



Every
Moment
With You

Happily
Ever
Yours Series

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROXY WILSON

**EVERY MOMENT WITH
YOU**

Happily Ever Yours, Book 1

Roxy Wilson

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

This is a work of fiction. All characters, places, businesses and incidents are from the author's imagination or they are used fictitiously and are definitely fictionalized. Any trademarks or pictures herein are not authorized by the trademark owners and do not in any way mean the work is sponsored by or associated with the trademark owners. Any trademarks or pictures used are specifically in a descriptive capacity. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, is coincidental.

© December, 2022. Roxy Wilson

About the Happily Ever Yours Series

From jilted lovers to second chances to brother's best friend. Short, sweet and spicy standalone stories about love and romance that guarantee a happily-ever-after ending.

Book Description

Tracey

I never thought that my ex-husband would cheat on me, but when he does, I'm left picking up the pieces of my broken family. My daughter hates me, blaming me for everything that went wrong.

My life is in a downward spiral and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

When I meet Liam, the last thing I expect is all the drama that surrounds him. At first, it seems like too much baggage for me to handle, but he's like nobody else I've ever met.

Neither of us are looking for anything serious; he has a business to run, and I have a relationship with my daughter to repair.

We don't have time to fall in love.

Liam

At my age, I should've been living my best life. Instead, I've got no wife or children in sight.

Nights of loneliness get to me, and it's during one of those nights I meet Tracey. She's everything I've ever dreamed of and so much more. She's so far out of my league, I find it hard to believe she's willing to be with me.

As I become entwined in Tracey's life—knowing that this isn't anything serious with our recently broken hearts—I find myself wondering what our lives could be.

An inferno of attraction ignites between us, burning hot even as our families and our own fears threaten to tear us apart.

Chapter One

Tracey

If I had a nickel for every time my teenage daughter told me I was ruining her life, I could retire tomorrow. While retiring at forty-four doesn't exactly sound horrible, I would prefer it not happen at the expense of my relationship with my daughter. When I was my daughter's age, my mother would have shown me exactly how she would destroy *my* life if I had dared speak to her the way Deja speaks to me.

I can't really blame her. Deja's sixteen, and her hormones are running wild. Her father had walked out of our lives with little more than a goodbye—that and the unwanted image of the secretary he was fucking behind my back.

I can't tell Deja that, though. It's my job to protect her, even if that means protecting her from the ugly sides of her own father. Even as she tries to stare me down from across the dining room table and blames me for all that was wrong in her life.

"You just don't get it!" She rolls her eyes—another classic teenager move I can't stand—and shakes her head. "If you weren't such a horrible wife to Dad, he would still be here."

"I prefer worthy woman to horrible wife," I say dryly, not knowing what else I can say. In the last few months, she had called me every name under the sun. I let her. I continue to let her just so I know she's still feeling something. "You might be mad at me, but you should still show me some respect. At least enough to not call me insulting names to my face."

Her lip piercing twitches as she grits her teeth. The lip ring is new, another act of rebellion since her father left. He had called me, screaming bloody murder, the first time he saw her wearing it. I'd nearly given him a piece of my mind then

and there, but he was still the father of our daughter. Keeping the peace for her sake was a weight only I seemed to carry.

“Deja, this act is getting old. Your father left, and there’s nothing either of us can do about it now. If he wanted to be here, he would be. I don’t know what you want me to say anymore.”

Tears glisten in her dark-brown eyes as she brushes her box braids off her shoulder to hang freely down her back. “I want you to call him and apologize. I want you to fix this.”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, honey, but there’s no fixing what went wrong between your father and me. We still love you, and that isn’t going to change, whether we’re still married or not.”

“This isn’t about me,” Deja says, shoving her chair back from the table and getting to her feet. “This is about what you did to drive Dad away. He wouldn’t even be with Britney if you asked him to come home.”

As I watch her blink the tears from her eyes, I can feel my heart tearing in two. There’s nothing I can say to ease the pain she’s feeling. Her whole world is falling apart, and she’s lashing out. I can understand that.

With Jake moving on, I’m missing the person I thought I would spend my life with. Though Deja is still mourning her father’s absence, I’m trying to pull myself together for her sake. I need to be the mother who supports her right now—not the mother who makes her life harder because I’m grieving the loss too.

I want to help her in any way I can, even though she doesn’t want it. I want to be the person she grieves with instead of the one she blames. If she needs to keep blaming me, though, I can be her personal punching bag.

Being the villain in her story still hurts, however.

“Deja, your dad and I have had our problems. All couples do. This time, there were some problems that we

couldn't overlook anymore. People grow up and they grow apart.”

She shakes her head, turning on her heel and heading to the back door. Her shoulders are stiff as she rips open the door before slamming it behind her. I stare down at the table, wondering where I'd gone wrong. In shielding her heart, I'm making her hate me. There's no compromise with our situation, as much as I wish there were.

I wipe away the tears that have started to spill over and grab my phone, sending a message to Deja to tell her I love her. No sooner have I put the phone down than it starts ringing. My ex-husband's name flashes on the screen, a new ache forming in my heart.

These days, Jake only calls me when he wants something. Most calls mean I have to go apologize to Deja on his behalf for his bailing on her yet again. Since he started sleeping with Britney, he has done nothing but forget that he has a daughter who needs him right now. Deja needs to know he still loves her despite moving on with his life. She needs to know her father is still there for her, even though he's doesn't give a fuck about showing her so.

“What do you want, Jake?” I ask as I answer the phone, skipping the pleasantries because I know my heart can't take them.

“Why is Deja calling me and begging me to come pick her up?” The sounds of rock music and the voices of people singing along fill the background.

What the actual fuck?

I can't believe he's at a party instead of coming to get our daughter who's desperate to see him. She's calling him because she needs him, and he has the nerve to call and ask why.

Even though I keep our relationship civil for Deja's sake, there are still days I consider cutting Jake out of our lives completely. If Deja didn't idolize her dad, I would have done it

already. All he does is disappoint her. And one of these days, I may just kill him for it.

“Because you left me picking up the pieces after you couldn’t keep your dick in your pants.”

“Well, I had to tell her I couldn’t tonight.”

Jake laughs on the other end of the line, hopefully in response to something someone else is saying. Surely he’s not so insensitive to think that what we’re discussing is funny. I want to leap through the phone and wring his neck. I want to demand he start acting like a better father. But I do neither of those things, simply because I can’t.

My hand clenches, nails digging into my skin. I take deep breaths, trying to compose myself before asking why he can’t be there for our daughter yet again.

“And why can’t you come get her?” My voice is tight as I stare daggers at the picture of us still hanging on the wall. That picture is long overdue for a trip to the curb on garbage day.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, the party in the background the only noise I can hear. There is a pit in my stomach, knowing whatever he says next is going to rock my world once again.

As if he hasn’t done enough damage lately, I think, drumming my fingers on the table.

“I’m at my engagement party.”

The world stops. Time freezes and nothing seems real. I know he’s planning on marrying Britney. After all, he’d said as much when he received the divorce papers. I thought he would let the dust settle first, but apparently not.

I cackle and shake my head, tears blurring my vision. “You did not just say you’re at your engagement party.”

“I did.” Irritation clear in his tone. “Stop laughing, Tracey. This isn’t funny.”

“Oh, I think it is, you bastard. I think it’s hilarious that not only are you not picking up your daughter because you’re at an engagement party—that she should have been invited to, by the way—but you’ve apparently also managed to recover enough of your shrunken balls to get engaged before our divorce is even fucking finalized.”

“This is why I left you.”

I snort, getting up from the table and pacing around the kitchen. “I thought that was because you slipped and your dick fell into the blonde secretary that’s half your damn age!”

“I’m not fighting with you right now. Not today. This is a good day, Tracey. The best I’ve had in a long time. So forgive me for enjoying life!”

“You’re choosing a woman over your daughter! Deja needs you, Jake. You’re breaking her heart.”

Jake sighs, the music in the background growing softer. “Tracey, I can’t keep doing this. Tell Deja I’m sorry, but I can’t come get her.”

He ends the call, and I’m left standing in the kitchen trying to figure out a way to tell my daughter that her father isn’t coming to get her. How do you tell a child her father won’t be there for her because he’s at his own engagement party—an engagement party he didn’t invite her to. She’s going to be crushed when I tell her that he isn’t coming for her. If I tell her why he’s not coming, I don’t think her heart will ever recover.

After taking a deep breath, I open the door and walk outside to find my daughter sitting on the curb, her phone in hand.

“He’s not coming, Deja. He called me and asked what was going on. I told him about our argument and asked him not to come and get you. We need to work this out, and we can’t do that if you’re at his house.” The lie rolls from my lips with practiced ease, but inside... inside I. Am. Dying.

Deja's face crumples, even as tears flow down her cheeks. She takes a deep shuddering breath, as if she's trying not to let her emotions overwhelm her. "I hate you." Her voice sounds almost deadly.

"I know," I whisper, biting back my own tears. "I know you do."

Deja brushes away the hug I offer, getting to her feet and shaking her head. She stands on the curb, rocking back and forth on her heels. Her chest rises and falls as she takes deep breaths, her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides.

"Why weren't you enough? Why didn't you try harder to make him stay?" she asks, her voice shaky.

"Honey, you can't make somebody stay, not once they're already gone. If I had thought it would help, I would have done everything I could to get him to stay."

"You don't know that it wouldn't have helped. You just let him go." She shakes her head, taking another step back when I reach for her. "Don't touch me. Don't look at me. Don't pretend you care about how I feel. If you cared, you would have saved our family."

Deja takes off toward the old treehouse that still stands in the backyard. I watch from the driveway as she climbs up the ladder and shuts the trapdoor behind her, deciding that talking to her now won't do any good.

She needs time to heal her heart, just like I do.

I walk inside, heading straight for the room Jake and I used to share. My blood boils at his latest example of not giving a shit.

His belongings are long gone, tossed on the lawn the day I found out he was cheating on me. Thankfully, Deja had been on an out-of-town trip with the youth group she belongs to. Looking back, I'm glad she didn't see the show I'd put on for the neighbors.

I'm sure they're still talking about me to this day.

The closet is emptier than it had been only a couple of months earlier, but my wedding dress is still hanging in the back. After pulling the dress out of the bag, I walk down the stairs to the fire pit in the backyard. Music is blasting from the treehouse, Deja lost in her own little world.

Lighting a fire doesn't take long, the heat of the summer keeping the wood dry. Bright flames lick up at the setting sun as I toss my dress into the fire and watch it burn. The white fabric turns black before turning to ashes and smoke. Years of my life spent in one relationship go up in smoke, the love long gone.

It's time for a new beginning.

Chapter Two

Liam

The worst part about owning a bar is not tossing drunks out or breaking up fights. Truth be told, I probably enjoy both more than I should. However, it's the one time I allow myself to relax and vent my tension and frustration. The drunks are lucky I handle it myself instead of calling the cops.

No, the bane of my existence isn't the fights. It's the paperwork—mountains of paperwork that never stops piling up on my desk, no matter how much I get through in a week. By the time I finish one stack, another is already in its place.

I groan as I sit at my desk looking at today's paperwork. The music from the bar provides a steady soundtrack to the monotony of going through profit-and-loss statements. When I started opening bars across the country, I could have hired people to take care of the day-to-day accounting. Back then, I hadn't wanted to give up that much control. Even now, I'm still unwilling to relinquish control over my financials. An accountant deals with some of my financials, but I still like to handle the daily tasks myself.

"You look like you're having a good time."

My half-brother appears in the doorway, a shit-eating grin on his face as he leans against the frame. Jason is nothing if not annoying—as every younger brother should be—but right now, he's a welcome relief from the headache that's already forming.

I haven't seen him in a few weeks. The stubble on his chin is longer, as if he's trying to grow the beard we both know he can't. He looks like he's enjoying life this summer, not letting the stress of taking over the family business get to him.

I don't want to be in his shoes. I never did.

“Why are you here?” I lean back in my chair and kick my feet up on my desk. “Aren’t you supposed to be celebrating graduating university in Bali?”

“And miss all the fun of spending time with my big brother?” Jason scoffs as he drops down onto the leather couch in the corner. “Absolutely not. I thought we could go out to a few clubs tonight. Let your hair down and have some fun.”

I snort and shake my head. While growing up, we hadn’t spent much time together. Jason is twenty-three, nearly twenty-one years younger than I am. By the time he was born, I was already well on my way to opening my first bar.

Of course, there’d been a lot more going on in our lives than opening a bar back then, but that was a can of worms both Jason and I preferred to keep tightly sealed. It’s for the best we don’t talk about the affair that made us a family, or the years I spent hiding overseas.

The older he gets, the better our relationship becomes. Now, we’re friends. We keep in contact at least once a week, even if we’re both busy. Imagining life without him had been easy when we were younger, but now it’s impossible to think of him not being around.

“My partying days are long over, have been for awhile,” I say, gesturing to the paperwork piled high. “This is my life now. Spending Friday nights locked in my office trying to get ahead for the next week.”

“You can’t tell me you’re old and boring when I swiped left on your profile this morning.” Jason smirks as he stares at me. “There is no way you are looking to settle down with a woman when you’re still on dating apps.”

Heat flares up the back of my neck as I stare at my brother. I don’t like to advertise the fact that I’m on multiple dating apps. Though I’m tired of being lonely, I’m not in the mood to let my family know that.

“You have your dating profile set to men now?” I ask my brother.

“No, I was helping last night’s hookup find her own hookup for tonight. She thought you were attractive, but I told her you were an asshole with a gas problem who cried during sex.”

Chuckling, I flip him off. “Cockblocker.” My brother might be the bane of my existence, but he never fails to lift my spirits when I’m feeling down.

Jason shrugs and gets to his feet. “She was out of your league. I really did the both of you a favor. Think of what would’ve happened if she’d shown up for the date and seen what you looked like in person.”

“Sounds more like she was out of yours,” I say, smirking. He rolls his eyes. “We both know I’m the better-looking brother. I know you were just trying to even the playing field, but there’s no way she’d go for you over me.”

He laughs and moves to the door, shooting me his shit-eating grin. “Then why am I headed over to see her now?”

Jason ducks as I throw a balled-up piece of paper at him, laughing as he leaves the room. I sigh and sit upright, glancing at the paperwork. There’s no avoiding it any longer. No matter how many times I wish that the papers would spontaneously combust, it hasn’t happened yet.

“Having fun?” Piper, my hard-working bartender, asks as she appears in the doorway, a towel over one shoulder and a multi-colored apron wrapped around her waist.

“Not even a little bit.” I grab a stack of ordering sheets. “Anything in particular you think we need more of?”

“Vanilla whiskey is a hit this month. Other than that, tequila. The college students cleaned us out during spring break.”

I nod and scribble a note on one of the order sheets. “Alright. I’ll get the liquor ordered.”

Piper nods before taking off, closing the door behind her. With pen in hand, I get to work, knowing I can no longer

escape the inevitable. It's the only part of owning a business I don't like. I love working with the people and serving the public, but doing paperwork makes me want to tear my hair out.

For a brief moment, I consider asking Jason to come on as my office manager. He has a head for numbers, and he'd studied business in college. If there's anyone I trust to handle the daily work other than myself, it's him.

But he has his own dreams, and I don't want to encroach on them with mine. With that in mind, I open a ledger and look at a column of tiny numbers. I can already feel the headache forming.

Walking into my house and finding my brother sleeping in my guest room—on the hardwood floor, no less—is not what I expect after a long day at work. The pile of paperwork had only grown larger through the night when one of the kitchen staff sliced off the tip of his finger. Between cleaning the blood and writing up a workplace accident report, I was exhausted. I'd been looking forward to making a strong cup of coffee as the sun rose before stumbling into bed. Instead, I'm staring at a sleeping Jason, wondering how the hell he got into my house.

As his snores fill the air, I grab a plastic bowl and fill it with cold water. Jason barely moves as I creep toward him, dumping the water over his head. Water sloshes onto the floor around him, soaking the quilt beneath him and his clothes.

“What the fuck!” he shouts, jumping up from the floor.

“How did you get into my house?” As much as I love Jason, there is a reason why I've never given him a key.

“Mom gave me the key.”

Mumbling under my breath, I drop the bowl in the kitchen sink. Then I stalk to my bedroom, slamming the door behind me. My mother is too intrusive for her own good, as if

her having a child outside of her marriage wasn't enough of a clue.

Her biggest problem is respecting boundaries. No matter how many times I try to set them, she seems to find a way to crash through them by the following week. She has yet to find a boundary she can't disrespect.

Growing up, she'd always been distant but as I'd gotten older, she became more interested in trying to control my life. Now, she's always doing whatever she can to push me toward the life she wants for me.

