, and his hips moved faster, pulling far out of me and slamming even deeper inside. Digging my nails into his back, I held onto him as his dick splashed inside

me and wet slapping noises filled the room right before he jerked to a stop, filling me with his cum. His heat within me felt so good, I soon spasmed and joined his orgasm.

“Mm,” he said in praise, kissing my lips as I kept my legs wrapped around him so we could keep kissing for a little while longer.

Chapter 38

Tiffany

“Just one more,” I whispered against Jared’s lips. He smiled at me and gave me another kiss before pulling away. “Wait,” I groaned. “Not yet. Another one,” I asked. He grinned before pecking me once, twice, then giving me a long, juicy kiss. Smiling, I moaned, wanting more, but he kissed me on the cheek and the chin before easing up over me. “One more?” I asked, raising a finger. He shook his head, grinning and pulling out of my leg hold just in time for my phone to vibrate.

He rolled away from me and onto his side, hugging his pillow. Sitting up, I reached for my phone and felt what seemed to be a second heartbeat in my back. “It’s Anthony,” I yelled in excitement before answering the phone.

“Hey Anthony,” Jared groaned next to me. “Where the hell were you?” he asked, but his voice was groggy. He was falling asleep. I smiled a little as his voice turned into an incoherent mutter.

“Where are you?” Anthony asked before I could get any questions out.

“At Jared’s,” I responded. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay. I saw all your missed calls and your messages, but I’ll have to talk about it when I see you,” he said.

“Oh, okay,” I responded, a little defeated over the thought of waiting.

“Can I see you now? Or are you busy with Jared?” he asked.

“Not anymore. He’s asleep. Do you want me to meet you?” I asked, getting up from the bed to locate my dress.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll come over,” he said. “I can’t wait to see you. I’m so sorry. I’ll explain everything.”

With that, he hung up, and I made my way toward the bathroom. “Hey, where’s your sexy ass going?” a sleepy Jared said, squinting his eyes in the dark to look up at me.

Smiling, I walked back toward the bed. “It’s Anthony. He wants to see me,” I said before giving him a kiss. “Hey, can I use your shower, and do you have something I can slip into?”

“Baby, you don’t have to ask. Take your pick,” he groaned, rolling over on his belly.

His room had a large wall closet, and his dresser seemed to also be into the wall. They were sleek and smooth wood, painted black against his white walls so they were easy to spot. It was too dark to look inside the closet, and I didn’t want to turn the light on when he was trying to get some sleep. So, I dug around in his drawers and pulled something out. I’d know whatever the hell it was when I was in the bathroom.

In the light of the bathroom, I celebrated the fact it was a large t-shirt. As narrow as Jared's waist was in comparison to his shoulders, I doubted any of his underwear would fit me without falling off. So, I had to either locate my underwear downstairs after my shower or go commando.

Holding the gray short-sleeved shirt up, I decided it was good enough to cover my cooch and my ass. Not that it needed covering. It was just Anthony. Still, he sounded serious, so I doubted sex was on the table for him, and it wasn't on the table for me, not after not knowing where he was for the past few days and him admitting that he saw my calls but chose to ignore me.

After showering and changing into Jared's large t-shirt that fit me like a modest dress, I headed downstairs for my purse to grab a hair tie. Twisting my hair up on my head, I took some time to head into the kitchen and put the ice cream back into the fridge before going into the living room to wait for Anthony to ring the doorbell.

A few minutes later, he called again. "Hello?" I asked, wondering if he'd changed his mind.

"Hey," he said. "I'm outside."

"Okay?" I said, confused. "Come in. I'm in the living room."

He paused. "Do you mind coming out? It's just, I want to speak to you alone," he said.

Jared was asleep, but maybe that wasn't alone enough for him. I didn't question him when I'd been waiting so long to see him.

"Okay," I responded, heading into the kitchen for my heels, which I cursed while putting on.

When I stepped outside, I almost jumped in fright to find him standing on the porch. But soon, my racing heart had nothing to do with fright as I looked at him. He looked great as if he were out living his best life, and he smelled amazing. I would've thought he had abandoned me for something better, more exciting, if it weren't for the storm in his eyes. Unless it didn't mean what I thought it did. Was he here to break things off with me? He broke eye contact with me and looked at the floor in what seemed to be shame. What was going on?

"What's with the secrecy?" I asked him.

He looked at my outfit and groaned. "I'm sorry for pulling you out here when you were getting comfortable. I can carry you to the car," he suggested.

"I'll walk," I said, stepping down the three steps in front of the porch.

"Okay, I'll pull the car..." he started.

"It's okay, Anthony." My words came out a little more aggressive than I intended as I motioned for him to lead the way.

Walking down the sloped driveway in heels wasn't fun. "Let me carry you," he stated.

“Will you just tell me where you were the past few days? Are you okay?” My ankle rocked, almost tipping me over, and he swore, picking me up over his shoulders. I shrieked as my ass was all the way out for the world to see, mooning the moon spotlighting us in its glow.

“Anthony! I’m not wearing underwear,” I gasped, reaching around to try to shield my cheeks as the wind kissed a few places I wasn’t sure it was meant to.

“Do you really think anyone’s going to see you out here?” he said while pulling the shirt over my ass for me. We both groaned as his finger brushed up close to my labia.

“Put me down,” I said, squirming. Once the car door was open, he did, and I ducked into the car, waiting for him to make his way to his side. “Is this private enough for you?” I was growing increasingly frustrated.

“Tiffany, please. I get that you’re a little irritated but just hear me out,” he sighed.

“*I’ve* been waiting. You’re the one refusing to talk,” I responded.

Chapter 39

Anthony

She was angry, rightfully so, although I could tell she was trying to hide it. Still, I didn't feel scared around her. Nervous, sure. But scared to talk to her? No. Her presence alone made me feel safe or maybe it was the fact I'd practiced my speech over and over again on the drive over here. Yet, somehow, there was still a pause between us as I wondered if my words would be enough. Because although I didn't fear talking to her, I feared messing this up just like I self-sabotaged other areas of my life, especially when it came to affection.

"Why are we sitting in the car?" she asked me when a few moments of silence passed.

Reclining my seat, I turned to smile at her, hoping it would ease the wrinkles in her forehead before gazing up at the sky. "I thought we could gaze at the stars together."

She leaned forward to peer through the windshield. "You can't even see the stars. The moon is too bright," she said. Still, she reclined her seat, and I could feel her turn to look at me, waiting.

“The moon’s beautiful though, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Anthony...” she started.

“I got you these,” I said, interrupting her and reaching into the backseat for the plastic-covered bouquet of yellow, white, and red roses. She gasped and looked from me to the flowers with eyes wide open.

“What’s this?” she asked and as her lips trembled, I could see them turn up at the sides. The wrinkles in her forehead smoothed out, and she seemed to breathe a relaxed sigh.

“Do you like them?” I asked.

“They’re beautiful,” she whispered, sniffing them. “This is my first-time getting flowers from a guy I like.” She blushed. “Thank you,” she said.

My own body released the air it was holding like removing a pump from a ball or something. Maybe that didn’t make any sense, but I could feel my chest just fall, releasing the tightness that stiffened it before. Reaching across the center console, I took her hand from around the bouquet and held it in mine, interlocking our fingers. We sat like that in silence for a while before she turned to look at me and away again. I sensed her eyes on me and caught her turning them away before our eyes could meet. “What?” I asked.

She turned to look at me and this time, it wasn’t in frustration. She searched my eyes. “What’s on your mind, Anthony?” she asked.

Okay, it was time for the speech I had practiced. *Here goes nothing*, I thought, hoping it all came out right. At least I knew she still liked me, right? That's what she had said. I didn't want to lose her.