If she believes sending my little brother to stay with me will urge me to buy the house she thinks I'll love—in the neighborhood she thinks is best suited for me—then she'll cut him as many keys as he needs, even if I tell her not to.

Before calling my mother, I try to take a few minutes to calm down. Getting hyped up and emotional while talking to her won't get me very far. When I'm sure I won't start yelling the moment she answers the call, I grab my phone and dial her number.

“Hello, Liam,” she says. “I see that you're finally calling your poor mother. You know, I'm not getting any younger. Are you calling to tell me that you and that nice young woman you were going to marry are getting back together? You know I've always liked her. And with my not getting any younger, I need grandchildren soon.”

“Botox would say otherwise,” I say before I can stop myself. I don't know who she thinks she's talking to either. Chloe and I ended our relationship on less than good terms and I plan to leave it in the past. “That's not what I'm calling you about, though. Why does Jason have a key to my house?”

“Because I made him a copy of my key.”

“And why would you do that?” I can feel a headache building. Not surprising, as they tend to visit me whenever I have to deal with the woman who gave birth to me and has been the source of conflicting emotions over the years. “Your

key was given to you for emergencies. It was not to give others access to my home.”

“Why didn’t he have a key in the first place? He’s your brother.”

“He might be my brother, but that doesn’t mean he needs a key to my house.”

“You should be thanking me for bringing the family together,” she says with a sniff. “I’ve spent years trying to put this family back together after you broke it.”

Resisting the urge to throw my phone through the wall took strength I didn’t know I had. No matter how long I go without speaking to her, my mom always finds a way to bring up my shortcomings. It’s never as simple as a conversation between a mother and son who want to catch up.

“You mean since I decided not to do every single thing you and Dad wanted.”

She sighs. “Liam, you had a good life set out in front of you.”

“I still have a good life. I own several successful bars. I’ve made a life for myself without the trust fund.”

The trust fund had come with endless amounts of strings that I didn’t want. I had left that life behind when I was young, determined to make it on my own. I did make it on my own, and I’m damn proud of myself for doing it. I didn’t need their money then, and I certainly don’t need their money now.

“Imagine the life you could have had if you had just followed the requirements of the trust.”

“That was the best decision I ever made. You know nothing about boundaries or allowing people to be themselves. All you care about is what your friends at the country club think about that stupid family image you try to uphold. I’m done, and I’ve been done with all that for a long time.”

She laughs as if what I’ve said is the best joke she has ever heard. “Liam, you and I both know you won’t turn your

back on this family. Now, we need to talk about your father's birthday dinner."

"No. We've talked enough for one night. Don't give out a key to my house anymore, or I'll change all the locks."

Before she can say anything else, I end the call and toss my phone onto the dresser. The floorboards outside my bedroom creak as Jason creeps down the hall. I don't know where he thinks he's going, but there are things we need to get clear.

"If you're going to stay here, you're not going to be a pain in my ass," I say, stepping into the hall and crossing my arms. "That means that I don't want any parties. You're going to clean up after yourself like a grown man. And you're making breakfast."

Jason grins, his shaggy brown hair falling into his eyes. "You're not going to regret this."

"Yes, I am." I sigh and nod to the kitchen. "Let's go. I'm hungry now. You can tell me all about this birthday dinner for Dad while you cook."

"Mom expects you to bring a date," Jason says, walking into the kitchen and heading straight for the fridge. I follow him and take a seat at the island. "She thinks it's time you settle down and stop living like a heathen."

"I'll live like a heathen if I want to. There's no need for me to settle down when I'm happy being alone."

"Tell that to Mom."

I snort and lean on the island, my eyelids heavy as the sun began to rise outside. My bed is still calling my name, even if it looks like I'm not getting there anytime soon. All I want is to crawl beneath the sheets and sleep until it's time to wake up and go to work again.

"There's no talking to her about anything. She still thinks Chloe and I are going to get back together and live happily ever after."

“Will you?” Jason asks as he cracks eggs into a bowl.

“Only when hell freezes over.”

I don't care what my mom wants. There's no way that she's getting grandchildren out of me. Not anytime soon at least. After a disastrous engagement, I'm not prepared to be serious with anyone again. Not yet.

Chapter Three

Tracey

Three days pass without more than a grunt or a groan from Deja. She's determined to hold on to her resentment for as long as it will burn. If I weren't her mother, I might admire her dedication. There was a time when she was younger that she hadn't spoken to me for nearly a week. I won't be surprised if her vow of silence lasts even longer now that she's older. She has a stubborn side that doesn't bend, even in the face of a hurricane. Pride always swells in my chest when I think of what an independent and ballsy young woman I'm raising.

Deja is my pride and joy, even when we are fighting. Even if she is mad at me, she has always been responsible. She still does her chores and makes sure she lets me know what is going on in her life, even when it would be easier to shut me out.

Jake has no idea what he's missing by not being in his beautiful daughter's life.

Still, even as she was giving me the silent treatment when she was younger, she would at least leave a note when she went out. Not tonight.

Tonight, when I check her room after listening to silence for too long, she isn't there. I walk into her room and pull back her bedsheets, surprised not to find her there. It would be like her to pretend she isn't in her room and hide somewhere else to get a rise out of me.

As I run my hand down her sheets, I can feel that they are still cold. She hasn't been in her bed in a while. My heart starts racing as I open her closet and look inside. She isn't hiding in there either.

"Not funny, Deja," I say as I bang on her bathroom door. When a few minutes pass without her answering, I can

feel my heart hammering in my chest. “Deja?”

I run downstairs and grab a butter knife before racing back upstairs and jamming the knife into her door lock. The lock pops with a click, but the bathroom is empty. A cool breeze flowing through the open window sends the curtains fluttering.

Deja had snuck out of the house one time before when she’d overheard her dad and I fighting, and I had been a mess. Jake talked me out of calling the police as he left to go search for her. When he brought her home, she promised she wouldn’t sneak out again. Until now, she’d kept her word.

Tears blur my vision as I leave the house and get in the car, preparing to spend the night searching for her. I dial her number, but the call goes straight to voicemail. The car rumbles to life, and I back out of the driveway, trying to remember the places she and her friends like to go.

When I was younger, my friends and I had spent most of our time down at a covered bridge at the edge of town. It was where we went for late-night fires and underaged drinking. If I closed my eyes, I can still hear eighties hip hop echoing against the wood and feel the ground shaking beneath my feet.

If I were a teenager today, a bridge far away from parents is exactly where I’d spend my time.

Even though she doesn’t like to admit it, Deja is a lot like me. Thinking that she would be hiding at the bridge with her friends isn’t a far stretch of the imagination, especially when she knows it’s where I used to go.

Rain splashes against the windshield as I drive through town. The droplets fall faster the farther away from downtown I get. Soon, the rain is pouring as I turn the car down an old dirt road and turn on my high beams.

The dirt road is more mud than dirt, but there are other cars lining the side of the road. Relief floods through me as I see a car I recognize, knowing it belongs to one of her friends.

The headlights illuminate the interior of the bridge as I pull up to the entrance and park the car. The old structure was condemned a long time ago, but people still gather inside. As I look around, I can see that over the years old couches and chairs have been dragged to the bridge, creating the perfect spot for teenagers to hide from their parents.

Deja is sitting with a couple of other people, brown bottles being passed among them. Clouds of smoke swirl upward with the wind, the end of a blunt glowing against the night.

I don't know what I expected to find, but my daughter drinking beer and smoking weed is not as bad as what I had pictured. She's still in trouble, but I suppose there are worse things that she could've been doing.

I take a deep breath, releasing my death grip on the steering wheel before stepping out of the car and into the rain. Deja's eyes widen, a bottle halfway to her mouth as I storm through the mud to stop in front of her.

The blunt is quickly taken from between her fingers, passing around the group until I lose track of it. I don't care. All I care about is my daughter being safe inside my car, so I can tear her a new one for scaring me.

"Get your ass in the car now," I say, my voice calm and controlled as Deja glares at me.

"I'm having fun." Though she looks like she's trying to stand her ground, there's a quiver to her bottom lip. She knows she messed up, but she is trying to save face in front of her friends.

Typical teenager, I think, shaking my head as disappointment swamps me. *Too bad she'll not be getting her own way with me. At least, not tonight.*

"Maybe you didn't hear me," I say slowly, pointing a finger toward the car. "Get your ass in the car. Now."

Deja's bottom lip quivers again, a small crack in her otherwise icy exterior. Her eyes are hard as she tries to stare

me down. But for once, my daughter isn't winning the argument. Not when she's being reckless and endangering herself.

After another moment of silence, Deja rises to her feet, her head held high, and stomps to the car. I follow her, not saying a word as we drive away.

"Mom," Deja says, her voice soft as she curls into herself in her seat. "Are you mad?"

I laugh, gripping the steering wheel and shaking my head. I press my lips together for a few moments, trying to keep myself from saying something I can't take back later.

She's an angry and upset teenager who has no sense of stability right now, I remind myself before taking a deep breath. There are so many things I want to say to her, but I don't know where to start. I wish I could understand what she's feeling, but she won't open up to me.

Am I mad? Absolutely.

"Mad doesn't even begin to cover what I'm feeling right now. You need to be quiet until we get home. I don't want to start fighting right now and say something I'll regret."

I glance at her for a moment, seeing a scared little girl instead of the headstrong teenager that usually sits in her place. For a second, my own fear and anger fade away. I want to pull my little girl in as close as I can and tell her everything will be alright. I want to take away her fears and save her from the dark spiral of her mind.

Instead, I pull into our driveway and walk into the house, stopping in the dining room and waiting for her to take a seat. Deja doesn't lift her eyes from the table as she swipes a tear from her cheek. When she looks up, there's no longer regret in her eyes, only red-hot anger.

Mentally, I'm preparing myself for what's about to come next. Hell hath no fury like a teenager scorned.

“You embarrassed me!” she screams, slamming her fist on the table. “You really can’t stop yourself from ruining my life, can you?”

“I’ve put up with this for too long, Deja!” My voice fills the room, her next words dying on her tongue. It isn’t often I raise my voice. Jake had been more of the disciplinarian over the years, and perhaps that was where I went wrong.

Maybe if I hadn’t been so lenient with her in the past, she wouldn’t be disrespecting me now.

“You’re going to scare off my friends, just like you scared off Dad!”

My body tenses, even while heat courses through my body. “You know, Deja, I really don’t care that you’re sixteen and think you’re grown now. For the little stunt you pulled tonight, you’re grounded. You go to school, and you come home from school. That’s it.”

Stamping her feet on the tiled floor, Deja yells, “That’s not fair!”

I will myself to stay calm. Back in the day, if I were to even *think* about giving my mother any back talk, she might have rearranged my face before I finished the sentence. Now here I am in the mother role, and my daughter is giving me back talk. I’m surprised my mother isn’t slapping my daughter across the face from the grave.

“What’s not fair is my teenage daughter thinking she runs the show and doesn’t have to tell me when she’s going out. What isn’t fair is having to search through the streets at night for you, having no idea where you are or if you’re safe.” I draw a long breath and then release it in a huff. “Damn it, Deja. What if the cops had found you before I did? Have you even considered that? You don’t get the same luxuries your friends get! You say one wrong thing, reach for one wrong thing—even air—and you’re dead. The cops will shoot first and ask questions later.”

Deja bites her bottom lip, her dark-brown eyes shining as she gets up and flees the room. As soon as she leaves, I sink into a chair and bury my face in my hands. Sobs shake my body as the fear finally spills over. I didn't know where she was tonight, and something could've happened. We're lucky nothing did, but we might not be so lucky next time.

I fish my phone from my pocket, needing another adult to talk to. Dawn answers on the first ring, her husband shouting at a football game in the background.

"Everything's going to hell, and I don't know what to do anymore," I say, tears still flowing down my cheeks. "I thought I knew what I was going to do when Jake left, but everything's going to shit. I feel like a failure as a parent. My daughter hates me and keeps lashing out and acting like a brat, and I don't know what to do about it."

"Tracey, everything isn't going to hell. It's not like you're raising the spawn of Satan and there's nothing you can do about it, you know?" Dawn pauses for a moment before sighing. "Tracey, Deja's a good girl, but she's going through a tough time right now. She's going to make your life miserable because she doesn't want to be alone in her misery. Don't you remember what we were like at that age?"

Despite myself, I laughed. "Yeah, you're right about that."

"I'm grabbing some wine and ice cream. Your ass better be in pajamas by the time I get there."

Dawn hangs up without so much as a goodbye. Though she has a new baby at home, Dawn's still the kind of woman who will find a way to be at your side through the fire. We've been best friends since high school, and she's seen me through the worst life has to offer. When I found out Jake was cheating, she'd been my second call. The divorce lawyer had been the first.

By the time I change and pick out a horror movie to watch, Dawn's storming through my front door. She has a

bottle of white wine in one hand and a giant tub of rocky road ice cream in the other. Dawn drops the ice cream and wine on the table before pulling me into a tight hug. I can feel the tears gathering at the back of my eyes as I hug her back, trying to keep control of myself, even as everything else is spinning out around me.

“Everything’s going to be okay.” Her voice is so soothing, it’s like she’s draping a warm blanket around me. “You’re a good mother, and you’re doing the best you can with Deja.”

The tears start pouring again at her words. Dawn holds me as I cry, not bothering to step away or try to make me feel better. That’s the best thing about my dear friend. If I want to wallow in my grief, she lets me wallow.

“Alright,” she says when I finally pull away and get myself together. “Let’s watch a movie and eat some junk food.”

I laugh and follow her into the living room, dimming the lights and settling onto the couch beside her. Dawn’s quick to open the bottle of wine and we pass it back and forth, both taking long swigs of the alcohol straight from the bottle. We’re classy like that. For a moment, I’m transported away from my reality and brought back to our high school years when we would pass stolen bottles between us and not worry about the future.

Now, all I seem to do is worry.

“I think I need to start dating again,” I say, my mind hazy as the wine does its job. “Jake’s getting married. Did I tell you that?”

“No.” Dawn hiccups and rolls her eyes. “It doesn’t surprise me, though. He’s always been a dickhead.”

“I don’t think Deja knows yet. He’s probably going to make me tell her since he has squirrel balls.”

“Squirrel balls?” Dawn asks, giggling as she shakes her head.

“Yeah, like balls the size of a squirrel’s.” I pinch my thumb and pointer fingers together, a tiny space between them. “Like this big.”

Dawn snorts. “I think dating’s a great idea. You’re still gorgeous, and any man would be lucky to have you.”

“I have no clue how to date anymore.”

“Give me your phone,” Dawn says, putting down the wine bottle and holding out her hand. “We’re getting you on some dating apps.”

I roll my eyes, handing her my phone. “Nobody’s going to be looking for a woman in her mid-forties with a child.”

Dawn points the phone at me. “Lean forward, push your boobs together, and smile.”

I huff a laugh. “Nope. Not happening.”

“Fine, I’ll scroll through your photo gallery and get something I can use.”

Dawn snuggles in beside me, leaning her head on my shoulder as she taps away on my phone. Butterflies erupt in my stomach at the thought of dating again. It’s been a long time, and I have no idea what to do. At least I have Dawn to help. She giggles to herself as she types in my hobbies: long walks on the beach, watching Denzel Washington movies, and comparing the size of animal testicles.

“You can’t put that.”

“I can. It shows your sense of humor.”

She adds a few photos to the profile before handing the phone back to me with a triumphant smirk on her face. In the corner there’s a message bubble with a three in the center. I tap the message section and squeal at the first message, throwing my phone into Dawn’s lap. She cackles as she looks at the picture of a dick on the screen.

“That’s not so bad. Go to the next message.”

Adam: *I like comparing the size of testicles too. I find the best way to compare my left and right is to have them in a woman's mouth.*

Harrison: *Nice tits.*

Michael: *I want one night of wild sex with you.*

Liam: *Hi, Tracey. If your favorite movie is "Remember the Titans," we're going to have a lot to talk about.*

"Liam is the only one that seems normal," I say, my eyelids growing heavy as the movie credits roll.

"Well then, keep talking to him."

"Tomorrow," I say with a yawn as I nestle against the arm of the couch. "Right now, I just want to watch another movie."

Chapter Four

Liam

Tracey: So, now is probably the time I should tell you I have a daughter. I will understand if that makes you lose interest. Not everybody is built for children. I love them, though. Started working as a social worker years ago, so I get to spend my days trying to help children as best I can.

Liam: That's awesome. Sometimes I wish I'd gone to school to be a teacher. How old is your daughter?

Tracey: Sixteen. Best thing that's ever happened to me. Even if she's a brat sometimes.

Liam: That makes you a good mother, I've heard. Children aren't easy.