"I'm sorry for leaving you to fight for you... and us, all by yourself." A sudden bout of nausea hit me. Groaning, I continued, "It probably seemed as if I didn't have any confidence in us, that I wasn't manly enough, that I didn't care... I don't know what it looked like." My hands grew clammy into hers as I rambled and pulled my hand from hers.

She watched my hand leave hers in confusion. "Manly enough? What does that have to do with anything, Anthony? What happened?"

Scratching my brow, I released a sigh. "It just all felt like too much to handle," I said. Oh wait, did that come out right?

"So, you chose to run away?" she asked, putting the flowers down on the armrest. "Don't you think it felt like that to me, Jared, and Mario too? Do you think it was easy for us? Easy for me? This wasn't just about you. I was being torn apart by my family, and it would've been nice if I knew you were in my corner, just like I wanted to be in yours, but you wouldn't let me in. You wouldn't let any of us in. I mean, even if you ignored me and checked in with the guys, at least I would've known you were all right. Do you have any idea how worried I was? I couldn't figure out why you weren't there. I thought something terrible had happened to you, and I felt guilty for

being mad at your absence.” She cut herself off and shifted in her seat.

Okay, by her reaction, I guessed that it hadn’t come out right. But how could she understand if I didn’t open up? Sighing and swallowing, I turned my body in my seat to face her. As our gazes locked into one another, I started.

“When I was a kid, the only ‘father figures’ I had would always leave. I learned to leave too whenever life got too complicated. When things got too emotional or too meaningful. It didn’t feel safe because that wasn’t my norm growing up, and it’s kind of embedded in who I’ve become. But I don’t want to be like those men who left my mother out in the cold. I don’t want to sabotage what’s good for me. And I think you’re good for me, Tiffany,” I said.

“I want to be better. But it’s hard. It’s hard to change completely overnight, but I want to, for you. Hell, for me too. It’s going to take some time though. Those experiences kind of made me feel as if I wasn’t good enough; that’s why they had to leave. As if my mother would’ve been able to have the love of those men if perhaps, she didn’t have me. I’m not trying to gain your pity or anything like that. It’s just that I’ve never said this to anyone. I didn’t even have this realization until recently when this situation brought up those same feelings. I thought you’d have a better chance of reconciling with your family if I weren’t around. I felt responsible for you losing everything.” My heart ached, twisting up in all kinds of knots.

She reached for my hand. “None of this was your fault, Anthony. You’re not responsible for the way my parents chose to treat me. You and I chose to do everything that happened between us. If anything, we would’ve been equally responsible,” she said, looking at me with soft eyes as she reached up to stroke my beard. “I’m sorry you felt you had to bear that all on your own. Although, being Anthony, I’m pretty sure you weren’t entirely on your own.” She smiled. “Thanks for trusting me with this though.” She eased up on her knee and leaned over to give me a quick peck before wrapping me into a hug.

But it had been so long away from her that I was craving more than just a quick kiss and a hug. As her lips landed on mine, I could feel my hunger for her burn a need inside me. Easing back, I cupped the back of her head and planted a soft, slow kiss on her lips, with the tenderness I feared feeling but craved having with her.

She gasped first in surprise, then wrapped her arms around my neck. It was pretty awkward though as her hips were pressed up against the armrest between us, and I wanted to rip it away. “Come here,” I said.

Panting, she climbed over onto my lap, straddling me. I paused to look up at her in the glow of the moonlight, which brought with it a sense of both calm and passionate rumblings of emotions between us. “You’re right,” I started. “I wasn’t alone...”

She groaned and rolled her eyes. “Ruining the moment, Anthony,” she said, pressing a finger to my lips and leaning forward to kiss me again.

Grinning, I kissed her finger and removed it from my lips. “I wasn’t done,” I said.

She sighed and sat back on her feet that were folded up underneath her.

“There were women...” I started.

She groaned and cleared her throat, still trying to be patient, though the look on her face said, ‘Why the hell is he telling me this now?’

“But I couldn’t. I don’t know what you’ve done to me, Tiffany, but I’m not the man I used to be. All I could think about was you. All I could talk about was you. All I want is you and if they’re not you, I don’t want them,” I said.

She shook her head, smiling. “Yeah, right. You’re just saying that...”

“No, I’m not.” I looked her in the eyes, hardening beneath her.

“It’s okay if you were...” she continued.

“I’m not. It’s you, Tiffany,” I said, holding her gaze.

Her eyes glistened in the blue light being cast upon us, and they widened as she felt my bulge pushing up against her nakedness. She pressed herself into me and smiled, biting her

lip. “So, I guess you must be starving, then?” she asked, reaching for the button of my jeans.

“I’m voracious,” I groaned, reaching up to pull her lips back down to mine, this time with the passion threatening to explode within me.

She moaned as I moved my lips down her neck. “Voracious, huh?” she panted. “I like that word.” She grinned and gasped simultaneously, while grinding her folds against the stiffness of my jeans.

“Yeah, I like your ass,” I said, gripping them before pulling the shirt she wore over her head. “And I like these,” I breathed, cupping her breasts and sucking them into my mouth. “And I especially like this,” I groaned, reaching down to cup her wetness, stroking her clit as she rode my fingers. Listening to her moan felt cathartic in a sense.

“Fuck, I missed you,” I groaned, fucking her with my fingers, feeling her muscles grab them as slick liquid pooled onto my hand.

Biting my lip and groaning from the heat of her, I pulled my fingers from between her legs to suck on them before kissing her. “Ease up a little,” I whispered against her breath. She did, pulling me along with her so we could keep kissing. My chest, my wrists, my ears, my dick, they all pounded in the struggle to pull my zipper and push my pants and underwear over my hips. My dick sprang free, and we both sighed together. She licked and bit my lip before reaching down to jerk me off. “Nah,” I breathed, pulling her hand away. “I want to feel you.”

As I reached for her ass, she nodded and positioned herself over the tip of my dick. We both sighed, moaned, and panted as she spread open over me. Swallowing, I watched her legs open up so wide, her labia and clit were exposed. Though I could only see a hint of it, the sight was driving me into insanity. My breath stopped as her mouth fell open, and I stuck my thumb against her teasing tongue, while my other fingers dipped into her hair. Her wet, hot mouth made me imagine that she was enclosing my dick with her mouth and her pussy at the same time. Pulling her forward, I kissed the fuck out of her as she moaned, bouncing slowly on top of me.

A ripple of pleasure shot up my spine, and I pulled away from her mouth like lightning struck me to clutch the sides of my seat, throwing my head back as her warm depths hypnotized me. Biting my lip and closing my eyes, I let my body shake from the jolts competing against each other beneath my skin. She came down harder on top of me, and my fingers were called to stroke her clit while she rode my dick.

“Uhh.” Her breath shook from the back of her throat. “Anthony,” she moaned, grabbing onto my knees to pump herself full of me. At the sound of my name, my eyes flew open to watch her as the moonlight illuminated parts of her body, while other parts were hidden in the shadows. One breast was visible, and my eyes locked onto it. It was milky smooth beneath the soft glow. I ran my hands up her back, using one to clutch the back of her neck so I could pull myself up and hold her in place at the same time. My other hand explored her nipple, pinching it as I held her in place.

“Fuck, Anthony.” She shuddered, and I brought my lips to hers, feeling the comfort of her soft breast pressed into the cup of my hand.

It felt so restricting inside the car when I wanted to pound the shit out of her. My hips needed to move. I needed to be buried deeper.

“Let’s fuck outside,” I whispered.

She gasped and moaned a chuckle. “We are outside,” she said before kissing me lasciviously, sucking on my tongue so we could hear our mouths’ enjoyment of each other.

“I mean outside the car,” I said, smiling against her breath as she kept riding me.