That makes you a good mother? I shake my head, wondering how to recover from what is easily my most awkward exchange ever over text. I wouldn't blame her if she doesn't even reply.

I tuck my phone into my pocket and shake my head. It has been years since I tried flirting with a woman. My skills are rusty at best, not that they were good to begin with. One part of me wants to see what she says, but another part fears the response. Instead of sitting around and waiting for it, I have the urge to work. After running a hand through my hair and smoothing out the wrinkles in my shirt, I leave my office and head to the bar.

Even paperwork will be a welcome distraction at this point.

"How's it going tonight, boss?" Piper asks as I step behind the bar.

"Pretty good now that I'm away from all that paperwork," I say, grinning as I toss a rag over one shoulder

before turning to the people at the bar.

“Anything exciting happening these days?” Piper pulls a nozzle and pours beer into a pitcher.

“Maybe. I’ve started talking to a lady. She seems nice and smart so far.”

Piper squeals, shoving the pitcher of beer across the bar to a waitress before turning to me. “What’s her name? What’s she like?”

“Tracey. My age. She has a daughter. African American. She’s a social worker. Spends a lot of time helping kids.”

Piper snorts. “Your mother’s going to love her... *not*.”

“Ask me if I give a flying fuck,” I say, making an espresso martini for a woman in a pink dress that’s barely covering her body. “My mother only likes Chloe because Chloe bends to her whims. She’s never seen what a spoiled brat Chloe is. If she knew about all of the hissy fits and demands for money, I doubt my mother would like her as much.” Smiling at the woman in the pink dress, I place the martini in front of her. I then turn to Piper, continuing our conversation. “Chloe’s only interested in me for what I can give her.”

“Hmph. You’re putting it lightly,” Piper says before hurrying to the other end of the bar where a group of twenty-somethings are ready to place their orders.

Friday nights are always busy, rivaled only by Saturday. Though I own several bars in the city, I always spend Fridays at Poison Apple. It’s the newest with the most inexperienced team. The other bars all have an established staff who can take care of business without me hovering over them. I check on them weekly, but there isn’t a need for me to micromanage.

The tension leaves my body as I pour shots and cocktails, collecting tips as I toss bottles high in the air before catching them. People come and go with no problems until I see my security team start charging through the dance floor.

“Piper, hold down the fort,” I say, leaping over the bar top and heading to the dance floor. My security team wouldn’t storm over to the dance floor if there wasn’t something serious going on.

Two men are trading punches, a woman on one of their backs while another man pours beer over them. I grab one man by the back of his shirt, hauling him to the side and straight into the arms of one of the guys on the security team. The other man is still trying to shake the woman off his back, shouting and cussing out anyone that comes near. The woman is holding on, clawing at his chest and wrapping her legs tighter around his waist. He shouts and reaches for her, but each time he does so, she swipes her fake nails down the side of his face.

“Get out!” I grab him by the collar and drag him toward the door, the woman still on his back. The bouncer opens the door, a chilly wind racing inside as we toss the men and the woman out on their asses.

There’s cheering and clapping as the door slams behind them, one of the waitresses appearing with a bucket and mop for the beer on the floor. I wipe my hands on my pants, put a smile on my face, and head toward the man who’d been pouring beer over them.

He looks as if he thinks he’ll get to stay after fucking up my bar. The cocky smile on his face fades as I stop in front of him and cross my arms.

“You too.” I point my finger to the door. “Out!”

The man sputters an angry protest, but it’s in vain as he’s escorted out before he can put up much of a fight. A wave of mild disappointment washes over me. Another fight might just be a good way to ease some of the tension that keeps building within me.

Just when I think we’re going to settle into an easy night, my mother comes parading through the door with her nose turned up. If that isn’t bad enough, my ex-fiancée Chloe

is hot on her heels. Both look out of place with pearls around their necks and clothing that cost more than I want to think about.

Chloe looks around the bar, spotting me before I can escape, and whispers in my mother's ear. She points a long finger in my direction. I can't help but wish I could sneak to the bathroom and squeeze out of the window—not that I would have been able to fit through it, anyway. I'm a big guy at six-foot-five and about two hundred and fifteen pounds.

With a jerk of my head toward the employees-only door, I take off toward my office. I can imagine the disgust my two uninvited guests are probably feeling as they weave their way through the crowd. I bet my mother is gasping in horror at the god-awful music—her words, not mine—blaring from the jukebox. I wait in the hallway for them with the door open.

As Mom walks down the hall, I look her over, trying to spot the telltale signs of the cancer returning. To my relief, there are no unexplainable bruises or an excessive amount of weight loss. She seems to be healthy, but there's always that worry that cancer is still lurking right around the corner. The last time she was sick, it had been sudden, and the doctors had all insisted we were lucky it was caught in time.

"I still can't believe you own this hovel," Mom says, brushing by me and marching into my office. "Think of where you would be now if you were a doctor or lawyer."

"I'd be miserable." I glance at Chloe, seeing the calculating look she gives me. With her, there's always some sort of scheme. "Why are you here?"

"Chloe and I have decided that it's best if you try to sort out this problem between the two of you." Mom sits down on the couch in my office, gesturing for Chloe to sit beside her. My ex-fiancée acquiesces to my mother's silent command, folding her hands in her lap.

"We're not working out anything." I still stand in the doorway with my arms crossed over my chest. "And it wasn't

a little problem. I wasn't happy, and she was cheating on me with my best friend. Mom, you already know this. Last time I checked, that's enough to end a relationship. Permanently. Should we even talk about all of the money she was more than happy to drain from my accounts if I'd allow her?"

Mom scoffs, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "Liam, please. Stop being a child. These kinds of things happen in relationships. You have to learn to grow together. Besides, once you get married, your money is her money. Just think of it as practice for later."

"After you did what you did to Dad, I promised that I would never forgive a woman the way he forgave you." Inwardly, I shake my head at what a coward I am. Even after all these years, I still can't say out loud that my mother cheated on my dad. It's as if keeping the words unspoken somehow means it didn't actually happen. But who am I kidding? My brother is the indisputable evidence that my mother had broken her marriage vows to my dad. The irony is that even though I've openly said my ex-fiancée cheated on me, it's still hard for me to admit my mother did the same thing to my dad.

My mother is the picture of innocence, and I know my words don't cut as deep as I intended. She made her peace with what she did a long time ago.

Glancing at Chloe, I say, "I'll not be with a woman who's going to cheat and lie to me every time my back is turned." I try to push down the anger bubbling to the surface. "I could've gotten over the excessive amount of my money you were spending, but you betrayed me."

Chloe's eyes are shining with tears as she stares at me. "I'm sorry, Liam. It was a mistake."

"No, it wasn't. Once is a mistake. Having an affair for over three years is something done deliberately. You're only sorry because you were caught." Why waste my breath even reminding her I'd caught her and my ex-best friend fucking in my bed? Coming home early from a business trip to surprise

my then fiancée with a birthday gift wound up exposing their deceit. Anyway, it's been years, and I don't have the time to waste. I just want them both gone. I expel a deep breath. "You made your bed, and now you can lie in it."

"Liam!" My mother admonishes. "You aren't seeing the bigger picture here. You and Chloe look good together. You work well. Think of what your futures would look like if you are together."

"Exactly what part of her cheating on me works well?" I ask, not quite believing my mom's audacity. "Could you tell me where in that do you see a great relationship that will last the rest of my life?"

"You are getting old," Mom says, looking me over. "Chloe is beautiful, and you won't be able to do better. Now, forget this silly little fight you had. You need to leave work early today, so we can get an early start on the weekend. We're running out of time to get the wedding planned."

I scoff, my arms dropping to my sides. "I have a bar to run. You can see yourselves out."

There's nothing left to say. Nothing that will change my mind. After catching Chloe in bed with my best friend three years ago, I left and didn't look back no matter how much my mom begged me to. I was old enough to remember seeing the pain my dad went through when mom came home pregnant. That nightmare had ended with my vow to never stay with a cheating woman. I won't ever feel the way my dad felt.

As I walk back behind the bar, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, seeing a notification from Tracey. A flash of excitement courses through me. Tracey is an enchanting woman I can see myself having fun with. Getting a message from her eases the tension that's trying to consume me.

Tracey: Thank you. Sometimes I feel like I'm trying to parent a possessed doll. Do you think it's wrong to compare your child to Chuckie? I love her to death, but sometimes I wonder if something hasn't slipped inside her and taken hold.

Although, that could also just be what happens when you're raising a teenaged daughter.

In a single moment, I go from being pissed off to laughing out loud and feeling better than I have in weeks. Though she and I have only messaged back and forth, I can tell there's something special about her—something that makes me want to spend my time getting to know her better. I didn't want to keep communicating only through text, though; it was too impersonal. I want to meet her, sit across from her, and get to know her.

Liam: *Let me take you out next Friday. Dinner downtown.*

Chapter Five

Tracey

“We need to talk,” I say, standing in Deja’s open doorway. My gaze drifts to the photo sitting on her nightstand. It’s one of our family, taken shortly before we’d been ripped apart. In the picture, Deja’s laughing and leaning her head on Jake’s shoulder while I stand beside my ex-husband, his arm wrapped around me. I wish I could go back to that time, before everything went so wrong.

“About what?” Deja asks, setting her homework to the side and turning around in her desk chair to face me.

It’s a better reaction than the one I’d been expecting. It almost has me hoping the conversation about my upcoming date won’t be a complete disaster. But, the hard set of her jaw has me thinking differently.

“I have a date tomorrow night.” I can’t help but feel conflicted. On the one hand, I know my dating again may possibly be another source of anger for Deja; but on the other hand, I just want to feel desirable again. Jake leaving me really messed up my self-esteem. “If you don’t want me to go, I won’t. But I’ve met a nice man, and he asked me to go to dinner with him.”

A million different emotions cross her face in the span of seconds. I’m not surprised when she settles on anger, her hands clenching into fists.

“How can you go on a date? Dad isn’t going to come back if you start dating other men.”

“Honey.” I will myself to be patient with my daughter. “Your father isn’t going to come back no matter what I say or do. He’s getting married to Britney.”

I stand in her doorway watching what could only be considered a complete train wreck. Tears are rolling down her cheeks faster than she can fall into her bed and bury her face in her pillow. I sit on the edge of her bed and run my hand along her spine.

“I don’t care if you go on your stupid date.” She turns her head to the side to glare at me. “Do what you want. You always do. You stopped caring about our family a long time ago, and that’s why Dad left.”

“Dawn is only a phone call away if you need anything tonight.” I get up from her bed, trying to hide the hurt in my voice. “Or call me, and I’ll be home right away.”

“I’ll be with Dad. I’ll be fine.” Deja scowls at me before turning on her side and facing the wall.

“Well, he should be here soon.” I walk out and close her door, wiping away the tear that dares to roll down my cheek.

Maybe this is a bad idea, I think as I walk into my room and find Dawn sifting through my closet. She tosses different options to the side, a look of concentration on her face as she searches for just the right outfit for my date.

“I don’t know what I’m thinking.” I lean in the doorway and run a hand down my face. “I rearranged wash days for this. And do you know what my grandmother would say if she found out I was going on a date with a white man?”

“You don’t talk to her old ass anyway.” Dawn tosses a green dress at me and crosses her arms. “Now, shut up, put on a good push-up bra, and shimmy into this.”

One eyebrow raises as I run my fingers over the silky material. “I don’t know. I think this date might be a bad idea. Deja isn’t happy about it.”

“Deja isn’t happy about a lot of things,” Dawn says. “What she needs is a mom who loves herself and isn’t afraid of being loved. How else are you going to set a good example for her?”

“How do you always know the right thing to say?” I ask as she heads for the stairs.

“I just do. Have a good time on your date tonight, and I’ll see you later.”

After Dawn leaves, I get ready. I have just parked outside the restaurant when the cold feet set in. This is a horrible idea, and I have no business going out. I’m a mother. Mothers don’t go on dates with men who are most likely not going to be able to deal with the baggage they come with. Plus, I’m part of a complete package, which also includes my daughter. And my girl will always come first until she’s old enough to have a life of her own as a strong, independent woman. Maybe, just maybe, I’m putting the cart before the horse. I need to get my shit together before I consider venturing back into the world of dating.

I fish my phone out of my bag and open the messages app. My heart is racing as my thumbs tap across the screen. Trying to ignore the pain in the back of my throat, I type the message.

Tracey: I think I had some bad food for lunch, and I’m not feeling very well. I think we’re going to have to cancel tonight. I’m sorry.

Liam: Okay.

The world seems to stop around me. I thought he would try to reschedule for a different day. Over the last few days, we’ve spent more time messaging than not, but he doesn’t seem to care I’ve cancelled our date.

Screw it. I dial Dawn’s number. If he doesn’t care enough to reschedule, I may as well go out and have some fun.

Dawn picks up on the third ring, and after a little begging to meet me at a bar down the street, she agrees to be my wingwoman for the night. Why I need a wingwoman, I’m not quite sure, but it has been years since we partied together. Being wives and mothers has certainly put a damper on our social lives over the years. Our careers in education—Dawn as

an elementary school teacher and me in social work—leave little room for us to have a girls' nights out once in a while.

Once the call ends, I walk inside the bar and immediately feel out of place. There are black leather walls studded with chrome. Wood accents and plush red stools make the bar look about twenty years too young for me.

Back in my college days, this would have been a bar I would frequent. But, now I'm in my mid-forties and feeling entirely out of place. Though I want to run home, I force myself to stay. I need to push myself outside my limits. I have gotten too comfortable living inside my little box.

When was the last time I'd done anything other than what was expected of me? When was the last time I let loose and had some fun?

If I'm honest with myself, I can't remember. It was probably well before Deja was born. Those years are likely the last time I'd been truly free, truly myself.

Still, I straighten my spine and hold my head high as I order a drink at the bar before heading to a booth in the corner. I melt into the soft seats, listening to the live band and sipping at my drink. I keep my eyes on the door, waiting for Dawn. After finishing the first glass, my phone buzzes.

Dawn: Poop explosion. Embedded in Hope's hair. I'll be there as soon as I can.

I sigh and order another drink. Dawn will be here as soon as she can, but until then, I can lose myself in the music and the drinks. My phone buzzes again.

Dawn: I'm sorry. She's throwing up now. I don't think I'm going to be able to make it. Rain check?

Tracey: Rain check. Good luck with that. Glad mine is grown up.

I smile and order another drink, finishing it quickly before heading to the bar. A man to my right sends me a flirtatious smile but looks away, clearly not interested in

making the first move. There's a small flood of relief that runs through me at that. I don't know what to do if a man openly shows interest in me these days. With a grin, I raise my hand and look at the bartender. She smiles and makes her way over to me.

"I'd like to pay my tab please," I say, removing my debit card from a small pocket in my dress.

"Hope you had a good night." The bartender smiles as she punches something in one of the registers.

"It was great. Thank you."

A man leans against the bar beside me, his arm brushing mine. My breath catches in my throat when I turn to tell him to go away.

"Dare you to stay and have another drink with me."

Chapter Six

Liam

Aerosmith's *I Don't Want to Miss a Thing* plays in the background as I take in the woman's appearance. She's beautiful. Her thick, cinnamon-colored hair is an alluring contrast to her chestnut-brown skin, skin that looks dewy and smooth under the lights. A shallow crease appears between her eyebrows as she squints at her phone, probably reading an email or a message. We've exchanged pictures a few times over the last several days of talking, but none of them have done her justice. She's far more attractive than I ever could have imagined.

She finishes her drink before getting up and heading to the bar.

I'm quick to stand and walk over to her, leaning beside her. "Dare you to stay and have another drink with me."

It's amazing how things might not seem to be going our way, but then due to a seemingly random series of events, things fall right into place. In my case, about an hour ago, the thumping on the wall between my bedroom and the guest bedroom had nearly had me on the brink of losing my mind. Why, you ask? Because no matter how much I hit the wall with my fist, it still didn't stop my brother, Jason, from continuing to pound into whatever girl he had in there. I could even hear her giggles and moans, and I'd really been wishing I couldn't.

But all terrible and painful things must come to end, even if I myself had to intervene. After getting tired of hearing the sounds of my brother's energetic sex life, I grabbed my coat and took off. It's not like I had an active social life or a large group of friends, so I simply opted to go to Poison Apple. I figured I could always grab a beer and see what's happening from the perspective of a non-paying customer—as

the owner of the bar, I should at least get free alcohol—and if I needed to roll up my sleeves and get some work done, I could do that too.