She smiled wickedly but soon, she leaned into me, appearing to have gone shy all of a sudden. “But what if someone sees?” she asked, looking outside as if she were considering it.

“Who’s gonna see? Look how high the hedges are,” I said, running my thumb across her lips.

There were tall hedges that appeared blue in the absence of the sun lining tall walls enclosing the entire yard. The black gate that led to the inside of Jared’s home was also tall, and the rails were close together. We had each other’s gate codes, which allowed me to be inside those gates. There would be no one watching us, unless they had binoculars sitting at their windows many feet over, staring down over the tall walls.

She bit her lip. “Why can’t we stay in the car?” she asked.

“Because I want to explore all of you, throw myself deeper inside you...” I started, and her breath trembled. Before I could finish speaking, she nodded.

“Okay,” she said, smiling.

“If it’ll make you feel better, you can put the shirt back on,” I suggested, reaching for it.

She grinned and took it before exiting the car. I got out behind her, feeling the night air move across my exposed, throbbing dick. Something about it felt freeing and a little dangerous. It didn’t seem as if I had lost that part of me, which was exciting.

Taking her hand, I walked her around the back of the car and laid her over the trunk of it on her belly before sinking to my knees. “Oh!” she gasped and sighed. “Mm.” She folded her arms up beneath her face as if she were taking a nap and spread her legs for me.

Her thick, swollen pussy lips were like sweet berries. I ran my tongue up under her so I could get to her clit and back to her hole in repetitive movements. Holding my dick in my hand, I stroked it while eating her out even as my knees dug into the paved driveway.

“Mm, yes.” Her hips jerked before her knees rocked and folded in on each other. I nudged my face up into the softness of her thighs so they couldn’t close around me, and I fucked her with my tongue.

Fuck, her moaning had my dick oozing precum, and the chill of the night made me feel wild and animalistic. She seemed to forget her worries of earlier, or perhaps she simply wasn't conscious of how much or how loudly she sang, but it was like music to my ears. Knowing someone out there might have been hearing us made me want to do whatever I could to make her sing even louder, scream my name until it was like an echo into the night.

My tongue drilled the inside of her pussy until her sexy ass ground my face. Her pussy sucked in the air of the night and let it back out on my face.

"Fuck," she groaned more in frustration, perhaps because it caught her off guard. I didn't let up, even as my tongue vibrated along the inside of her tender folds. It was so fucking hot how nasty it felt. Burying my face even deeper, I sped up my tongue in repetitive short strokes until she screamed her orgasm.

"Fuck," she yelled. "F-f-fuck!" She clenched her ass and squeezed her thigh against my face. Damn, it made me crazy as I jumped to my feet and pressed myself up against her ass while kissing her neck.

"Say my name," I said, running my hand up beneath her shirt, across her navel, and over her belly to grab both breasts.

"A-a-anthony," she murmured, still shaking as she came down off her orgasm.

Pressing her back against my chest with my hands still on her breasts, I stuck my tongue in her ear and nibbled her

earlobe. She shuddered.

“What was that?” I asked. “I couldn’t hear you.”

“Anthony,” she breathed, contorting as I rubbed my rock-hard penis between her ass cheeks, pulling on her nipples at the same time. “Fuck me, Anthony. Please,” she moaned.

Groaning, I granted her wish. Easing off her ass a little, I lined my dick up with her pussy and pushed.

“Fuck,” she panted, gripping my arms that were still beneath her shirt. I pulled out and pushed myself in again, this time moving one of my hands up to grip the front of her neck as the other reached around to find her clit. “Oh, fuck!” she gasped. “Yes.” She sobbed and whined as I rested my face up against her neck, bending my knees to push into her again, harder and deeper until I was in a rhythm. “Yes, please, fuck, fuck, Anthony, yes,” she cried, loud enough for the birds of the night to take with them on the wind so that others far and wide could hear her. “Fill me up, Anthony. Fuck, you feel so good,” she gasped.

Releasing her neck, I rested one hand on the trunk of the car, leaning over her as the other hand remained on her clit. She flopped forward, hanging on, turning to look at me as she bit her already swollen lip.

“Fuck, Tiffany,” I breathed. “You feel like fucking heaven,” I said before spinning her around so I could gaze at her beautiful face and watch her mouth hang open while I fucked her. “Ah, shit!” I groaned while climbing to my peak. Picking

her up off the car, I wrapped her legs around my hips and finished by fucking her standing up.

Grunting, I jerked, bursting inside her, and she hung onto me for dear life as we were both covered in sweat, trying to catch our breaths.

Chapter 40

Mario

“**G**ood morning, Mr. Sharpe.” My assistant smiled at me as I walked past her desk, coffee in one hand and briefcase in the other. Thank goodness she came back because we’d worked together for years. Trying to rebuild and regain business after clients left, it would have been hell having to work with a new assistant who didn’t already know the ins and outs of everything. It was an awkward interview when she came back for her job but considering the circumstances, I decided that it wasn’t outrageous for her to leave as someone with morals even if loyalty was important.

Overall, though, it felt good to walk into the office without the judgmental glares. It felt nice to be smiled at again. It felt great that I didn’t have to walk into the office with the guilt of lying to Chris or hiding Tiffany from the world. Even if she didn’t say it back last night, it felt good that I told her how I felt. Whatever happened next didn’t matter. I was in high spirits. The truth was out there, and the truth did in fact set me free.

“Good morning,” I responded.

“There’s an urgent letter on the desk for you,” she said, giving me a knowing look. My brows crinkled in response as I turned away from her and into the office. On my desk, there was an envelope, and the only thing written on it was my name in capital letters. My stomach turned over in knots, but I tried to focus on the positives, although the trauma of the past week made it hard to stave off the anxiety.

Putting my briefcase on the couch in my office, I took a sip of my coffee while heading toward my desk so that it would comfort me in my preparation to open that envelope. Instead, it scorched my tongue, and I had to put it aside. Sitting in my swivel desk chair, I picked up the letter and gauged the weight of it. It was light, but that didn’t make it less ominous. Taking a breath for confidence, I opened it, and a key fell out.

My heart tensed when I saw Chris’ name and address in the corner, but it burst free like doves at a wedding when I saw ‘For Tiffany’ at the heading.

Call my attorney, and we’ll set up the apartment in Tiffany’s name. The note read.

My eyes got misty in celebration as I jumped up from my desk and headed through the door. This would mean so much to Tiffany and perhaps it could resolve the bad blood between us.

In the lobby, I ran into Jared. He looked at me with his brows raised, tapping on his watch and waving his hands out beside him. “Where are you going? We have a meeting right now!” he said. Shit, I’d forgotten about that.

Handing him the note, I said, "I've got to go see Chris. I need to thank him in person and talk to him. You know? Sort things out." Waiting for Jared to let me know if he was okay with me running out, he surprised me when he handed the note back to me.

"Screw the meeting," he said. "I'll ask Melissa to reschedule." He pulled out his phone. "I'm coming with you."

Chapter 41

Chris

Walking into my dealership this morning for a meeting with the CEO and managers, I spotted an irate customer who demanded to speak to the manager. When that wasn't enough, they caused an even bigger scene, and I intervened. They were in the showroom with very expensive vehicles that could be damaged if they were careless. I also had to think of the other potential customers' safety. As well as the reputation of my business. I didn't want them scaring customers away.

Managing to soothe the customer wasn't easy, and it caused a bit of tension in the meeting with my employees. Nevertheless, I understood that if I hadn't stepped in, they would've handled it. That wasn't the first unstable customer, and it wouldn't be the last. They had everything under control. I just liked to stop by to make sure that everything was running smoothly. Though I enjoyed taking on a managerial and CEO role some of the time, I was also happy with the freedom that came with not being obligated to.