When I arrived, I bypassed a line of patrons at the door, glancing at the bouncer and nodding before heading inside. The band I hired for the night was playing on stage, getting the crowd up and moving. They're a cover band called Desert Rose that has a very talented group of singers whose repertoire includes some good ol' rock and roll from the 80s and 90s. I grinned, knowing that patrons hot and sweaty from dancing means more alcohol sales. We'd have a good night tonight, but I hadn't shown up intending to work.

Apart from trying to remove myself from my house where lots of bullshit was currently taking place, I needed a drink and a space to relax for the night—somewhere to unwind and pretend my life wasn't an absolute shit show. As I wove my way through the crowd, I stopped dead in my tracks.

I saw the woman, Tracey, who'd stood me up earlier, saying she had an upset stomach. Maybe she isn't interested in me but didn't want to come right out and say so because she didn't want to hurt my feelings. Either way, my feelings were hurt. I had thought she liked me and wanted to get to know me better, to see if things could go further. I'm done with casual dating. I'm looking for something... someone permanent. I want to meet and be with the woman who is meant for me.

A heavy sigh escaped my lips.

Tracey didn't see me, though. She was sitting at a booth alone, watching the band and smiling. I took a seat at the bar and ordered a whiskey, keeping my eyes trained on Tracey the entire time. I'm not a stalker, by any means, so I debated whether to approach her, especially since doing so would mean implicitly calling her out on her fib about having a stomach bug... unless she'd miraculously had a full recovery in the last sixty minutes. But if she'd really wanted us to hang out together, she could have called me. And we could have been here together right now, nixing the restaurant I'd booked.

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. I thought we'd both been enjoying getting to know each other. And to be honest, I was low-key hoping we could have had something more.

Now, standing beside Tracey after daring her to have a drink with me, there's a sliver of hope she'll be game to take me up on my offer.

Her mouth falls open when she recognizes me. Seeing me here would have been unexpected. Although I'd mentioned via text message that I own a bar in the area, I'd never told her which one. Plus, she probably thought I'd stay home after she cancelled our date.

Embarrassment quickly replaces surprise. Tracey's body seems to be frozen in place. She clears her throat and then says, "Well, this is the last place I expected to find you. Are you sure you still want a drink with me after I canceled our date?"

"And miss an opportunity to spend time with you?" I chuckle. "Not likely. I would love to buy you a drink."

Tracey bites her bottom lip, glancing at her phone before nodding. "Alright, one drink."

I look at Piper with a nod. "Bring two of what she's having, please."

Piper smirks but turns to make the drinks and then places them in front of us. I take a sip of the drink, a whiskey smash, and chuckle.

"Whiskey... my kind of woman."

Tracey's eyes are lit with a twinkle of mischief. "Alright, Casanova. Lead the way."

I hold out my hand, waiting as she tucks her phone into her purse before taking my hand. She grabs her drink with the other, following as I lead her through the bar. There's a decent sized crowd, but most of them were on the dance floor,

gyrating to the sound of the song *I'm a Lucky Bastard*, leaving the booth Tracey had previously been sitting in vacant for us.

We sit and soak in the rich tones of Desert Rose's version of *Waiting for a Girl Like You* by Foreigner. With eyes focused on the people dancing, Tracey bobs her head in time with the beat of the music. It gives me the opportunity to admire her without looking creepy.

Tracey wears a dress, which is a shade of red that reminds me of autumn leaves. It's one of those wrap dresses, which makes her cleavage look deliciously plump, and there's a sash that ties around her waist. The sleeves are long and flattering and cuff at her wrists. And of course, I don't miss the fact that the hem of the dress is knee-length at the front and below her calf in the back, which shows off her thick warm-brown legs. It looks like parts of the dress are made from a stretchy material judging from the way it clings to her voluptuous hips, thighs and buttocks. Tracey is alluring and makes the dress look beautiful.

Soon, Desert Rose takes a break and house music is playing. It gives me the opportunity to connect with Tracey.

"Tell me about yourself." I cross my arms on the table and lean against them.

"There's a lot you already know."

Damn, she's right. I'm really rusty with this whole getting-to-know-somebody thing. "Tell me something you haven't told me before."

Tracey traces a finger around the rim of her glass, considering what she hasn't already told me. "Sometimes I dream of burying my ex-husband six feet deep."

I chuckle at the conflicted expression on her face. "So, you hate him then?"

"No. I can't hate him when we have a beautiful daughter together. He gave me the best thing in my life, and for that I could never hate him. But sometimes, I really want to

hate him for what our separation and divorce has done to Deja.”

“That’s understandable. You love your daughter.”

It’s all the prompting she needs. A smile as dazzling as the fireworks illuminating the vast sky at Eleanor Tinsley Park—a place I frequently visit for its Fourth of July displays—lights up her face as she starts talking about Deja and the love her daughter has for photography. And fuck, Tracey has dimples just above the corners of her luscious lips... and I want to dive deep into them and taste them. Her hands move rapidly as she speaks, telling story after story. And I’m here for it, as each story is very entertaining.

“I’m sorry,” she says after a few minutes, laughing as she gives me a playful nudge on my arm. “I’ve been talking about my daughter for who knows how long. Your turn now. Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, there’s not much to tell. I own this bar and several others. I’m as estranged from my family as I can be while still attending birthdays and holidays. Other than that, there’s not much.”

“There has to be something else,” Tracey says, leaning forward and giving me that beautiful smile again. “I’m afraid you won’t keep me entertained long if your life is as simple as you’re implying.”

“Well, there’s not a whole lot to me. I like to think I’m a pretty simple guy.” I’m relieved to see her body perks up, curiosity clearly written all over her face. I clear my throat. “Care for another drink?” I know Tracey had agreed to one drink, but I’m enjoying her company so much, I want to prolong this moment with her. I release a breath when she agrees to a second drink. I gesture for Piper to bring us two more drinks, then set my eyes back on my beautiful companion.

Eyes twinkling, Tracey resumes the same line of questioning with no change in subject—not that I minded.

“There has to be more to you. What do you like to do when you’re not working your fingers to the bone?”

“That’s the thing. I’m always working my fingers to the bone.” I chuckle. “The bars keep me fairly busy.”

“You’re starting to make yourself sound incredibly boring,” Tracey says, a teasing smile on her face. “Tell me something interesting about you—something not a lot of people know.”

I grin, because her boldness is refreshing. “I’ve collected vintage guitars and cameras for years. I’d like to have a collection of cars too, but those take significantly more time and funds to collect.”

“That’s impressive. I wouldn’t have pegged you as the type to collect anything vintage. You look more like a live-in-the-now kind of guy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have pegged you as the kind of woman who would need to tell a little white lie about not feeling well to avoid a date.” Oh fuck, I shouldn’t have said anything about that. But having a mother and ex-fiancée who both cheated on their partners, it’s difficult for me to trust easily. Little white lies lead to bigger lies and a fuck ton of trouble and heartbreak.

“I’m sorry about that,” Tracey says, looking down at the table and tracing the pattern of the grain with her fingertip. “Truth is, I was scared to come out tonight. The only person I’ve ever dated is my ex-husband, whom I met in high school, and I’m not sure what I’m doing.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing either, and I totally understand why you were a bit nervous about going out with me. Things worked out anyway, because I’m here with you.” I watch as the server, Jackson, brings the drinks I ordered. “Tracey, I’ll be back in a minute.” Giving her a smile I hope shows her I’m not upset and that I do accept her apology, I rise from my seat. She gives me an answering smile, which helps to soothe my nerves. I really don’t want to mess this up.

After leaving the washroom, I make my way back to our table only to find that Tracey has left. I scrub my hand over my face, wondering what I'd said to scare her off. Maybe calling her out on her fib was a bad idea after all. Jackson approaches with cloth in hand to clear and clean the table. As I step aside, I catch sight of an ID under the table. I bend and swipe it from off the tiled floor. It's Tracey's. I take mental note of her address and birthday before sliding it into my pocket, certain I'll see her again.

Chapter Seven

Tracey

As the Uber drives me home, I think about Liam, the guilt still eating away at me. I'm not proud of what I've done, but by now he'll realize I'm gone.

I'd stared at Liam's retreating back, my heart hammering in my chest. Truth be told, I hadn't expected to see him after blowing him off. Then, there he was looking even better than he had in his photos. He was good at talking and even better at listening, an easy smile on his face as I talked his ear off about Deja.

Maybe that was why I'd headed for the bar as soon as he was out of sight and paid my tab. I order an Uber as I walked outside, waiting on the curb until it pulled up a moment later. As I settled myself inside the car, the guilt began eating away at me. I eventually brushed it aside, not wanting to think too much.

Dating again is terrifying, especially when I know Liam is the kind of man that I could fall for. Although he was dressed casually enough, it was obvious he's well off. Plus, I couldn't possibly have endeared myself to him with that lie I'd told, which came back to bite me in the ass. If the shoe were on the other foot, that would have totally been a deal breaker for me.

I close my eyes and lean back in the seat, wondering when I would manage to get myself together. Even if I decide to see Liam again, I have a daughter to think about. Deja was upset I was going out in the first place. It would definitely be a sore point if I made a habit of it.

Sighing, I think about how Jake wanted to dip his dick in another woman and fucked up our family, yet he's still

living his best life... free of any major consequences from the changing dynamic between us.

I sigh again as the Uber stops in front of the apartment. It looks like my thoughts conjured up the fucker. Jake, with our daughter Deja, is sitting outside on the front porch. His car is still running in the driveway.

“What are you doing home?” I ask as I hurry up the driveway to my daughter. I shoot Jake a look as I catch sight of the tears in her eyes. “I thought you were going to be at Dad’s all weekend.”

“He doesn’t want me,” she whispers, looking more broken than she’d been the day he left our home for good.

I hand her my keys. “Go inside, honey. I want to talk to your father for a minute, and then you and I are going to eat ice cream until we barf.”

Deja takes the keys and unlocks the door, hurrying inside with tears streaming down her cheeks. The moment the door slams shut, I turn on Jake, ready to tear his head off. My body suddenly feels cold. I am gutted. It pains me to see him hurting Deja, acting as if he doesn’t have a place for her in his new life, as if she’s a burden.

“What are you doing to her?” I ask, venom laced in my voice as my hands clench at my sides. “What the fuck are you doing to your own fucking daughter? Her heart is breaking, and you’re stomping on it! You’re a bastard.”

“Look, Britney thinks it’s best that we spend some time together before the wedding. She says this is the last real weekend we’re going to have together before we start planning the wedding. We need that time alone together.”

What. The. Fuck.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I’m torn between ripping his head off or running over his whore, Britney. The bitch is a spoiled child, and he’s abandoning his daughter for a woman half his age.

“I’m filing for full custody.” My mind is made up. This shit has to stop.

Jake’s eyes harden. Throughout our divorce, I’d promised myself I would never take Deja away from him. They needed each other. He was her father and he deserved to be in her life.

Not anymore. Not if he isn’t willing to fight for her. Not if he’s not going to put his own flesh and blood first.

“The fuck, Tracey!” Glaring at me, my ex-husband bares his teeth. If I didn’t know better, I would think he wants to literally tear me limb from limb. “If you try to take my daughter away from me, you’ll regret it.

I continue, as if I haven’t heard a word he’s said, “I’m filing for full custody, and if you try to stop me, I’ll ruin you. You’ve lost the best thing in our lives because you think that burying your dick in Britney is more important than your child.”

Before he can say anything, I storm up the steps and slam the door behind me. Deja looks at me, the curtains fluttering shut. I sigh and slump against the door, knowing she’d been watching the entire thing.

“How much of that did you hear?” I rub the back of my neck, wondering how much she’s going to hate me now.

“All of it.”

I nodded, another heavy weight settling on my shoulders. “You’re old enough that the court is going to let you make your own decisions. It’s your choice. But I’m not going to stop fighting for you, Deja.”

“How was your date?” she asks, her voice soft as she looks up at me.

“It was fine.” Despite my efforts to keep my romantic life away from Deja’s prying eyes, my response is less than enthusiastic and my daughter knows me well enough to figure out what I haven’t said aloud.

Her responding smile tears my heart in two. I don't want my daughter to be happy that my date hadn't gone well. I want her to be happy that her mother is moving on and starting to rebuild a life for her family.

But, I'm not responsible for the way she feels. I sigh and stand up straighter, not letting her see how her response bothers me.

"Is it okay if I go to Bonnie's tonight?" Deja asks.

"Don't you remember that you're grounded?" I stare at her for a moment before deciding that I could use the night to myself. Wallowing seems like a good way to cope. "Fine, you can go to Bonnie's. I want you home tomorrow evening though, okay?"

Deja nods, a wide smile on her face as a car horn honks in the driveway. I open the door and glance outside, seeing Bonnie and her mother sitting in the car. It's no surprise that Deja had called them before asking my permission. I shoot her a look, before holding the door open wider for her escape.

She and Bonnie have been best friends since kindergarten and have had dozens of sleepovers over the decade of their friendship. I know she's in safe hands. I'll give her mom a call a bit later.

Once Deja is gone, I go to my room and swap my dress for leggings and a tank top. It's only after dropping my phone, debit card, and car keys on my bedside table that I notice my ID is missing.

"Shit." I check the pockets of my dress again. *I could just leave the ID at the bar and get a new one.*

Though I want nothing more than to avoid any further embarrassment, I need my ID. I do what any adult would do. I slip on a different top before ordering another Uber and preparing myself to walk back into the bar with my tail between my legs.

I can only hope Liam will be long gone by the time I get back to the bar. Avoiding him, ditching him, and returning to

the bar on the same night will not look good.

As if the impression I made could get any worse, I think as I climb inside the Uber.

When I walk back into the bar, Liam is slinging drinks while talking to a few of the patrons with a smile on his face. He looks comfortable behind the bar, laughing and serving drinks; it's obviously second nature to him.

Regret floods me, especially as I realize I will likely have to talk to him to get my ID. My humiliation quota for the night is nearly full, but the universe doesn't seem to care about that.

Liam looks up from the register, his gaze traveling around the bar before his eyes land on me. His lips curve downward as he stares at me. After a moment of his gaze freezing me in place, he rounds the bar and walks in my direction. His hand slides into his pocket, pulling out what I suspect is my ID.

"Missing something?" he asks as he stops in front of me. He holds the ID out, waiting for me to take it.

"Thank you." I tuck the plastic into my purse.

"So, why'd you run out on our date like that?" A frown mars his handsome features.

"Honestly?" I ask, shifting my weight, and looking around the room. "I was terrified."

Liam's lips twitch, the frown disappearing as understanding crosses his face. "Well, tell you what, I want to see you again. And if you promise not to run out me again, I'd love to take you out."

I smile, though the embarrassment of ditching him is still making me uneasy. "I promise."

Liam grins, closing the space between us. I tilt my head back to look at him, my heart pounding in my chest. There are

butterflies beating their wings against my stomach, the feeling of that moment before a first kiss returning as if it hasn't been missing from my life for years.

Liam's arms wrap around my waist, my arms circling his neck before he leans down and presses his mouth against mine. His lips move softly, coaxing out a slow kiss that I melt into.

When we part, I'm grinning like a fool, wondering what I've been missing the last few years. That one kiss with Liam has more passion than the last several years of kissing my ex-husband had.

"I'll see you soon," Liam says as I leave the bar and get into another Uber.

As the driver steers the vehicle away from the curb, the sense of danger curdles my stomach once again. I think I'm falling for Liam, and I'm falling fast.

Chapter Eight

Liam

Tracey: *I'm sorry, I can't see you tonight. Deja is in a photography competition, and I don't want to miss it. It's a long time since she's been interested in something other than giving me a headache.*

Me: *No worries. I understand.*

Tracey: *Thank you. I promise I'll make it up to you.*

Me: *You could make it up to me now. Remember that picture you sent me last week? That sexy lace bra and thong? Send me another one in that.*

I groan as the photo—albeit without her face showing—comes through. With a smirk, I stare at the picture as I stroke my erection hard and slow.

Tracey and I have been texting several times every day in lieu of actually physically hanging out with each other. Her daughter didn't take too kindly to her going out with me, so Tracey decided we should keep things low-key and not flaunt our relationship—at least until Deja is in a better frame of mind. I'm not too happy about it because it makes me feel as if Tracey and I are hiding what's happening between us, but I understand. Although I had a privileged life growing up, my childhood was marred with issues that no child should have to deal with, so I can empathize with Deja a whole lot. And besides, Tracey has every right to raise her daughter in the way she sees fit.

Before we'd met in person, our texts to each other were merely the friendly, getting-to-know-each-other kind. But, since then, those mainly platonic messages have seamlessly moved into the NSFW category. Obviously, these latest texts are strictly NSFW. I quickly type another message.

Bzzzt, bzzzt, bzzzt.

The reminder on my phone lets me know it's time to get going. With a scowl, I quickly message Tracey to let her know I've got to go but will talk to her later, and then I tuck the device into my pocket. Getting up, I mentally prepare myself for the worst blue balls ever during brunch with my mother.

When I arrive at the country club, my mother is sitting by the pool at one of the tables. She doesn't look up when I give her the obligatory kiss on both of her surgically-enhanced cheeks. I sit down across from her, her thumbs flying over her phone as she finishes a message. When she looks up, there's a bright smile on her face. That's probably the only thing I've inherited from her—her smile. Other than that, I'm the replica of my father, less the greying hair.

“Liam, good to see you finally. I was starting to think you were ignoring me.”

“I would never ignore you,” I say tightly, looking at the menu. “I've been busy trying to avoid your shenanigans.”

She laughs and waves a dismissive hand. “I'm not up to any shenanigans, son.” Raising her gaze beyond me, she says, “We need to wait a few minutes before ordering. There's another person joining us.””

“Dad?”

“No.” Mother shakes her head, smirking as she looks down at her own menu. I pull my phone out of my pocket and look at the message Tracey sent.

Tracey: No worries. Love talking with you. We can always pick up where we left off when we're both free.

Me: Did I tell you how enticing you look in that pic?

Tracey: Oh really?

“Thanks for waiting.”

My head shoots up from my phone as I glare at my ex-fiancée. She has a white binder in hand that she places in the center of the table before taking the seat beside me. Chloe smiles brightly and takes my glass of water, sipping from it as if we were still a couple and she is still allowed to do shit like that.

“What the fuck is this?” I ask, looking between both women.

“We have to start planning our wedding.”

Hell, no. “We do *not*. We’re not engaged anymore, and we won’t ever be again. I’m seeing someone else, and I really don’t want anything to do with you.” I know I’m not technically seeing anyone else, but I’d sure like to get the chance with Tracey.

Before either of them can respond, I push back from the table and leave. I’m not going to sit there while they try to plan a future I want no part of.

When I get to the parking lot, I sit in my truck for a few minutes, gripping the wheel and trying to convince myself not to go back in there and start yelling. Mom is trying to make sure I’m settled down with a woman in case the cancer comes back. She had said as much one night a couple of months ago after a few too many glasses of wine. She’d been worried that I was lonely, or so she had said.

I’m lonely, but I’m not about to tell my mother that. I’m a grown man, and I can handle my relationships myself, despite what she seems to think.

Liam: *I just got ambushed by my mother and ex-fiancée. Mind if I come over?*

Tracey: *We’ll be home for a couple more hours before we have to leave for Deja’s competition.*

Liam: *I’ll be there as soon as I can.*

Tracey: *74 Julien Terrace*

The engine roars to life before I speed out of the parking lot. The closer I get to her house, the more relaxed I feel. We haven't seen each other since that night in the bar, but merely talking to her has been enough to put my mind at ease on tough days.

When I park in her driveway, Tracey is already waiting on the porch. Her shapely legs look stunning in a pair of ripped denim shorts. My eyes drift higher, looking at the way her shirt hugs her breasts. My erection is back in full force, but that isn't why I'm here.

"Ex-fiancée, huh?" Tracey walks down the porch steps before coming to a stop in front of me. Amusement dances in her oval-shaped eyes as she looks up at me. "Sounds like your family is a little overbearing."

"That's putting it lightly," I say, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her close. She melts in my arms, her own looping around my neck. "They've never really stepped out of my life, no matter how old I get."

"Well, it's good to have family."

"Not when that family is my mother." Leaning in, I placed a soft kiss on her cheek. I couldn't help it; her cheeks are high and delicately curved, altogether too tempting not to touch. "And certainly not Chloe," I continue. "I don't want to be with her." I stave off the need to kiss her again, resolving to stay strong.

"What do you want?"

"I've been wanting to kiss you again since you walked out of my bar." Okay, that resolution was short-lived. I definitely have to yield to the temptation that is Tracey.

I dip my head, kissing her like it has been years since we've seen each other. She presses closer to me, her mouth moving against mine as her fingers knot themselves in my hair.

"Get away from my mom!"

A teenager comes flying out of the house, braids streaming over her shoulders as she charges my way. I step back from Tracey and drop my arms, staring at Deja. She is a near replica of her mother, but if looks could kill, I would already be dead. She clearly has no interest in getting to know me. In fact, I'm sure if I say the wrong thing, she'll come at me swinging.

"Deja, don't be rude." Tracey jams her hands against her hips. "This is Liam, and you are going to apologize to him right now."

It's fair to say that life has been tough for Deja. She's just a teen, and although her mother isn't pleased with her daughter's attitude toward me, I can totally understand how upset Deja must feel knowing her parents have split and are now living their own lives. Tracey will get the brunt of Deja's ire because she's the parent who's living with her. Any man—and I'm keeping my fingers crossed that I'll be the only man—who comes into her mother's life will get the same reception, so I'll not take Deja's behavior personally. I was a grown man in my 20s when my parents' marriage went to shit, and it still fucked me up... even to this day. Deja is due for a break. I hope Tracey won't be too hard on her.

"It's fine," I say with a smile I hope will reassure Tracey that I'm not offended by Deja's attitude toward me, and there's no need for her to be too hard on her daughter.

Even as I pull away from the house, Deja is still glaring at me.

I sigh. It's going to be hard winning Tracey's daughter over, but I'm determined to make her like me. Tracey has made it clear if I want to be in her life, her daughter needs to accept me... and as far as I'm concerned, that's a given. It shouldn't be any other way.

I'll do everything I can to be a part of their lives.

Chapter Nine

Tracey

It has been a week and a half since Deja all but chased Liam out of the yard. In that time, we haven't stopped messaging each other or talking on the phone. If I'm being honest, I'm impressed he wasn't scared away by Deja's antics. A weaker man would have run for the hills.

Still, she wasn't happy when I told her the plan for the night.

"Okay, so, Liam is taking me to dinner, and then we're going to watch a movie. Are you okay staying home alone?"

"I'll be fine." Deja scowls, glaring out the window, avoiding my gaze.

"Deja, how are you feeling about all this? I know it can't be easy."

Deja's bottom lip quivers as she looks at me, her eyes glassy. "I don't know. I just want to go back to the way things were."

I cross the room and pull her into a tight hug. "I promise you're always going to be the most important person in my life. Always."

"Then why are you trying to bring someone else into our lives?" Deja asks, her arms wrapping around my waist as she holds on. "Why do you have to date *him*?"

"He makes me happy. I would really like it if you gave him a chance. If you still don't like him after that, I promise I won't date him."

"I don't know."

"How about I ask Liam if he wants to stay here and watch a movie with us instead? We can make popcorn, and

you can pick the movie.”

A beat passes before Deja responds. “Okay.”

Deja heads to the living room to go pick a movie. I head to the door when I heard someone knocking, confident it’s Liam. Confirming that it really is him, I open the door, offering him an apologetic smile.

“Mind if we stay in tonight? I told Deja we could watch a movie so you two could get to know each other. She’s supposed to be at her friend’s tomorrow night, so we could go out then instead?”

Liam enters the house, toeing off his shoes and grinning. “I don’t mind at all.”

He heads straight for the living room—the open plan living space making the room easy to find—and moments later I can hear them talking about shutter speeds. Deja flies by me and up the stairs, likely to grab her camera. I feel an unexpected release of the tension that has been stored inside me for so long, perhaps ever since our world was turned on its head by my cheating ex. For the first time in a long time, Deja’s eyes had been animated, a genuine smile on her face. Liam offers me a smile as he sits on the floor, crossing his legs. Deja returns in a matter of seconds to sit beside him, camera in hand, their heads bent together. A constant stream of photography terminology I don’t understand flows from their mouths.

Liam looks up and pins me with his magnetic gaze, winking before he goes back to showing Deja more settings. She’s beaming as she lifts the camera and snaps a few pictures of me before showing him.

In that moment, I know I am a goner for this man.

“Deja really likes you,” I say, getting into Liam’s truck the next night.

“I like her. She’s a smart kid.”

“She really is. To be honest, I thought that whole thing would go a lot worse. She’s been so resistant to everything since Jake and I separated.”

“It’s not easy to go through something like that.”

Liam and I talk easily on the drive to the restaurant. He tells me about his childhood over dinner, laughing and telling me stories about his brother as well. By the time dinner is paid for, I know I’m head over heels.

There’s something about Liam, something that makes him completely unlike anyone else I’ve ever met. He’s relaxed but knows who he is, and he doesn’t take life too seriously. There were moments when he would laugh so loud, I worried we were bothering the people around us, but he didn’t seem to care.

Being with him is easy and freeing. He accepts me for who I am and doesn’t question a single thing I tell him. He takes each fact at face value, never reading into anything.

Liam is the kind of man I could be with for a long time... maybe for the rest of my life. And yeah, I know it’s pretty soon to have such strong feelings. And I know I don’t have much experience, since I’ve only ever been with one man. But the thing is, Jake and I were together for over twenty years, and we still didn’t last, didn’t have the happily ever after we’d both hoped for all those years ago. I’m in my mid-forties now, getting closer and closer to fifty. It’s time for me to live life to the fullest. I want to speak my truths, fear no one, be myself, open myself to adventure, and allow myself to fall in love again.

I’d like to think I deserve a second chance at life and love and all the good things in life.

“How about we go back to my place and watch a movie?” Liam says as we get into his truck.

I smirk and settle back in his seat. “Watching a movie is what we’re going to be doing?”

His hand comes to rest on my thigh, his thumb rubbing slow circles as he drives through downtown. “Well, there might be something else that we could do instead.”

I’m not fool enough to think Liam’s idea of *something* is a serving of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream. I’m not surprised to find myself a bit ambivalent about the prospect of sleeping with Liam. Jake is the only person I’ve known in the biblical sense. He knew my body almost as well as I do. He was my first everything, and he was supposed to be my last. But that wasn’t in the cards for us. By the time we’d separated, our sex life was almost non-existent—so much so that I’d purchased a rechargeable boyfriend, much to the delight of my best friend, Dawn. I’d breathed a sigh of relief when the discreetly packaged device had arrived on my doorstep. Since then, my mechanical coochie whisperer, as Dawn had labeled it, has been the only thing pleasuring me for the last several months.

Still, I’m nervous, even while feeling hypersensitive to Liam’s strong, skillful fingers.

I laugh, closing my eyes and enjoying the feeling of his hand on my body. Only a few minutes later, he’s leading the way up to his house, my hand in his. I laugh as he opens the door, steering us into the living room. As I sit on his leather couch, he puts on a movie I know neither of us will be watching.

The movie starts playing as I nestle into Liam’s side. His hand runs up and down my thigh as my skirt rides up. His touch leaves a trail of fire along my leg, igniting my core. My heart is beating faster as I move to straddle his lap, and his lips find mine. He moans as his tongue glides along my lips, coaxing my mouth open and dipping inside. His hands push my skirt up to my waist as I grind against him.

Liam moans deep in his throat, his fingers slipping beneath my thong and rubbing against me, teasing me until I’m on the edge of release. The way he looks at me makes my heart leap. He makes me feel beautiful and sexy and delicate... and oh so very good. I can’t help but think about the fact that it

took my ex-husband and me six months of dating before we slept together the first time (and we'd actually known each other for most of our lives even then). I haven't even known Liam six weeks, and I want to have sex with him.

"Bed. Condom. Now," I say between pants as he pulls the top of my dress down and sucks a nipple into his mouth.

Chuckling, he stands up in one fluid motion, lifting me bridal style—as if I'm as slender as a Victoria's Secret model—and carries me down the hall and up the stairs to his room. He tosses me onto the bed, hastily stripping off his clothes.

He's beautiful. His broad shoulders. His trim waist. That goddamn V-cut. And his big dick makes my mouth water. Liam's hands are rough against my skin, the callouses on his palms creating a delicious friction as he runs them up and down my body before pulling my dress off.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he groans, reaching into the nightstand and pulling out a condom. He slips the condom on with one hand, while the fingers of his other hand work me toward my release.

After the first orgasm, he is quick to nestle between my thighs, his erection prodding at my entrance. I open my thighs wider, and he enters me, our groans filling the room as he begins to move.

I suck on his neck, nipping and kissing as he brings us closer to release. His big hands work my breasts until I'm begging him to make me come. Liam picks up speed, grabbing one of my legs and holding it open wider, changing the angle.

After several more thrusts, I'm clenching around him, my release coming hard and fast. He groans, finding his own release before collapsing beside me. His strong arms wrap around me, pulling me close.

"We're going to have to do that again." I nestle closer to him and close my eyes, a sheen of sweat coating my skin.

Liam laughs and kisses my shoulder. "We can definitely do that again."

Chapter Ten

Liam

The moment the door slams open, I'm on my feet and grabbing the baseball bat from beneath my bed. As I start toward the living room, my mother flies into the bedroom with Chloe hot on her heels. Tracey gasps, and I can hear her scrambling behind me to cover herself as I move to block her from sight.

Mom had always been one for dramatics and ignoring boundaries, but this is going too far. Possibility of cancer or not, this invasion of privacy is inexcusable.

"What are you doing here?" My voice is hard. If it were an intruder, I'd definitely tighten my grip and deliver some incapacitating blows all over their body. But since my mother and ex-fiancée obviously are no physical threat, I drop the bat on the floor. "Get out of my house."

After making sure Tracey is safely tucked under the covers, I quickly swipe my pants from off the floor where I'd tossed them last night, and put them on.

Without even the courtesy of leaving my bedroom, or at the very least waiting until I'd zipped up my pants, my mother says, "That's no way to talk to your mother." She glances past me, leaning to the side to look at Tracey. "I see you've been sleeping with a tramp."

Chloe crosses her arms, her eyes glued to Tracey. "You're lucky I'm willing to forgive you for this—this indiscretion. Sleeping with this whore is beneath you." Her lips curl in disgust.

"Wow," Tracey says, her voice hard. "Well, that's a great way to meet your mother and I'm guessing your ex."

“Shut up,” Chloe says, her eyes narrowing. “You have no business being here.”

I see red. I don’t care that I’m half naked as I march toward them, inches between my mother and myself. “Get the fuck out of my house before I call the police and have you arrested for trespassing.”

My mother laughs. “Please, Liam. You wouldn’t do that to your own mother.”

“I’m sure there’s breaking and entering that could be added to the charges as well,” I say, crossing my arms. “Get the fuck out now. I’m not warning either of you again.”

“No,” Tracey says, her voice rising. Whipping my head around to face her with growing dismay, I eye her as she gets out of bed and pulls on her dress. She grabs her heels from where I’d tossed them last night and slips them on. “I’ll go. I’m not going to stand here and listen to them call me names. I’ll see you later.”

Before I can protest, she runs out of the room and down the stairs. Chloe looks smug as she moves between me and my mother.

I step around Chloe and run down the stairs. Grasping Tracey’s arm, I stop her before she can get to the door. She turns around, her eyes glassy but her jaw set in place.

“I get that you have some other things going on in your life.” Her tone is even, but her eyes... those expressive eyes of hers are an ocean of conflicting emotions. She’s angry, hurt, scared. “I understand a messy life.” Tracey laughs bitterly. “It’s no secret that my life is fucked up at the moment. But I’m not going to stay in that room and listen to them call me out of my name. I have higher standards than that.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, running a hand through my hair. “I’ll deal with them, I promise. It won’t happen again.”

Tracey shakes her head. “Liam, I like you. I really do. But this is just too much for me to handle. Things will only get worse the longer we stay together.”

I don't want to think that we've ended before we've even gotten the chance to begin. "Let me deal with them, and then I'll call you. And we can talk about all the messy details, okay? I'm not going to let them treat you like that, and I certainly don't want you walking out of my life."

Tracey nods, shifting her belongings in her arms. "I'll talk to you later."

I wait until she's gone, taking a deep breath before marching back up the stairs. Anger is boiling my blood as I step back into my bedroom to find Mom and Chloe looking smug.

"Why are you sleeping around when we're engaged?" Chloe asks, having the balls to sound hurt as her hand reaches for my chest.

I take a step back. "Don't touch me. We aren't engaged. We haven't been for a long time now. Get over it, Chloe, and get the hell out of my house."

"I don't see why you're dating the help," Mom says, her eyes narrowing as her lip curls. "Really, Liam? A black woman?"

"Nope. We're done here. You and I, Mother, are completely fucking done."

As much as I love my mother, she doesn't get to say things like that. She doesn't get to treat people the way she is treating Tracey. Enough is enough.

I take the keys from her hand, sliding my key off the ring. "Get out of my house and don't come back. I'm done with both of you. That woman is a better woman than both of you combined."

"You can't do this to your family," Mom says, shaking her head. "You are going to ruin us because of one woman who means nothing to you? You are willing to walk away from our family because of... of that woman?"