Sighing and walking out of the meeting, I handed some files to my assistant on my way to my office. My walk faltered a tiny bit upon seeing that I had visitors standing by the black door that led into my office. What were Jared and Mario doing here?

My office wasn't as magnificent as one would expect of an owner of a successful car dealership. There were two moderately sized glass walls encasing the door, and inside was a strong and thick, heavy wooden desk. On my wall behind my desk hung pictures of my wife and my two kids. There was also a picture of them on the desk. There was a large, soft-backed swivel chair for me to sit on and two armchairs in front of slightly above-average-sized glass windows with blinds on them. The guys had been in here several times before, although they used to say it was too small and stuffy for their liking, which was why we'd end up at bars when we hung out, even during work hours. Having them show up here wasn't like the other times, however.

Without a smile and only a sideways glance, I stepped past them, tugging at the lapel of my black jacket paired with a black t-shirt, black pants, and black shoes. I was kind of feeling the black vibe today regardless of what anyone said about it, possibly clashing with the redness of my hair and the undertones of my skin. When I got dressed this morning, I didn't think about what would look flattering on me. I kind of just thought about what mood I was in.

My mood was kind of resigned and flatlined.

The guys didn't wait for me to say anything; they said nothing either. Instead, they just walked in after me and closed the door. I hadn't looked up at them and pretended to be busy flipping through some pages on a black clipboard on my desk.

"Got your note," Mario said as he took a seat in one of the grayish-bluish armchairs.

Not looking up at him, my only response was a mouth shrug that resembled a smile turned upside down. It seemed senseless to come all this way just to tell me that.

"How are you doing, man?" Jared asked.

Well, that was a loaded question. Where would I have started from? I was still bitter toward the men but felt like I didn't have the right to those feelings. My guilt rose and fell when it came to my sister and failing to be the big brother she needed. Yet, I wasn't sure I knew how to be that for her or if I was ready to try again. The only way I knew how to apologize to her was to give her the apartment back.

As much as my mother would've made jabs at me, at least the distance between us wouldn't be so far apart, and she'd invite me to stuff and show up at events with my father that I invited her to. Even though I didn't let my kids around her, for fear of her influence on them, she'd always call to either check up on how they were doing in her own little way, or she'd call to complain about something. There still used to be something connecting us regardless of how toxic the environment might have been. She was still my mother. Though it should've come

as a relief not to hear from her anymore, it wasn't. The kid in me ached for my mother.

My dad sounded somber when we spoke the last couple of times. The aftermath of everything, I had no doubt, had been great for the guys and Tiffany, seemed vacant and dead for me. Not that my own family didn't bring me joy. Right now, they were the only light in my life, my wife and my kids. But I now lived with the added fear of trusting others and making new friends. My fear over whether I'd be a good enough father and husband had been heightened from this experience.

So, all in all, I was either a big ball of anxiety or numb when the anxiety became too much to cope with. That was how I was doing, but I said none of that to them. I just rested my mouth on hands clasped before me and elbows holding them up. Looking toward them but not at them, I tried to breathe. Whatever they came here to say or do, they could say it or do it and be on their way. I'd cope with their visit afterward.

The room was so silent, I could hear one of them gulp and another one sigh.

"Chris," Mario started. "I'm so sorry. I know how much you trusted me. You let your guard down around me and had no worries because you knew for a fact I would never deceive you with anything. I know that's why I used to be your personal attorney when it came to this place," he said.

Rubbing my lips against my knuckles, the side of my head cramped a little, releasing a mist in my eyes. I held it though,

staring ahead until my eyeballs dried. Still, they remained heated, promising more tears. I gulped.

“I know that’s why you recommended me as her mentor,” he continued.

There was that sting of tears welling up again. Clearing my throat, I leaned back in my chair and clasped my hands in my lap, hoping the movement would confuse my body and take the mist away. It did, but it was still so close to me that I knew if I started talking, that mist would soon become a stream. And I wasn’t in the mood to cry. Not over this. Not over them. Certainly not in front of friends I no longer trusted with my vulnerability.

“You would’ve never expected me to be someone who would use that to my advantage, but I did. And I know that knocked your lights out. I know it hurt you. And I never wanted to do that, Chris. I’m really so sorry,” he said. His voice cracked, and I thought I was about to choke on my breath as my chest twisted and turned, aching.

“I really hope you can forgive me for this, Chris. I promise you, I never had any ill intentions toward you or your sister. I truly am in love with her, and I wouldn’t have pursued her if I didn’t have the best of intentions with her. I should’ve told you. Being afraid of your response wasn’t a good enough reason to hide it from you. Saying that I was afraid to tell you because I didn’t want to be forced to choose between my best friend for over a decade and the woman I cared about, means nothing at this point. Ultimately, not telling you cost me your

friendship anyway.” His voice grew hoarse, and I squeezed my hands together. This outcome wasn’t great for me either. I also wished it didn’t have to be this way.

“I hope one day, we can all find a way to be family again. I miss you man,” Mario said, grunting and sniffing. Swiping my hand across my beard to hide the twitching of my cheeks and the quivering of my lips from the emotion I was suppressing, I tensed to not fall apart during this. Taking a deep breath, I was just waiting for the moment they left, so that I’d be able to breathe.

Mario went silent, and I thought that was the end of everything, that they’d soon get up, but it wasn’t over.

“Man, where do I start?” Jared sighed. “You know how closed off I’ve been all these years. I was even closed off to you when we met. It was hard for me to trust anyone, but you being this happy-go-lucky, redhead rich kid who was secretly humble as shit soon broke through my barriers and won my trust. You’ve kept that trust ever since,” he said.

Turmoil grew inside me from the need to remind him that while I had, he hadn’t, but it would just be stating the obvious. I was sure now that’s why he was here. My head grew numb for a bit, and my lips tingled with the overwhelming emotions creeping up inside me. Nausea rose, and I ran my hand across the back of my head, remaining silent.

“The point, Chris, is that I know how hard it is to trust someone. Trust isn’t easy, and not everyone is entitled to it. To trust someone is to not just let them in but to surrender

yourself to them. To trust them with your sanity, with your secrets and even as bros, with your heart, you know? To essentially trust them with your life. And the fact that I've been able to do that with you, it's invaluable. Priceless. Yet, I mistreated it. Stabbed you in the back, basically. Made you feel unsafe around me. And that feeling of unsafety, of having to go it alone is dark and lonely. Somewhere you don't deserve to be. I'm sorry if I got you there. I'm not worthy of your forgiveness, Chris. I'm not worthy of your trust. But I hope one day, we can be friends again. I love you, man, and I care very much for your sister. I hope that's okay with you," he said.

His voice was a lot more controlled. Something I'd expect from Jared but as I shifted my eyes to connect with them both, I saw that they were also exercising great emotional restraint. Still, I couldn't speak. Truthfully, I didn't know what to say. In the absence of my words, they nodded as if they understood before getting up.

"See you around, Chris," Mario whispered on his way out as Jared closed the door behind them.

As soon as they left, the breath I was holding fell from me and with it, came the suppressed tears. They fell in a stream of gratitude. I didn't know how much I needed that heartfelt apology but man, it hit me hard. Since when did I become so fucking sappy? Shit. Swiping my hand at my face and sniffing, I cleared my throat and tried to get myself together.

Blowing warm, trembling, sputtering air from my mouth, I also hoped that one day, if this thing between them and Tiffany lasted long enough, we'd all learn to be okay with each other again. Even if it didn't last between them, I hoped with time, we'd find our way back into each other's lives. Whether or not that day would come sooner or later was unbeknownst to me, but I knew that hearing their apologies today set something free inside me.

Chapter 42

Tiffany

There were mixed reactions stepping foot into my apartment again, even knowing that it was now in my name. Of course, there was relief in finding my things just the same, but with that relief came a heavy ache stirring inside my chest and back.

It looked the same way it did when I'd rushed over to Lion's Bar. My bed was messy, and the closet door was still swung open from me grabbing the first items of clothes I could find. A little over two weeks' worth of dust gathered on the window panes. My underwear and clothing that I'd climbed out of the night before hung from my laundry basket. The night that caused this whole debacle.

Removing the sheets from my bed and the cases from my pillows, I stuffed them down into that same laundry basket and got fresh sheets from the linen closet. These sheets were pale yellow with tiny white flowers scattered about the design, detailed with spots of red. It was pretty, and it gave me the sense of a nice sunny day, out in a flower field. Something about that symbolized both freedom and a fresh start to me. It

felt like wiping away the bad memories that sat inside the laundry basket and making fresh ones.

There was gratitude in knowing that Chris had decided to hand the apartment back over to me and put it in my name. But there was a voice inside me telling me that I should have told him where to shove it. Nevertheless, knowing it was well and truly mine now filled me with hope about the future. Being able to call this apartment mine again was bittersweet. I wasn't sure what I was hoping for next. Did this mean that Chris and I were good now? Did I want us to be good now? Did I owe him an apology? Did he owe me one? Perhaps, it would have been better to stop focusing on what happened next and be grateful for all that was happening now.

As I wiped down my windows with a dry cloth, focusing on getting my vacuum next, my phone vibrated into the pocket of my blue denim jeans. For a moment, I was so lost in thought, I didn't feel it. Placing the cloth on the windowsill, I retrieved it from my pocket. Ms. Saunders was calling. My eyes lit up even though at the same time, my heart kind of sank. Turning around so I could perch on the windowsill, I crossed one arm under my bosom while answering the call.

"Ms. Saunders, what a surprise!" I said. "Didn't think I'd ever hear from you again." I smiled and shifted. My heart started to giddy up in a way because well, I had no job prospects following the disaster and had been trying not to think about it.

"Ms. Levine, how are you doing?" she asked.

Scrunching my nose up, I responded, “I’m doing okay...”

“Well, let me make this quick, Ms. Levine. I saw what happened with the court case,” she started.

It must have been all over the news just like when my life was being scandalized in public, but I honestly hadn’t paid much attention to any of it. My focus was on my men, the people who cared about me, and my well-being. After reuniting with my men in a way that made me feel secure in us again, I was living on cloud nine, not allowing any of the bad feelings to take me over.

Last night, I spent a few hours getting drinks and celebrating with my very busy friends before Mario surprised me with the key back to my apartment and the deed Chris signed, which awaited my signature. I hadn’t signed it until this morning even with my mixed feelings. Truth be told, a part of me didn’t even feel as if I deserved to have the apartment. Maybe that’s why I wanted to throw it back into his face; it was a reminder of my insecurities over not being able to purchase an apartment for myself. Having to take a gift that had been stained with bad blood from the giver who once held it over my head.

A part of me wanted to be stubborn. His money bought the apartment, not mine, so maybe he should keep it. It was his right. It would be best to get my own. But I didn’t want to be dependent on Mario. I had no job, and my accounts were still frozen since they needed permission from my parents to release that money to me. My mother was still bitter,

unfortunately. So, unless there was a lottery win in my near future, I wouldn't be getting my own anytime soon.

It would've been stupid to choose to be homeless and spite myself or stay in the apartment Mario let me live in, preventing him from making money from it. Since I wasn't a stupid person and could put aside my ego, I signed the deed, accepting Chris' "gift" so that it was legally mine and decided to choose gratitude. Knowing he wouldn't be able to take it away from me again did make the decision a lot easier to digest.

But that was where my head had been for the past few days, trying to choose gratitude and avoid unnecessary stress. It certainly was not focused on what other people thought about the court case. My tone reflected the same in my response to Ms. Saunders.

"Oh, okay," I said in boredom and confusion over the call. "Well, thanks for calling, Ms. Saunders. But I'm kind of in the middle of something..." I started.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said with a light laugh. "Let me be quick then. It's clear we've made a terrible mistake letting you go. It wasn't a great judgment call, and I want to apologize to you." She paused as if she was waiting for me to say something. Maybe she wanted me to be overly grateful for the call? But well, I wasn't too bothered about trying to make a good impression on her anymore.

"That's not necessary, Ms. Saunders. I understand that you did what you had to do. Thanks for..." I responded.

“Ms. Levine,” she sighed. “I’d like to know if you’re interested in returning to your position as an associate at our law firm. To make it up to you, we’ll double your pay?” she said.

“Why?” That was the first thing that flew out of my mouth as she was beginning to sound desperate.

“Well, because you’re brilliant, Tiffany. It was hard letting you go, and now that everything’s been cleared up, it’s a no brainer inviting you back. That’s of course if another firm hasn’t already snatched you right up,” she responded.

No. Another firm hadn’t snatched me right up because they had all been trying to save their asses and didn’t want to be associated with my ‘drama.’ Her offer was tempting since I was jobless, and she was offering double the pay I was getting before. Not that it was anything to brag about, but it was an income, and it would be double that. All I’d need it for was utilities, food, personal care, and travel.

My closet was filled with expensive and classic clothes and shoes if I needed to sell them but, in the meantime, they were good quality and would last me a long time for any event: work, formal, or casual wear. So, I shouldn’t need to replace those anytime soon. It would give me a sense of independence to pay for my own shit again, however small. Most importantly, my law dreams wouldn’t die an awful death. I didn’t see any other law firms lining up to call me but if this call were any indication, maybe there would be more offers coming my way?

Although, now that she had made this offer, it got me thinking about how well Jared, Mario, and I worked in court together during what would probably be the most stressful, pressure-filled court setting I'd ever find myself in. It made my reason for leaving Crawford & Beam pale in comparison. What was it again? To not mix business with pleasure? To avoid being in the same environment as my men that I couldn't resist, so I could focus on my work? Oh, please. That was my greatest dilemma? This past experience caused me to grow up so much in just two weeks, I wasn't the same person I used to be.

The only reason I went to work for Ms. Saunders at Bronkers & Associates was to avoid Jared and to regain my focus, to remember who I was. But shit, this experience taught me that I might spend many years trying to 'find myself.' And at the end of it, maybe I would end up finding out who I was, or maybe I would've wasted many years trying to find myself when I could've spent it cultivating or creating myself. It lit another fire in me, fueling an already deep passion for law but this time with a focus on what was important and what wasn't. It made me want to practice law, not just because it was something I was good at, or it was the only thing I knew how to do, but I wanted to create change.

It taught me that despite how false, cunning, and unfair the law could be at times, it could also allow space for the truth to take center stage. I wanted to help other people state their truths and give their truths the chance to win. Maybe that was a lot to hope for being a lawyer and all, but it would be what

lay beneath all my actions and decisions going forward in my clients' cases. And whether or not Jared, Anthony, Mario, and I couldn't keep our hands off each other wasn't the worst problem I could have.

"I'll think about it," I responded to Ms. Saunders.

Before confirming anything with Ms. Saunders, I needed to know if my men felt the same way and if there was a place for me at Crawford & Beam. If they liked the working environment without me there as a distraction, we could keep it that way. But if we could all be grownups who knew how to get the job done and not let our roaring passion for each other get in the way of our work, then perhaps we could try that again. It was up to them, really. I enjoyed working with them during this, but I wouldn't want to impose. This time, I'd make sure to get Jared's confirmation first.

Chapter 43

Jared

“**W**hat’s got you in such a good mood?” Melissa looked at me horrified as I spun around in glee before rapping a quick beat on top of her desk with my fingers.