“Chloe means nothing to me, Mom,” I say, not missing the hurt look on Chloe’s face. “Tracey? She means a lot to me. I can see myself being with her for a long time. In fact, if things continue to go well with us, I won’t waste any time. I’ll marry her right away... if she agrees, of course.”

God, I hope so.

Tracey and I are still new, and this fucked up situation isn’t going to endear me to her. But I’m nothing if not optimistic. Of course, anything can happen. We might not even be together over the long haul, but here’s the thing. I’d known Chloe for most of my life, was engaged to her for years. We were compatible—on paper, at least—and we still broke up.

I’m done with wasting my time when it comes to matters of my own damn heart. Tracey has been the only woman who checks all my boxes: she’s beautiful, she has a kind heart and cares for others, she’s obviously a great mother, and she gets me. Not to mention, since blowing me off when we met each other the first time, she’s been completely up front with me and tells me exactly how she feels. In the world in which I was born and raised, people have their home face, their office face, their social face—so many damn faces. It’s hard to know what’s real, because they all mask their true selves. I guess that’s what we should expect in polite society, at least the society I was raised in.

But with Tracey? She’s real.

Mom scoffs and waves that dismissive hand of hers as if such a thing is impossible. “That’s not going to happen, and we both know it. You are going to marry Chloe and continue to uphold this family’s values.”

“And what values would those be?” Fighting to ignore the burning in my throat, I press on. “The ones from the days where nobody who isn’t white is allowed to have a good life? The one where I can’t fall in love with a Black woman?”

“Liam, you’re being ridiculous. Stop this tirade right now and apologize to Chloe.”

Chloe's eyes water as she looks at me. "Liam, please just come back to me, and we can fix this. I'm willing to forgive everything."

"See, Liam? Chloe is willing to get back together with you even after all the pain you've caused her." My mother smiles at Chloe. "Son, there is still a chance for you to have the kind of future I have always wanted for you."

"The pair of you are unbelievable. Get out of my house. We are done. Chloe, I'm never getting back together with you. And Mom, if you continue to disrespect me or Tracey, I'll show you what walking away from our family really is."

As both of them start to complain, I grab my phone and tap in 9-1-1. My mother stares at me for a moment before huffing and grabbing Chloe's arm. They storm out, the front door slamming behind them. I breathe a sigh of relief before going to lock the door.

Once I'm sure the doors are locked, I call Tracey. It goes straight to voicemail. I sigh and dial her number again. She picks up on the second ring.

"Liam, I don't have time for this."

"I know. I'm sorry they did that, Tracey. I took my key back from my mother and kicked them out. I'll be changing the locks, just in case she has an extra key. Trust me, I don't believe anything that either of them said. You shouldn't either. You're amazing."

"I know I am," Tracey says, her tone hard. "Which is why I don't deserve that."

"I'm done with them. I told them as much. No more."

"I need time to think." Tracey sighs, the anger seeming to drift out of her, carried away on the blowing wind I can hear in the background. "Liam, this isn't the kind of life I want for my daughter, and I won't force her to listen to that shit."

Even though it kills me, I understand. If I were in her position, I wouldn't want to be anywhere near my mother or

Chloe. I've tried to avoid them as much as possible. Tracey's right to keep Deja away from my family. They'd be cruel to her, even though she's only a teenager.

"I know." Lord, did I know. I would make the same decision if I were her. I would protect my daughter at all costs, even if it meant walking away from me. "I know this isn't what you want. I'm not going to let her treat you like that, and I hope you know that."

"I know, Liam. I just need time to think."

"I know," I say again, my heartbeat speeding up. The relationship has barely even started and it feels as if it is slipping through my fingers.

"Bye, Liam."

"Bye, Tracey."

Fuck.

Chapter Eleven

Tracey

It has taken me a week to process what happened at Liam's. My first instinct was to give his mother and that evil so-and-so, Chloe, a piece of my mind, but my mom had raised me better. That doesn't mean I'll tolerate them disrespecting me or my daughter. They are a pair who clearly deserve each other, and I want nothing to do with either of them.

I'm grateful Liam has left me alone, not pushing for a decision. He's giving me time to grapple with the implications of being with a man who comes with baggage I don't think I want to handle. At all.

The respect he's showing me with this just makes me fall harder for him, though... as if that were even possible.

I grab my phone, the hesitation I've felt all week as I hovered my finger over his name finally gone. A small smile crosses my face as I open up our messages.

Tracey: Your mother is horrible, and your ex-fiancée is even worse.

Liam: Tell me something I don't know. Does this mean you changed your mind about breaking up with me?

Tracey: This means I'm willing to try again, but I'm not going to stick around if your mother treats me like shit (excuse my French). That's a hard no for me. I don't deserve that and neither does Deja. I won't put her in that kind of world.

Liam: My mother is as far out of my life as she can be without disowning my entire family.

"Mom, are you okay?" Deja asks as she sits beside me on the couch. "You've looked like you were sad all week."

Looking up from my phone, I smile at my daughter. "I've just had some things going on, nothing to worry about."

Deja nods and bites her lip. “You think Liam would come over and help me with my portfolio? My photography teacher says I need to start building one for university applications next year.”

“I’m sure he would love to help. Why don’t you go get your camera, and I’ll invite him over?”

Deja takes off up the stairs as I send Liam a message. Forty-five minutes later he’s in the backyard with Deja, helping her take pictures of the flora. I stand in the doorway watching them talk as if they’re the best of friends.

Long after Liam had left that night, Deja is still talking about all the things he had shown her. After she disappears into her room to edit the photos, I send him a message.

Tracey: *Deja had a great time with you today. Thank you.*

Liam: *I had a great time too. She’s so smart and eager to learn. I figure before long, she’ll have her photos featured all over magazines and billboards.*

Tracey: *You’re amazing.*

Liam: *And you’re a MILF.*

Tracey: *Are you flirting with me?*

Liam: *Absolutely. I know things are a little weird now, but I hear make-up sex is great.*

Tracey: *Oh, really?*

Liam: *Oh, yeah. The things I would do to you would have you forgetting anything ever happened between us.*

Tracey: *Like what?*

Liam: *Like licking your clit until you’re grinding against my face and begging me to get inside you. Fucking you from behind and playing with those nipples until you’re coming all over my cock.*

Tracey: *Fuck. That sounds like a pretty good idea right about now.*

Liam: *Come over.*

Tracey: *I can't. Not tonight.*

Liam: *I know you can't. You've got to be with Deja, and I totally respect and understand that. I was just thinking out loud. LOL. So, here's the thing; when you go to bed tonight, you better be thinking about what I want to do to you while you play with yourself. I want a video.*

With a grin, I get up from the couch and run to my room, eager to do as he asked.

Chapter Twelve

Liam

The fire in the pit is burning low as Tracey and I sit staring at the flames. The blanket is wrapped snugly around us. Deja is at her dad's, giving us the time alone we've been lacking in the last couple of weeks.

My hand drifts up and down her silky, smooth arm as she nestles into my side. The breeze is cool around us, but the heat from the fire makes sitting outside comfortable. The remains of dinner are sitting on a small table, tumblers of wine nearing empty.

Dates with Tracey are simple. There's no going out or making a show about spending time together. She understands I have work to do, and I understand she has a child to raise. It makes the moments when we are able to get together that much more meaningful.

"Why do you let your mom control your life the way she does?" Tracey asks, tilting her head back to look up at me.

I sigh, knowing there's no way of avoiding this conversation, even though I'd hoped to. There's no easy way to talk about my family's past, even if I wish there were.

"To understand everything, I have to take you back to when I was a kid. We had a big house that was mostly empty. My parents are from old money, and with that comes events and social functions that come before raising their own child. When they were home, the house was not a happy place."

Tracey nods, a look of understanding on her face. "That doesn't sound like the kind of place a child should be raised."

"It's not," I say, nodding and staring into the distance as I lose myself to the memories. "I was ten when the first cancer scare came. It turned out to be nothing—just a couple cysts—

but it still caused a change in my mother. She became wilder and even less affectionate. If I wanted her attention, I had to do everything she wanted. Life became about pleasing her, and my father only noticed me in the few seconds between coming home and going to bed.”

“My dad was the same way for a long time,” Tracey says.

“It’s not an easy way to live. When I was twenty-one, just after graduating from university, I found out my mother was cheating on my father. She tried to swear me to secrecy, but after a few weeks, I felt too guilty to hide it from my dad. Before I could tell him what was happening, she came home pregnant. Dad found out that I had known about the cheating and was angry with me. So, I did what any young adult angry at the world would do.”

“You left home?” she asks, her eyes warm as she stares at me and shifts into a more comfortable position.

Nodding my head, I say, “I left home. I packed my shit and went overseas, taking a few months to backpack through Europe before settling down in Germany for a time and working as a bartender. It was what inspired me to open my own bar. I thought I would move to Spain, though—better tourist seasons so more possibility to make money.”

“Why didn’t you stay there then? Why did you come back?”

A lump lodges in my throat as my heart races. That time in my life is one that I prefer not to think about if I can avoid it. There are a lot of things I would change if I could, but there’s no going back in time. I was young and stupid, anger fueling most of my actions. I hadn’t supported my dad through his pain, even though he was angry with me.

“I should have been there for my father, but I wasn’t. The guilt was starting to eat me alive. I was already considering returning after hearing that the baby had been born. My dad was a saint for taking in a child that wasn’t his.

Of course, it wasn't completely altruistic; it was to protect their image as a united family, as well."

"Doesn't mean it wasn't painful for him," Tracey says, leaning forward to grab her tumbler. She tilts her head back, draining the last of the wine. I just stare at her for a moment, wondering how I got so lucky as to find her.

"It was painful for him. Some days, I think it still is. He loves Jason, but that doesn't mean it's easy to have a reminder of the worst time of your life."

"So if the baby wasn't enough to bring you back, why did you come back?"

"Mom was diagnosed with cancer a couple of years later. The lumps she found in her breasts weren't just cysts this time. She had cancer, and it was spreading fast. I got on a plane the same day I got the call and came back home."

"You feel guilty for not being there when she was diagnosed."

"I didn't even know she had found lumps. I was too angry to keep in contact with them."

Tracey puts her empty tumbler down and nestles back into my side, her head on my shoulder. Her eyes are fixed on the fire, her bottom lip pulled into her mouth. I would give anything to know what is running through her mind in this moment.

"So, now that you're older, you're overcompensating by allowing her to try and dictate the way you live?"

My cheeks flame. "I never thought of it that way, but now that you've said it, I guess that's exactly what I'm doing." I huff out a breath. "The cancer came back a second time ten years ago. That was what really formed the bond between me and Jason. We were there for each other when nobody else was, so we started making up for lost time."

"How is she now?"

Oh, Tracey.

You're just...

If I hadn't already fallen in love with her, I'm certain I would have fallen in that moment. My mother has been unreasonably cruel to her, but there is still enough empathy in Tracey's heart to ask how she is.

"She's in remission, but there's still always the worry that the cancer will come back for a third time."

Tracey nods, her fingers drifting up and down my thigh beneath the blanket. "There's going to be a time when you have to stop allowing her so much control over your life just because you feel guilty over what happened nearly twenty years ago."

"I know," I say before pressing my lips to her temple. "You're a good woman."

"I'm good to a point," she says, looking at me. "I understand where you're coming from, Liam. I do. But I'm too old to play these kind of games with your mother. I'm certainly not about to bring Deja around her if that's the way she's going to behave."

"I'm not going to let her do that to you again, Tracey. She doesn't get to do that to the woman I love."

Tracey's hand pauses on my thigh as she looks at me, her eyes wide. "You love me?"

"I do."

I can feel my heart hammering in my chest as she falls silent. This is not the response I hoped for... at least, not until the smile spreads across her face.

"I love you too."

I laugh and kiss her temple again before getting up and gathering the dishes from our meal. "What do you say we let the fire die down and head inside for the rest of the night?"

Tracey raises an eyebrow as she gets up and grabs what is left, a knowing smile on her lips. "Oh yeah? What were you

thinking we would do?”

“Why don’t we go to your room and I can show you?”

“Race you there?”

Before I can respond, she is clutching the dishes tight and running toward the house. I laugh and follow her, the forks rattling against the plates in my hands. For the first time in a long time, I feel as if the weight of the world isn’t settled on my shoulders.

Chapter Thirteen

Tracey

Two weeks have passed since Liam and I admitted we love each other. In that time, we've spent nearly every free moment together. Most afternoons, before he goes to work, he comes over and helps Deja with her photography portfolio. The three of us have spent the last two weekends driving to neighboring towns so Deja can take more pictures.

Each day, I fall for him a little more.

Deja has opened up more to him each day that he comes over too. They spend hours bent over her laptop, looking at pictures and working through edits together, while I watch from the couch.

Now, he's sitting in a chair outside the dressing rooms in one of the local boutiques while Deja and I look for dresses for Jake's wedding.

In the beginning, I didn't want to go. I'm fine with Deja going, but I had wanted to stay home and wallow in whatever horrible feelings might come my way. Even though Jake and I are no longer together, it doesn't mean I don't have any feelings about what used to be and what could have been if we'd stuck it out for the long haul. It was Liam who said Deja would need me to be there with her at her father's wedding.

The closer the day of the nuptials gets, the more truth I see in that statement. Her father getting remarried is taking its toll on her. She's quiet and withdrawn any time it comes up in conversation. More often than not, if Jake says something when he picks her up or drops her off, Deja either clams up or quickly excuses herself and goes to her room.

My daughter needs me to be there for her, and I'm not going to let her down.

“You look beautiful,” Liam says as I come out in a blue dress that falls just below my knees.

“I think the neckline is too low to wear to my ex-husband’s wedding. I don’t want to look like I’m trying to get him back,” I say quietly, keeping my voice low so Deja doesn’t hear me.

“Good point,” Liam says, leaning back in the chair. “What about that yellow one?”

“I looked like a grandmother.”

He laughs and shakes his head, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Nothing you wear could ever make you look like a grandmother.”

“Gross,” Deja says as she walks out of her dressing room to stand in front of the floor-length mirror. “You guys are disgusting.”

I laugh and stand behind her, moving her braids to rest over one shoulder. Our eyes connect in the mirror, and I can see the panic on her face. It’s the same panic that has been making an appearance any time the wedding is mentioned.

“Do I have to go?” she whispers, her eyes wide and glassy.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” I pull the zipper up the rest of the way. “But you might regret not going.”

“I don’t have to go if I don’t want to though?”

“No. It’s your choice. I know your dad wants you there, but it’s going to be hard. You’ve been through a lot in the last few months. If you want to go, I’ll be with you the entire time. If you don’t want to go, we can stay at home and pig out on ice cream.”

Deja nods, taking a deep breath as she looks at her dress in the mirror. The dress is lavender with a lace overlay. She runs her hands down the dress, smoothing it out.

My heart swells with pride as Deja swallows hard and nods.

“I’ll go to the wedding, but only because you’re going to be there.”

I smile, wrapping my arms around her. She stiffens for a moment before relaxing into the hug. For just a moment, I can see the scared little girl she tries to keep hidden deep within herself. It breaks my heart to know she’s struggling, but all I can do is be there for her.

“I think I like this one,” Deja says.

“Well then,” I step back and let her go. “Go get changed and we’ll get you that one. I have one more dress to try on before we can get out of here.”

Deja nods and disappears back into the dressing room. I look over my shoulder at Liam, seeing the smile still on his face. Jake would have been irritated sitting outside a dressing room for so long, but Liam is completely unbothered. He looks like there’s nowhere else in the world he’d rather be.

I grin back at him before disappearing into my own dressing room and changing into a silky black dress with a floral design. It hugs my curves in the right places, but the neckline is draped. It looks effortless, as if I’m interested in looking good but in no way trying to win back my ex-husband.

When I step out of the dressing room, Liam whistles. I feel light-headed and free as he motions for me to spin in a slow circle. I do, covering my face in mock embarrassment when Deja comes out of her own dressing room and imitates Liam’s whistle.

“Damn, Mom, you look good.”

“Thank you.” I stand in place and look at the dress in the mirror. “I think this is the winner.”

As I change, I can hear Liam and Deja talking. When she asks him if he’s coming to the wedding, he doesn’t hesitate before saying yes. It’s hard to believe he’s doing that for me,

but I'm glad he'll be there as my plus one. It will make Jake's wedding that much easier to bear. I'm not anticipating an easy day.

"How about we go home and watch a movie?" I ask, handing the discarded dresses to the dressing room attendant.

"Can I pick?" Deja asks, leading the way to the registers.

"I'm not watching anything with singing or dancing," Liam says, making a face. "The last musical you made me watch was awful!"

"It was a classic!" Deja says, crossing her arms and pretending to glare at him. "Just for that, I'm picking another musical."

I laugh, until I see Liam take out his card to pay for the dresses. I pin him with a stare, and he raises his hands in mock surrender. I'm glad he didn't try to fight me on this. The thought of Liam buying anything remotely linked to Jake and the life I had with him rubs me the wrong way.

I pay for the dresses myself and follow the two of them as they bicker about musicals the entire way to the car.

When Liam and I started dating, I would have never imagined he would fit so seamlessly into our lives, yet here he is. The pieces have fallen into place as if he were meant to be with us.

Chapter Fourteen

Liam

“You know Mom is planning a birthday dinner for Dad this weekend, right?” Jason asks, grabbing another beer as halftime begins on the TV.

“I know. Dad called me this morning. He told me I should bring Tracey and Deja.”

Jason tosses a beer to me before sitting down on the other end of the couch. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I mean, after the last time when Mom made such a terrible impression on her, Tracey didn’t talk to you for a week.”

“I’m not sure what’s a good idea at this point,” I say, cracking open the can and taking a long, satisfying sip. “I want Dad to meet them. I think he would really like Tracey. And I’m not going to stop being with her just because Mom acts like a monster... which is also not going to change.”

Tracey and I have told each other how we feel, but everything is still fresh and new. I don’t want to risk messing anything up between us. I don’t want to hurt her or Deja, so that means *trying* to keep Mom under control.

“I’m worried about Mom getting sick again, and I know I allow her to get away with shit and take things too far because of that. Drawing boundaries is hard for me when she could end up back in the hospital again in the blink of an eye.”

My brother chuckles. “I know. She isn’t focusing on my love life right now, but when she does, I’m going to be running for the hills and hiding.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do about this entire mess. I don’t want to lose Tracey, but I don’t want to cut Mom off completely.”

Jason nods, staring at the TV. “You know, you’re going to have to go over there and talk to them about it. Mom won’t listen, but Dad will be able to keep her on a short leash so she doesn’t scare Tracey off.”

I consider it for a few minutes. As much as I don’t want to go see my mother, Jason is right. The only way to get her to behave—especially at a small family dinner—will be to get Dad on my side. He will hopefully keep my mother from acting like a complete animal.

“Well, I guess I know what I’m doing with the rest of my afternoon.”

It has been nearly five years since I’ve set foot on the family estate. Five years since I have walked through the door of a house that looks like it could double as a castle. Pulling up to the front door now brings back memories of how lonely I felt when I was growing up here.

“What are you doing here?” Dad asks as he stomps his cigarette beneath the toe of his shoe before picking it up and tossing it into a flowerpot.

“I need to talk to you and Mom about the birthday dinner this weekend.”

Dad looks at me for a moment, a frown crossing his face before he opens the door and leads the way inside. “I’m happy you’re here, even if it is to stir up more trouble with your mother.”

I follow him inside, walking through the winding hallways until we find my mother in her library. She puts her book to the side when we walk in, one leg crossing over the other at the knee.

“Yes?” she asks primly, folding her hands in her lap.

“I’m bringing Tracey and Deja to Dad’s birthday dinner. After the stunt you pulled a couple of weeks ago, I’m lucky she’s even still with me.”

“What stunt?” Dad asks, looking between me and Mom.

“She called my girlfriend a whore.”

“Chloe said whore. I said tramp.”

“Either way! You’re being judgmental and grossly disrespectful without even getting to know her. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“You can’t honestly be dating that black woman. Jesus, Liam. I thought I raised you better than that.” She rises to her feet and crosses the room.

Dad’s mouth drops open. “Elaine! This ends right now. I will not have you scaring away our son because you insist on being both racist and elitist.”

I hide the smirk that threatens to appear. “If you continue to disrespect Tracey, I’ll stop speaking to you. I will remove myself so far from your lives that you won’t even remember you I ever existed.”

Dad looks at me and nods. “You have my word. Your mother will be on her best behavior.”

“Thank you,” I say before spinning on my heel and leaving the house that is the epitome of a hellhole.

Chapter Fifteen

Tracey

A birthday dinner—a small, intimate dinner—for Liam’s dad didn’t seem like a big deal. Not at first. I had agreed, only wavering when I thought of his mother. She was going to be there, but he had promised she would be on her best behavior. Although, I was pretty sure his mother’s best behavior might put Genghis Khan to shame.

For days after Liam had invited Deja and me to the dinner, I’d gone back and forth, considering whether bringing Deja was a good idea. I want her to know she’s still the most important person in my life, even if I’m in a new relationship. Knowing she’s important means she needs to be present in nearly every aspect of my life, which is the part I’m struggling with. Getting her involved where Liam’s mom is concerned could be disastrous.

Each time I’ve brought up my concerns, he has promised he will protect Deja. With the knowledge that he loves her almost as fiercely as I do, some of my fear has lessened.

Still, I’m an adult and can handle myself. Deja is young, and I do not need a rich white woman with an attitude problem leaving scars on my daughter’s heart.

“What’s his family like?” Deja asks as she swipes on lip gloss in front of my bedroom mirror. “Do you think they’ll like me?”

“Of course they will,” I say, smiling as I smooth the wrinkles from my dress. My stomach is twisting and turning in knots, worrying about what these people could say or do. I’ll not let them hurt Deja, even if it means losing Liam.

“Is he going to be here soon?”

“Very soon.”

Sure enough, no sooner had I answered her then I could hear a truck pulling into the driveway. As we walk downstairs, my heart is beating a mile a minute, and my blood is racing through my veins. I hope Liam’s father and brother are nothing like his mother. I won’t be able to stand being in the same room with them if they are.

“You both look beautiful,” Liam says as we meet him on the porch. He pulls me in for a quick kiss before grinning at Deja. “I hope you’re ready for some good food.”

“Yes. Mom’s cooking is kind of sad,” Deja says before taking off for the truck. My cheeks are on fire as I laugh and stare after her.

“I guess I’ve been called out.”

“Well, what do you say we go get this over with?” Liam loops his arm around my waist, leading me to the truck.

“You think it’ll be that bad?”

“No. I just think any evening spent with my family is a shit show.”

I laugh and press a kiss to his cheek before getting in the truck. Liam hums along with the radio as he drives through the city, leaving the suburbs behind and heading straight into the lap of luxury.

When we enter the restaurant, two men who look like Liam are sitting at a table. Deja takes my hand, clasping it tightly, as Liam leads us through the restaurant.

“Tracey, Deja, this is my dad, Stephen, my mom, Elaine, and my brother, Jason. Everybody, this is Tracey and Deja.”

We exchange greetings, but I do not miss the flash of a sour expression on his mother’s face before she plasters on a fake smile and greets us as if her life depends on it. There are several empty chairs around the table, as if more people are

expected. I hesitate beside Liam, noticing the way his shoulders tense as he takes in the sight.

“Over here,” Liam says, turning to me with a smile and taking my hand.

Liam pulls out the chair beside his father and waits as I sit down before tucking the chair back in. He helps Deja into the seat beside me before sitting down on the other side of Deja, effectively blocking her from his mother. Though I’m nervous, I appreciate he’s already protecting her the best he can under the circumstances.

Deja looks at me, her eyes wide, before she turns and stares at the chandeliers and candles. Waiters roam around the restaurant, dressed in white shirts with black pants and vests. It’s nicer than anywhere we’ve ever been, and I feel completely out of place.

Stephen and Jason start talking about the businesses they run while Liam ignores his mother’s attempts to talk to him. Instead, he talks to Deja about photography while I feel the walls of the room closing in around me.

Just as dinner is being served, a couple of more people appear, sitting down at the table beside Jason and introducing themselves as old family friends. I fall into conversation with the rest of the table, but the feeling of being an outsider still doesn’t fade. I’m reminded of it with each bite of steak I take, wondering when the magic spell will break, transporting me back to reality.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I say, pushing back from the table when the panic rises too high to continue ignoring.

I weave through the tables, feeling sick to my stomach, as I head for the bathroom. Standing over the sink, I look at myself in the mirror. My chest is heaving as I try to calm down. Nothing bad has happened yet. Nothing bad is going to happen. Liam has promised we’re okay here.

“Well, if it isn’t the little whore that’s ruining my son’s engagement,” Elaine says as she walks into the bathroom, a

smirk on her face. “You would think you would know better than to show your face here, but then again, what can really be expected of a woman like you?”

I stand straighter and cross my arms as I turn to face her. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“I will not see my son with a black woman, no matter what he says. It’s unseemly. He needs to be with a woman like Chloe, who understands what his life is like. You’re nothing but trouble with excessive amounts of baggage, and all you will do is hold him back.”

I want to scream and storm out but that will only prove her point. Instead, I put on a saccharine smile and step closer to her. She blinks, the smile never leaving her face.

“You listen to me, I will not be judged as lesser than because of the color of my skin. Not by you. Not by anyone. I love your son, and he is a grown man. He can make his own choices, and he has chosen me and my daughter. It is no business of yours.”

“Liam hasn’t woken up and realized that dating the help is frowned upon.”

I scoff and shake my head. “You know, I feel sorry for you. You’ve lived your entire life being racist, and it’s going to cost you everything you love, assuming your shriveled little heart is even capable of love.”

“What are you going to do?” she says, rolling her eyes. “Tell Liam what I said? How childish.”

I don’t bother to respond, instead whipping out my phone from my clutch purse and walking back out into the restaurant and smiling at Deja. “I don’t feel so good, honey. How about we get an Uber home and go watch some movies?”

Deja’s eyebrows furrow, but she doesn’t say anything as she stands up. Liam looks at me, a question in his eyes. I shake my head and take my daughter’s hand, leading her away from these people. Vaguely, I hear the dragging of a chair, probably Liam pushing his back and trying to make his way over to us.

“Are you okay, Mom?” Deja asks, dropping my hand to loop her arm around my waist and press herself against my side.

“I will be soon. I just don’t feel well.”

“Tracey, wait!” Liam’s voice carries through the restaurant as Deja and I leave.

Liam catches up with us just as Deja gets into the Uber. I pause, closing the door and turning to face him with my arms crossed over my chest. I harden myself against whatever means he might use to try to convince me to stay, reminding myself I won’t put up with a woman like that... not even for him.

“What happened in there?” His eyes search my face.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Tracey, it matters to me. Please tell me.”

I sigh and shake my head, glancing back at my daughter. “I told you I would protect her above all else. As long as your mother is in your life, I won’t be in it. This isn’t an ultimatum either. She’s your mother and you need her.”

“Then what is this?” he asks, sounding as broken as I feel.

Tears spring to my eyes, blurring my vision. I can feel a lump rising in my throat as I reach up to cup his face. “This is goodbye.”

“Tracey, please don’t do this.” His eyes plead with me.

Everything in me wants to cave, to fall into his arms and overlook the fact that his mother is a horrible person. I won’t ask him to choose between us. I can’t. Instead, I’ll do the only thing I can do—end the relationship before we get in too deep. Before things are said that can’t be taken back. Before the hate from his mother embeds itself into Deja’s life.

“I love you.” His voice is steeped with emotion.

“I love you too,” I say, tears streaming down my cheeks as I open the car door. “But sometimes even love isn’t enough.”

Chapter Sixteen

Liam

I watch the Uber drive away, feeling my heart being ripped apart. Looking up at the sky, I wish I could go back in time and fix this before it all fell apart. I never should have brought Tracey and Deja around my mother. Even with my dad's word, I should have known my mother would find a way to corner her and say something to send Tracey running.

When my mom had gotten up from the table, she had excused herself, saying her new medication was making her sick. Worry had flooded me as I wondered whether or not the cancer had come back. When she is in remission—as she is now—she shouldn't be on any medication.

It had been my fault. I hadn't suspected anything when she scurried away to the washroom, too blinded by my own panic.

I should have known better. Should have learned from the track record my mom had already set with Tracey. If I could go back in time, I would have followed my mom to the washroom and made sure that she didn't say anything to Tracey.

It was time for her interference in my life to end... past time.

I storm inside, ready to tear heads off and cut ties with my family. Tracey told me she isn't going to make me choose, but there is no choice. My choice is her, and it will always be her. My mother is a cruel woman, and I'm not going to sit around and let my life wither away so my mother can feel good about herself. Cancer be damned.

I'll always be there for my mother, but it's time I establish clear boundaries in my life with her. She needs to know Tracey will be in my life for as long as she will have me.

“What did you do?” I ask, slamming my hands down on the table. Plates quake on the table as Dad jumps back and Jason stares at me with wide eyes.

“Liam, don’t start a scene in front of our guests,” Mom says, folding her hands primly in her lap and looking to the Goldsmiths. “They have come a long way to be with us here tonight. They ended their vacation in Thailand early for your dad’s birthday, and they shouldn’t have to be witness to family drama.”

“There wouldn’t be any family drama if you stopped trying to steer my life in whichever direction you decide is best,” I say, not giving the Goldsmiths another thought. Mr. Goldsmith has done business with my father since I was a child. He has seen more than his fair share of our family drama over the years.

“Actually,” Mr. Goldsmith says, looking at his watch, “I think it is time we were going. I think this is a family matter we shouldn’t be intruding on.”

Mom waits as the Goldsmiths gather their belongings, thanking them for coming to dinner, and wishing them a safe drive home. The moment they are gone, the smile drops from her face as she scowls at me.

“What did you say to Tracey?” My hands grip the edge of the table until my knuckles turn white. I don’t want to make a big scene in a restaurant, but this discussion can’t wait.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Mom bats her eyelashes and sits back in her seat. “Where did your little friend and her daughter go? The cake is about to come out. Although, I think you might have ruined the dinner with your temper tantrum.”

“What are you talking about?” Dad glares at my mother. “Elaine, what did you say to Liam’s girl?”

“I merely suggested that our son shouldn’t be dating the help.” My mother shrugs and crosses her arms over her chest. “She is not a suitable match for Liam.”

My heart jumps in my throat as I shake my head. “You callous, horrible woman. You ruined the best thing that has ever happened to me because you can’t stand the thought of me being with a black woman?”

Mom looks around, her mouth dropping open. People are staring, and some of them are people she knows. “Liam, lower your voice. We do not need to make a scene.”

“You’re damn right we don’t. I’m done with you. I thought maybe with Dad keeping an eye on you, you would keep your mouth shut and actually get to know Tracey. Maybe find out what an amazing woman she is. But, no. You decided that the color of her fucking skin was enough of a reason to hate her.”

“Liam, I didn’t think your mother would do this.” Dad gets up from the table and rests his hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry, son.”

“It’s not me you need to apologize to.” I shrug off his hand from my shoulder. “I’m done with Mom. If you want to see me, it won’t be while she’s around.”

My mother’s protests follow me as I leave the restaurant and get in my truck. I head for my house, my mind already running through the apology options. I need to apologize to Tracey. I will apologize to her every single day for the rest of our lives if that’s what it takes to keep her. This is my fault. I had foolishly believed my mother would rather see me happy than to be following her plan for my life.

I’d allowed my guilt over her diagnosis to blind me to her schemes.

I had allowed the best thing in my life to slip through my fingers because I couldn’t keep my mother in check.

The weight of my guilt threatens to overcome me as I enter my house and storm up the stairs to take a hot shower. I slam my fist into the tile, my knuckles splitting open. Blood pools on them before dripping to the white tile below.

“Liam!” Jason’s voice echoes through my house.

I turn off the shower, heading to my room to get dressed. There's no point in answering him; he'll find me soon enough. I'm sliding on my shorts when the door slams open and Jason appears.

"What are you going to do to fix this?" Jason crosses his arms.

"I'm not sure there's anything I can do. Tracey told me she would leave if Mom disrespected her. She told me she wasn't going to expose Deja to that kind of shit, and I completely understand. She has to do what's right for her daughter, and that doesn't involve me. Not anymore."

"So, you're not going to go after her?" Jason scoffs. "You're not going to tell her you cut our mother off because of what she did?"

"She told me not to choose between them. She doesn't want me to turn my back on our mother."

Jason rolls his eyes. "Well, you clearly ignored that. Tracey is a good woman. Not many would tell you to stay with your mother instead of her."

"Which is why I'm respecting her decision to walk away from this shit show." I brush by Jason and head down the hall.

Chapter Seventeen

Tracey

Deja is curled up in the bed beside me, pressing against my shoulder with her slender arms wrapped around my waist. As I look down at her, I see the little girl I've taken care of since the day she was born. I see the endless injuries to her heart, knowing more will come as she grows older and becomes an adult. But I will do everything I can to protect her.

That was why I walked away. As much as it hurt to tell Liam goodbye two weeks ago, I was easy doing it for Deja. She is my life, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for her.