The look of shock on her face made me laugh aloud; she had never seen me this happy before. *I’d* never seen *myself* this happy before. There were times I’d be happy about a deal with a client, but it never had me spinning like Mary Poppins or some shit. The weirdest thing about it was that I didn’t even feel weird doing it.

“Business is picking up, Melissa.” I grinned.

“Yeah, I know. That’s good news. But good enough to make you that happy? I doubt it,” she said.

“Aww, come on. I didn’t know there was a crime in smiling,” I responded.

“It’s a crime when you do it. You might give some of us heart attacks,” she said.

My phone chimed with a Tiffany-specific tune. My smile grew even wider as I pulled it from my trouser pockets.

Melissa cleared her throat. “Oh, okay. I get it now,” she said as I answered the call.

“Hey, sweetness,” I murmured into the phone.

“Mm hm,” Melissa said, side-eyeing me with a smirk as I ducked into my office, closing the door.

“Hey, lover,” Tiffany responded with a raspy tease.

“What’s up?” I asked her. My cheeks hurt from smiling while I lounged on my office couch.

“So, you know how we worked well together this past week? I mean, I wouldn’t call it fun, but we were on fire together, right?” she asked.

“Yes, baby. You were incredible,” I responded, playing with the end of my tie as I crossed my legs. Her voice could weaken even the strongest man. Closing my eyes, I just allowed the silk of it to move through my body.

“Incredible enough to be a part of your team again?” she asked.

My eyes flew open. That was an amazing idea, but I never imagined she’d want to work for me again, even if we were lovers now, through and through. It had been something I thought about. Regrets about letting her leave Crawford & Beam ran through me whenever I watched her in court, but I would’ve never asked her to come back to an environment she wasn’t comfortable in. The fact that she was asking me now was like music to my ears. But I was feeling silly all day

today, and I just had a great idea that could allow us all to have some fun.

“Ms. Levine, are you saying you want to work for Crawford & Beam again?” I asked.

“Ugh, why are you calling me Ms. Levine?” she groaned.

“Because I’ve just moved over from ‘boyfriend’ to ‘potential boss,’ and you know how I run my firm,” I said.

She muttered something under her breath and groaned again. I stifled a chuckle. “Okay, so what does that mean?” she asked.

“Well, it means that just because we’re together, it doesn’t mean it entitles you to a job,” I continued.

“You know, I’m beginning to remember why I didn’t like working for you,” she said.

Um. Hold on. I didn’t want her to change her mind. I was just messing around. My heart skipped a couple of beats, allowing me to soften my tone. “I’m sorry, baby. I mean, Ms. Levine. I came on a little too strong.”

She sighed, and I could hear a smile in her voice. “No, I understand. You’re particular about the firm,” she said.

Whew. Okay.

“Thanks for understanding. So that means you wouldn’t mind coming in for an interview then?” I asked.

She gasped and seemed to count to three before responding. “Jared, come on. Why do I need to come in for an interview?”

Can't you tell already whether or not I'm a good fit for the job?"

Of course, I could. She fit perfectly in all aspects of my life. But if she didn't come to the interview, she wouldn't be privy to the wicked delight that entered my imagination. "It's nothing personal, it's just protocol. You understand that, right, sweetness?" I asked, lowering my voice and dragging my tone to soften her. I didn't want her to choose not to come.

She paused for a moment. "I guess," she finally said. "This is ridiculous though. What are you going to ask me that you don't already know?"

"Tiffany, love, this is my firm. I've got to make sure I choose with my head, not my hormones," I said.

Well, if everything went according to plan, and she was up for it, I'd be choosing with my head and my hormones.

"Okay, so when do you want to do this?" she asked.

"Give me a few to check my schedule for the next couple of days and I'll call you back," I said.

She let out a frustrated breath, and I was so close to coming clean, I had to pull my phone away from my mouth.

"Okay," she said. "Just so you know, I've got other options too. I just thought I'd give you the benefit of a first shot with me since I'm such a hot commodity right now," she said.

"Damn right you are," I responded with a husk in my tone.

She gasped and grinned. “Hm. You’re lucky you’re so damn sexy but don’t push it,” she teased before muttering, “I can’t believe you really suggested an interview. I’ll look out for your call.” Her eye roll was so loud, I could hear it through the phone before she hung up.

With the click of the tone, I hurried over to my desk and called Anthony and Mario’s office phones. Anthony had been back at work for the past couple of days, and it was nice to see that he was also in good spirits. By the way Tiffany passed out in my bed after taking yet another shower post her meeting up with Anthony the other night, I knew for sure they had made up. I didn’t know if it was just the sex that made him appear so much lighter; Anthony always had sex, but something about him seemed different. My guess was that it wasn’t just the sex, and it had to do with whatever they talked about. Maybe one day they’d share that with me but for now, it was nice to see him so... well, happy.

“What do your schedules look like for the rest of the day? Or during the week?” I asked.

“I’m pretty booked due to my absence for the past week or so. Why?” Anthony asked.

“Hey, man, I’ll help you catch up if you need me to,” Mario offered.

“Yeah, shit. We all have stuff to catch up on but hell, I’ll help you too,” I said.

At my offer to help, both of my friends said, “Huh?”

“What’s going on, man?” Anthony asked.

Not wanting to share it over the company’s phone, I told them to come to my office. I was the boss, and I could do that. It would save me a trip from having to go to them. And just because everything with Tiffany was out in the open, it didn’t mean there wasn’t still some fun in sneaking around.

Spotting Anthony and Mario through my glass window, walking side by side, I waved, gesturing for them to hurry up. Anthony’s brows sank when he opened the door, and Mario kept looking between Anthony and me.

“Is everything okay, man?” Mario asked.

“Close the door,” I whispered, cocking my head in its direction.

“What’s going on?” Anthony asked.

Smirking, I started, “So, Tiffany’s thinking about coming back to work at Crawford & Beam.”

“Okay, that’s great news,” Anthony said as Mario’s face lit up. Still, Anthony peered at me as if he were wondering if I’d ingested an edible or something. That was more something he would do though, not me.

“Yeah, so what’s with all the sneaking around, hush hush shit?” Mario asked.

“Well, it’s no question, she’s got the job. I mean, you guys are fine with that, right?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me? Shit, I miss our little rendezvous. Although, I’m guessing that after last time, that may be off limits,” Mario said.

“Well, not from my end and hopefully not from her end either. Otherwise, this idea will flop,” I said, smiling.

“Okay, dude, what are you saying?” Anthony asked.

“What I’m saying is that I’ve invited her to an interview, but I had something else in mind. Something we could surprise her with. I want us all to ‘interview her,’ of course only if she’s down for the type of interview I had in mind,” I said.

It clicked for Mario. He shifted in his seat and ran a hand across his beard. It also clicked for Anthony. He grinned and shook his head, running a hand through his hair before nodding.

“So, again, I ask you. What do your schedules...” I started but before I could finish my question, Mario and Anthony interrupted me.

“I’m sure with your help, I could push a few things around for this evening,” Anthony said.

“Yeah, me too. I think I have a couple of hours free,” Mario followed.

Chapter 44

Tiffany

Wearing a purple, long-sleeved, slim-fitting work dress with a V-shaped neckline, I held my chin up high stepping through the doors of Crawford & Beam in matching pumps. Some people found it hard to make eye contact with me, and some of the people who didn't know what to do with their faces the last time I stepped in here, smiled at me as I made my way to the elevator. With my resume in the hard-cased file jacket between my fingers, I tapped my feet, essentially rolling my eyes at the elevator camera as I was taken to Jared's floor. This was ridiculous. Stepping out of the elevator, I stomped my way across gray office carpeting.

“Ms. Levine, look at you. You look amazing, girl!” Melissa beamed at me, and I blushed a little, smiling at her and sweeping a hand over my updo. The last time I stepped in here, she couldn't even bring herself to look at me, but I wouldn't hold that against her. It wasn't like she was family or my best friend. We had no ties to each other, so I wouldn't take it personally.

“Thank you,” I said.

“It’s so good to see you.” Melissa smiled.

“You too.” I smiled in return.

What I liked about Melissa was she knew when to pry and when to just let things be. I appreciated that she didn’t try to talk to me about the case. She gave me a knowing look that made me feel like she understood I wouldn’t be interested in talking about it. She also gave me another knowing look when she said, “Mr. Crawford is expecting you.”

That last knowing look made me blush again as I tried to not think about how he invited me to interview for a position I’d already been in, and he knew I was good at. Turning toward his office, I noticed that all the blinds were down.

“Are you sure he’s expecting me?” I asked, pointing at them.

“Oh, I’m sure.” She nodded, eyes wide as she stared at her computer screen.

Um, okay. Well, she knew Jared better than most people. I knew what the blinds being down reminded me of, but I also knew that after what happened the last time, it would be risky to try something like that again. So, I rationalized that he must have needed the privacy to catch up on stuff, not wanting anyone to know he was at the office working late or something.

Knocking on the door, I opened it slowly and stepped in. Jared wasn’t alone. Mario and Anthony were there too. I

grinned. “Oh, hey guys. Didn’t expect you all to be here,” I said, closing the door.

“Are you complaining?” Mario asked, smooth as butter.

“Never,” I responded, blushing and biting my lip. He smiled.

“So, I hear you’re here to be interviewed,” Anthony said.

Smiling, I tilted my head. “Yeah? Where did you hear that?” I teased, taking a seat in front of Jared’s desk.

Jared dropped his eyes to my neckline, staring at the hint of my cleavage before raising his head. “I invited them,” he offered.

“Okay?” I asked, my skin heating by the mere fact that we were all in the room together. “So, are you all going to interview me?”

“Depends on what you consider an interview.” Mario’s voice came up from behind me as he moved to sit on top of Jared’s desk.

He was right next to me with his hands clasped in his lap. They were both looking at me with eyes I recognized. Eyes of hunger. My blood ran through my veins like river water slipping over rocks. Anthony moved across the room without a sound, sitting on the other edge of the desk. Enclosed within them, my body responded instinctively. It recognized them and wanted them. My nipples were already erect just from the sight of them, and now they pulsed against the fabric of my

matching purple lace bra. My clit shook, and the mouth of my vagina responded, dampening my lace thong.

The combined energy of all three men overwhelmed me, setting free an explosion in my chest as something like an epiphany hit me. It was more than just feeling grateful that they chose me, and I chose them. But there was warmth, desire, exuberance as well as comfort and a sense of safety with them. Together, they all felt like home, and the only words I could think of to describe this feeling were the words Mario shared with me earlier.

They kept their eyes on me as if they were waiting on me for something, and I soon understood what this was. The heat of my blood and the fluttering of my pulse coupled with their hot looks of hunger didn't just have something to do with the fact that we were all enclosed in a space together, which automatically made us yearn for each other. But it hit me that my first instincts were right about the closed blinds. This wasn't meant to be an actual interview after all. This whole thing was my men's idea of roleplay. And they were perched on the desk waiting for my permission to take things further. It was too cute, and it had me bursting out laughing.

My men turned to look at each other in confusion. Anthony smiled awkwardly, Mario just looked shocked, and Jared looked embarrassed. I wasn't laughing at them, and I didn't want them to think that. So, I said the words that were on the tip of my tongue that I now knew to be true. They were words I didn't fear anymore. Somehow, sitting in this room with all

three of them, it didn't feel too big to say anymore. It just felt right. We felt right together.

“I love you.” I grinned.

Jared and Anthony sighed in relief. Mario's face of shock morphed into pure happiness as his rounded mouth turned up into a sizzling smile, and he looked at me beneath tranquil lids. Scooting over so that he was directly in front of me, he pulled me out of the chair, scooping me up into his arms. “Do you?” he asked.

Nodding, I leaned forward to kiss him. “I do.”

He kissed me, groaning as he savored my mouth and tongue. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I deepened the kiss, moaning against his lips. Mario walked me over to the couch, tossing me on it. Jared and Anthony advanced toward me as I watched them. Fuck, they looked like beasts about to devour me, and I was into it.

“So, I'm guessing if I do a good job in this interview, the job is mine?” I asked, turning my back toward them so that one of them could pull down my zipper. Sweeping my hair out of the way, I sighed as the callous tips of someone's fingers grazed my spine, while other hands moved to sweep the shoulders of my dress away. A collective gasp sounded from behind me, and I tugged at my sleeves, pulling it over my wrists in a rush.

“I think this interview should be mutually satisfying. I'm taking a more collaborative approach,” Jared said and as I

turned around, he was coming out of his jacket so smoothly, it made me bite my lips.

Groaning, Anthony dropped to his knees, reaching for my breasts. He raked his thumb over my nipple peeking at him through the purple lace. “Yeah, just because you’re the one being interviewed, it doesn’t mean you’re at our complete surrender,” Anthony breathed against my neck.

Mario pulled my shoes off first before clutching at the length of my dress, sitting around my knees and hips. He dragged it from my body, jerking me. Hissing, I looked at him through slitted eyes, moaning as Anthony kissed me.

“If you’re not satisfied by the end of this interview, you also get to determine whether or not you’d like to continue working with us.” Mario smiled, tapping on Anthony’s shoulder for him to scoot over a bit so he could position himself between my legs.

My breath shook.

“So, what do you think of our methods so far?” Jared asked, pulling his tie from the collar of his shirt as he looked deep into my eyes, standing over both men. “Are these methods to your liking?” His fingers pulled at his buttons, and I ached to feel him too as Mario’s hands stroked my thighs.

“Yes,” I moaned, gasping and tossing my head back. “This is the best interview I’ve ever been on,” I sighed.

With that, Mario moved his hands to the waist of my panties, pulling at them. I raised my hips so that he could take

them off. He gasped, and his face tensed in desire. “I’m happy to hear that. May I bury my head between your legs?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whined, squirming. “Please.”

He spread my legs wide as Anthony’s hands moved to the back of my bra, unhooking it. As it fell away, Jared leaned over them to kiss my lips. I jerked and groaned into Jared’s mouth as Anthony’s mouth met my breasts, and Mario’s tongue hit my clit. Mario tugged at the patch of red hair between my legs, and I tried gripping Jared’s office couch, but the material had no give.

Groaning in frustration, I ran my hands up Anthony’s back, gripping at his shirt, wishing it were off already and running my other hand through Mario’s blond hair, holding his head against me. Warm mouths and soft tongues consumed my body, sliding over my most sensitive areas. My body buzzed constantly and man, was I glad the office was soundproof.

“Fuck,” I moaned, spasming, unsure if I was orgasming or if the sensations were just too overwhelming for my body to handle all at once.

I didn’t come here prepared for this; it was a surprise, which made it all the more exhilarating. It felt like I blacked out when I hadn’t. My ears were well aware of shirts being taken off and buckles being pulled. But like a defibrillator being placed upon my chest out of nowhere, I became certain when my orgasm came. My body shook so hard, and my pussy felt like it was about to combust. I squirmed, trying to run away

from the intensity of it, slipping on the couch, my arms flailing as I tried to grab onto something.

Jared's lips left mine, and Anthony's mouth left my breasts for a moment as they growled. Soon, my eyes flew open to a grinning Mario licking his way up my belly before Jared pulled him away.

"Come here," Jared grunted, extending his hand and pulling me from the couch. He stood there completely naked, his dick pointing at me, picking me out of the lineup. Fuck, I could barely stand up straight, but I wanted him so badly. "I need to fuck you," he whispered against my lips, and I kissed him, hard.

"Then fuck me," I said.

He grinned, lifting me up and with the slickness of my pussy from Mario's magical mouth, I slipped right over Jared with ease.

"Oh, yes," I gasped, throwing my head into his neck as if his dick just knocked the wind out of my body. He slammed me against him until I crossed into another reality, some fantastical realm where pleasure was the right of all its residents. Their only need.

Moaning against him, gripping into his back and marrying myself with his grunts, I shuddered when we slowed down and coolness settled between my ass cheeks. "It's up to you, baby, but I'd really love to fuck your ass this evening," Anthony whispered, coming up behind me. "Can I?" he breathed

against my ear, and my vagina muscles gripped Jared, tightening around him as my body shook with desire.

Turning my lips toward Anthony, I kissed him as Jared continued to fuck me and as Anthony's hand slipped between my ass cheeks. Damn, the two sensations felt so fucking good, I started nodding at Anthony, reaching my hand around to grab the back of his neck. "I want to feel you both inside me," I said.

As soon as the words left my mouth, he slipped a finger inside my ass, while Jared flung his hips into me, holding me firmly against him. My asshole stretched and sucked on Anthony's finger as Jared slammed his pelvis against my clit, throwing his dick deep inside me on repetition.

"Ohhh." My voice vibrated as sobs of pleasure rained out of me. "Ohhh, yes," I surrendered. I couldn't see Mario, so I didn't know what he was doing, but the thought of him sitting back, stroking his thick long cock while watching us fuck made me come so hard against Jared.

Before long, another coating of lube was smoothed over my anus, and the heat of Anthony's chest pressed into my back. "Ready?" he asked, kissing my neck, and I bit my lip, nodding.

The edge of his penis pressed up against my tight hole, and he breathed along with me. My sphincter muscles slowly relaxed around him, and we both shuddered and sighed as he entered more of himself a tiny bit at a time.

"How's that?" he asked.

It was tight as before. I could feel the stretching of my skin around his width. But as he stood there a moment, getting my ass comfortable with the feel of him, the tension in my belly fell away. It helped that Jared was still deep inside me, though he was also standing still, looking like he was going through hell as he held himself back. My pelvic muscles clenched and released around him, heightening my arousal. Soon, the pleasure points in my ass became aware of Anthony, and they were excited, reaching out like greedy little buggers all trying to get a hold of his dick.

“So, good,” I breathed, eventually. Hands came up to stroke my breasts and at first, I thought they were Anthony’s, but I opened my eyes to see Mario watching me. His skin was flushed, his bright blue eyes were blackened, and his lips were plumped as he teased my nipples with his fingers and stroked my chest and neck. A sense of calm and peace ran through my body, and I sighed against Mario’s touches, throwing my head back against Anthony whose hand moved between me and Jared to find my clit.

“Ohh!” My eyes flew open from the contact, and I heard Mario chuckle before nibbling my ear and squeezing the hell out of my breasts, which turned on a switch inside my body that lit up all my nerve endings. Anthony kissed me from behind, and my body moved against him and Jared of its own accord.

Anthony broke the kiss, excited. “Ready for more of me?” he asked.

I whined. “Yes, please.”

“Hold on,” Mario said, moving away from me. From beside me, I could see him reach for the tube of lube Anthony had tossed on the floor. He popped it open and squirted it on my ass and Anthony’s dick. “Just a little. Just in case,” he said.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“Anything for you, my love,” he said, placing a kiss on my cheeks and stepping away so that both Anthony and Jared could sex the hell out of me.

Their bodies slipped against me. Anthony’s sweaty chest was pressed against my back, and Jared’s sweaty chest slipped against my nipples as they both pressed into me. It was euphoric. My eyes rolled over into my head, and my body tingled from the follicles in my scalp to the pores in my toes. Letting go, I let them pump me full of ecstasy until I froze, gripping them both as I came around them.

“Ah, shit,” Anthony grunted, pulling out of me. I was limp against Jared’s body as he walked me over to the couch, next to Mario. Crawling into Mario’s arms for a cuddle, I ventured my mouth down his body, and he stopped me.

“You look spent, baby. I can wait,” Mario whispered, smiling at me.

“Okay, I just need a few minutes, and I’ll be ready to go again,” I said.

He pinched my chin and kissed my lips. “It’s all right, babe. If you’re too tired, we don’t have to continue. All that matters

is your satisfaction,” he said, stroking my hair and staring dreamily into my eyes. His cock still pointed at the ceiling, and my mouth watered for it.

“Oh, but I want you.” I smiled at him before kissing his neck, and he groaned. When I turned to rest my face against his cool chest, I watched as he moved his hand to stroke his cock. The beauty of his solid hard-on poked through his fist and disappeared over and over again until I couldn’t help but imagine it inside me.

Anthony was sitting on the couch next to Mario and me, stroking my ass as Jared brought us all tiny paper cups of water from his water cooler. Even the water cooling my tongue and drenching the back of my throat felt orgasmic. Tossing the cup aside, I planted my mouth on top of Mario.

“Ooh!” He jumped. “So cold,” he started but as I kept going, he sighed and submitted, blessing my ears with his moans until he was growling. “Fuck, shit.”

Lifting my mouth from him, I climbed on top. “Wait, you can’t come. You haven’t fucked me yet.” I smiled, positioning him at the entrance of my hole, spreading my swollen labia lips to grind myself against him. Just the taste of the tip of his dick had the mouth of my pussy salivating, soon sucking him into me.

“Yes,” he groaned, throwing his head back before looking up and holding eye contact with me. “Fuck,” he said. “I love you so much.”

Moaning, I murmured. “I love you too.”

He kissed me as I impaled my body with him. Breaking the kiss to reach for Anthony and pulling him closer to us, I whispered against his lips. "Please, will you fuck my ass again?" I asked.

He grinned. "You don't have to ask me twice," he said.

Moaning, I called Jared's name. "Please, I want to feel you at the back of my throat," I groaned as Mario swung his hips up inside me, hitting my special spot, causing me to cry out.

"Mario, oh, fuck, Jared, I mean... Anthony... oh! Mario," I whined as waves of pleasure danced within my veins. At this point, I was just calling out names.

Grinning, Jared came to stand behind the couch. "Your wish is my command, sweetness," he said, leaning over the couch.

"Whoa!" Mario gasped as Jared's cock moved past his face but as I sucked it in my mouth, muffling my moans, Mario's desire grew even hotter.

Being stuffed by all three of them was like Christmas coming early and within minutes, they were all busting off inside me. Swallowing Jared's warm cum while feeling Mario's warmth pool within me triggered my own orgasm. I could feel the heat of Anthony's cum against the condom though it didn't trickle from me like Mario's did. Sighing from being well and truly satiated, I wrapped my arms around Mario's neck, lying against his chest, with him still inside my body. Jared and Anthony collapsed next to us on the couch.

The office was filled with the smell of our sex, our sweat, and the sounds of our panting. It all felt like paradise and when I could finally move, I opened my tired eyes to peer at Jared and Anthony. Hearing my voice echo against Mario's chest, I asked with a rasp, "So, am I suitable for the position?"

We all grinned.

"Baby, you're suitable for all positions," Jared teased.

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About Carmen Black

With a penchant for a nice glass of red and a good steamy story, Carmen Black can usually be found either writing at her computer or snuggled under a blanket as she binges one of her favorite TV series. Either way, her four-legged fur babies, Crash and Chloe, are always by her side as she crafts wicked tales of unconventional love.