Since that disastrous dinner, she's spent every night in my bed, holding onto me as tightly as she could. She said she couldn't sleep, but I'm sure it was more than that. I'm sure she's figured out Liam and I are done.

"Wake up, honey." I run my finger along her arm. "Time to get up."

"Five more minutes," she mumbles, turning her face into the pillow and burrowing deeper into the bed. "Please, Mom."

"Can't, honey. We have to go to court today."

Deja blinks sleepily, staring at me with tears gathering. "Do we have to?"

"Yes. We have to. Don't worry. The judge will ask you a couple questions about where you want to live, and after that it will all be over."

"Will you be upset if I choose to live with Dad?" Her voice small.

God, I want her to be mine in every sense of the word. I want to be the home she comes to. I want her to have the best of me. But I have to put her needs ahead of my own, and if she

chooses her father, it will hurt. A whole lot. But I'll have to be woman enough to accept her decision and make the best of the hand I've been dealt.

Her brow is furrowed, so I know I've taken longer than necessary to respond to her question.

"Not even a little bit, Deja. You're old enough to make your own decisions and choose what's best for you. Even if you go live with your father, you can come see me whenever you'd like. You'll always be the most important person in my life, and I'll always have a place here for you."

Deja nods and gets out of the bed. Her shoulders are hunched forward as if the weight of the world sits on them. She trudges to her bedroom, the shower turning on a few moments later.

This day is going to suck. Getting up, I head to my own shower.

"I want to live with my mom," Deja says, tears rolling down her cheeks as she sits on the witness stand. Her eyes are locked on me, her bottom lip quivering as she speaks.

The judge nods. "Very well. I am awarding full custody to the mother of the child. The child is free to visit who she wishes when she wishes, but the mother will retain all parental control."

Deja flees from the witness stand as I stand up and open my arms. She crashes into them, her arms wrapping around my body and squeezing me. It feels as if she has forced all the air from my lungs.

"No more tears." I pull back to wipe her tears away. "Okay? We're going to get through this like we've gotten through everything else together."

She nods, glancing to the side as her father and Britney approach us. Britney is glowering, her arms crossed over a

pregnant belly. I shake my head, a small smile of disbelief crossing my face. One more mess to add onto all the others.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” Jake asks, not looking at Deja. Rage is building inside me as I try to will him to look at his daughter and tell her he still loves her despite everything.

“Fine.” I look down at Deja. “I’ll be back in a minute, okay? Why don’t you go wait in the car?”

I wait until Deja has left before turning to my ex-husband. He doesn’t even have the decency to look guilty for not talking to his daughter. For not comforting her after dealing with the biggest disappointment of her young life. She will remember this day for years, and it will affect every new relationship she enters.

“You are fucking unbelievable,” I say, shaking my head. My voice is nearly spitting venom as I contemplate if murder in a courtroom would look bad. “You just let our daughter walk away without even telling her that you were okay with her decision.”

“I’m not okay with you turning her against me,” Jake says, his arms crossing over his chest. “I’m not going to tell her that it’s okay, because it’s not.”

“First of all, I didn’t turn her against you. You did that yourself with your new family. You didn’t leave time for the little girl who has idolized you since the day she was born. Second, you don’t let her know that you’re disappointed. You tell her that you love her no matter what she chooses.”

“I do love her.”

“Congratulations,” I say, tossing my hands in the air. “Maybe you should show her that instead of dropping her back off at my house because Britney doesn’t want her around. Maybe you should have invited her to your engagement party. Or maybe you should spend some time getting to know her as the amazing young woman that she is.”

“That’s not fair,” Britney says, her nasal voice grating against every nerve in my body. “We’ve been busy with the wedding and the pregnancy.”

“And tearing lives apart,” I say, my glare never leaving Jake. I poke a finger into his chest, watching the hurt flash across his face. “Oh, so that one gets to you. Now you care that you destroyed our family. That’s funny.”

“Tracey, I love Deja, and I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Then stop doing it. Hurting her is all you’ve been doing for the last year. You know who has taken all that anger and all that pain over the last year? Me. I’ve been there to pick up all the pieces every single time.”

“I didn’t—”

“Bullshit, you didn’t! If you didn’t mean to hurt her, then you shouldn’t have done it! You knew what you were doing, and you knew what it would do to Deja. And you still did it. Repeatedly!

Britney scoffs and reaches out to smack my hand. “Don’t you talk to him like that.”

“Touch me again, and I’ll rip those over-bleached extensions right out of your head,” I say sweetly, stepping closer to her. “Stay the hell away from my daughter. Both of you.”

“You can’t keep Deja from me.”

“The court order says I can do just that. If Deja doesn’t want to see you, I’m not going to make her.”

“You’re cutting her out of my life.”

“You did that yourself,” I say, brushing past them and heading to my car.

My blood is boiling as I walk toward my car. I want to go back in there and give them another piece of my mind. I want to tear them to pieces until there is nothing left of them. Instead, I get in my car and head home.

It has been a long day and with Deja out for the night at her best friend's house, I finally have some time to relax.

Chapter Eighteen

Liam

Two weeks have passed since Tracey walked out of my life. I've wanted to call her every single day since, but each time I've willed myself to put the damn phone down. I've even thought about driving by her place to see if I could get a glimpse of her beautiful face. But that would be borderline stalking, and I'm not that guy.

But yesterday I buckled under the pressure of needing and wanting to build something solid and meaningful with Tracey, and I left a message on her phone. All I said was that I loved and missed both her and Deja. I'm not sure Tracey will ever listen to the message, but at least I've put my feelings for both of them out into the universe.

When my dad called and asked to talk, it felt as if my world had tipped upside down. It wasn't often that he wanted to talk. For my entire life, he'd been a man of very few words. The only times he had ever asked to speak with me were both times Mom had been diagnosed with cancer.

Still, even though talking was rare for us, I do want to know what he deems important enough to meet and talk about.

That is why I invite him down to one of my bars, something I've never done.

When I walk into the nearly empty bar late in the afternoon, he's sitting at a table nursing a beer. He looks up as I walk over and for the first time in a long time, I see pride etched on his face.

"You've done well for yourself," he says as I sit down in the booth across from him. "I would never have thought when you said you were going to start opening bars, they would look like this."

We are at the same bar where I'd met Tracey. I try not to focus on the fact that the table she and I sat at is only a few feet away.

"I worked hard for years to get to this point with them."

One of the waitresses stops by the table, dropping off a glass of water for me. I thank her and sip at the water. Dad swallows hard, looking around the bar and shifting in his seat.

"Why are we here?" I finally ask when the tension gets to be too much. "What are we doing?"

"Your mom was out of line the other night. She never should have done that to Tracey. I want you to know she and I have had many words on the matter."

"I appreciate that." I draw my finger through the condensation on my glass. "But it doesn't change the fact that I will not be bringing Tracey around the family anymore, assuming she ever even agrees to be with me again."

"For what it's worth, I think she is a lovely woman, and her daughter is charming. The three of you looked good together, and I was happy you had finally found happiness. I know you've been angry for quite some time, and I was worried about you spending the rest of your life alone. She brings out a side of you that I haven't seen since you were in university."

"I appreciate that as well, but you don't understand what has happened. Mom said racist shit to Tracey, causing her—the woman I love—to walk out of my life with the child I also happen to love."

Dad says nothing, staring at me for a moment before nodding. "I spent a lot of years of my life keeping you at a distance. I am not willing to continue doing that."

"I'll not be around Mom any more." I run a hand through my hair. "If she gets sick again, of course I'll be there, but I'll not be pretending her behavior toward Tracey is alright."

“I would never expect you to. You must protect your family, as I should have protected mine. I was angry at you when I found out you knew about Elaine’s infidelity when I should have been comforting you. I cannot imagine what you went through, and that is one of my biggest regrets. I should have been there for you as a father is supposed to be. I am glad if given the chance, you would be a better father than I ever was.”

I swallow hard, my vision blurring slightly. Though I wouldn’t allow myself to cry, I know what it must have taken for him to admit his wrongs. It’s something my dad has rarely done in my lifetime. The fact that he is doing it now means the world to me.

“What are you going to do to win Tracey back?”

I sigh and lean back in the chair, staring at the wall. “The best I can do for her is to let her go. I have to. Hanging onto her is only going to hurt both of us.”

“Are you going to be alright?”

“I don’t know.”

Would I be alright? I doubted it. Each day without Tracey is worse. I feel myself drowning in the memories of moments we shared together. All I can think about is what went wrong and how I could have done more to fix it. I sit at home and analyze every moment from the time we met until the time she left. In each of those moments, I find flaws, see my shortcomings... the cracks that were forming that I hadn’t noticed.

“All I want is for you to be happy,” Dad says before taking another sip of his beer. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Do you mind just sitting with me for awhile?”

“That I can do.”

Dad and I sit in the bar, talking about the years that had gone by. It’s strange that now that I’m in my forties, I feel like

I'm finally getting to know who my father really is, and in turn he's getting to know parts of me he never knew before. It's also the perfect opportunity to take my mind off of Tracey for just a little while. And for that, I'm grateful.

I don't know if my relationship with my dad will ever fully recover, but it is a beginning. Bringing us back together is just another thing I'll have to thank Tracey for. She didn't know what changes she was making in my life, but she made them all the same. She has changed so much without even trying.

And there I go, thinking about her again. It doesn't seem as if my thoughts can stray too far from my baby.

Guilt still plagues me as I repeat the process of the last several days—drive home and sink into whatever bottles of liquid pleasure I can find in my cupboards. Drowning the memories seems infinitely better than reliving them.

Chapter Nineteen

Tracey

I have a daughter who is hurting, and no clue how I'm going to explain what has happened and help her to cope. In less than a year, she has lost both her father and a man she was treating like a father figure.

I'm expecting her to blame me again. It wouldn't surprise me if she did. I have changed her life in a massive way yet again. There's no stability—no sense of a place to relax and be herself without fear of what comes next.

“Mom?” Deja opens the door to my room and sticks her head inside. “Are you okay?”

“Why do you ask?”

She walks into the room, her eyes fixed on the ground. When she looks up, I can see the glassiness of unshed tears. Deja's bottom lip quivers as she sits on the bed beside me, leaning back into the pillows and staring straight ahead. She's trying her hardest to hold herself together, and it's killing me.

“Deja, honey, are you okay?”

“Why doesn't anybody love us enough to stay?” Her voice is soft as it breaks. “Why didn't Liam love us enough to stay?”

I wrap my arm around her and pull her closer to me. Tears roll down her cheeks as she nestles into my side, her arms wrapping around my waist.

“It's not that he didn't love us, honey. Liam loves us as much as your dad loves you. He really does. I asked him to let us go.”

Deja goes stiff in my arms, but she doesn't pull away. “Why would you do that? You looked so happy with him.”

“I was happy with him,” I say, speaking around the lump forming in my throat. “You would not believe how happy I am with him, but his mother is not a kind woman. She’s not the kind of person that I want around you.”

“What did his mom say? When you both came back from the washroom, you didn’t look like you were okay.”

“She said some racist things I’m not going to repeat. It’s not the first time she’s insulted me and treated me poorly, but Liam had promised me it wouldn’t happen that night. He said she would behave, but she didn’t. I told him I wasn’t going to have you around anybody like that.”

Deja’s chest heaves, the words setting heavily on her. She leans her head on my shoulder, her breathing unsteady as I run a hand up and down her back, trying to soothe her.

“He let us go because he loves us enough not to ask us to stay,” I say. “He loves us enough to know that being near certain people in his life is toxic for us. We don’t need their acceptance, and we don’t want it. He understands that.”

“He could have fought for us.” Deja reaches down to pull the blanket up around her. “He could have told her to go to hell, and he could have fought for us.”

“He might have, honey, but I wasn’t going to keep you there to find out. We don’t deserve that, and we certainly don’t have to put up with it.”

Though I miss him and listen to the voicemails he leaves on repeat at night, I know I did what was best. I can’t ask him to give up his own flesh and blood for us, but I wouldn’t stay and listen to her racist bullshit either. I respect myself and my daughter more than that.

Liam had done what was best for us; he had let us go.

“Dad’s wedding is tomorrow,” Deja says, shuffling around beneath the blankets until she is comfortable. “Why did he plan a wedding so fast?”

“Britney wanted a wedding before the baby came, before she looked super pregnant,” I say, not bothering to hide the amusement in my voice.

“I want Liam to go with us. Do you think he will?”

“I don’t think so, honey. But we don’t need him there. You and I are going to have a great time, and we can spend the night dancing.”

Deja nods, her eyes closing. “Mom, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

When we wake up in the morning, Deja is quiet and withdrawn as she sits at the table eating her cereal. She’s normally connected to her phone but instead, she’s staring at the back of the cereal box and not saying a word.

“Deja, honey, you don’t have to go today if you don’t want to.” I stand behind her and rub her shoulders. “Your dad will understand if it’s too hard for you.”

“No, he won’t,” she says with a sigh, shaking her head. “He’ll be mad at me if I don’t go, and then I’ll never get to see him. He’ll be too busy with Britney and the new baby to spend time with me. At least if I go to the wedding, he won’t be mad.”

I pull her into a hug, kissing her cheek even as my heart breaks for her. “I admire you so much, honey. You are the strongest young woman I know.”

She snuffles, wiping away a stray tear that rolls down her cheek. “I’m going to go get ready.”

“Okay, honey. I’m going to have a cup of coffee. Then I’ll get dressed and we can go.”

After we are dressed, I lead the way to the car, holding her hand and hoping it will give me the strength I need to support her and get through the day. Not once did it ever cross my mind that I would be attending the wedding of my cheating

ex-husband as he marries another woman—the woman he cheated with no less. It isn't the kind of thing you consider when you get married to the man you thought you would spend the rest of your life with.

When we walk into the chapel, we are led to Jake's side and put in the front row. Deja scuffs the toes of her shoes against a mark on the floor. She grips the edge of the pew hard, looking sick as she glares at nothing.

“Deja, there's still time to leave if you don't want to be here.”

“I need to be here,” she says. She takes a deep breath and looks up at me. “I have to be here.”

“You know, it's okay that it's not easy. It's not easy for me either. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with your dad, but look at where we are now.”

“It's weird for you too?”

“Very weird. I thought your dad and I would be together until we died. Your husband getting married to another woman isn't something that you think about on your wedding day. But I'm happy to be here with you. I'm glad you wanted me to come.”

Deja nods, biting her bottom lip. “Why didn't you give up on me? I know I was horrible to you. Dad gave up on me.”

If I ever get a chance to murder Jake without anybody finding out, I might just do it... especially if he realizes what his actions are doing to Deja. She may be a teenager, but she's still a child. She needs her dad to tell her everything is going to be alright. She needs him to love her through whatever she's going through.

“I will never give up on you, Deja. Never. You can act like the worst monster in the world, and I will still love you. Although, I would appreciate if we didn't go back to the hating me phase. But you're my daughter, and I'm going to love you through whatever difficult things you're going through. I'm never going to give up on you.” I know I'm

repeating myself, but I want to reassure my daughter that she's safe with me. I'll always be there for her, even during the times she doesn't want or need me to be.

Deja sniffles, wiping away a tear before hugging me. We fall quiet, holding hands as the wedding starts. If it had been anybody else, I might have said it was a beautiful wedding, but there's something about the fact it's my ex-husband's wedding that keeps me slightly bitter.

However, all I have to do is look at Deja and the bitterness fades. The divorce has been rough. It has been messy. I thought it was going to drive Deja and me apart, that the damage would be irreparable, but all it has done is bring us closer together.

Chapter Twenty

Liam

My head is aching, the remnants of my bender from the night before scattered around the floor. I look at the cans of beer, the world spinning as I get to my feet. My stomach twists and turns. It has been a long time since I've downed bottle after bottle to chase away my demons. Now, I'm in desperate need of a shower.

"Whoa, this place is a mess," Jason says, walking into my room and shaking his head. I had no idea where he'd been since yesterday, and I was too fucked up to care. He'd kept pestering me about things with Tracey until I'd totally shut down and stopped speaking to him. I hadn't taken kindly to him being the voice of reason at the time. "You should be ashamed of yourself. It's been weeks since you decided you couldn't win her back. You either need to grow a pair and get her back or stop moping."

"I'm not moping," I say, stumbling to the bathroom. "I'm drowning my sorrows. There's a difference."

"There's no difference," Jason says, grabbing the trashcan from the bathroom and making his rounds around the bedroom. Empty cans clash together as he tosses them inside the garbage can.

"There's a difference. Drowning my sorrows is an old tradition known by men who have had their hearts broken."

"Dumbass." Jason's voice is laced with disgust. "You're the one who broke your own heart, and for what? You lost everything, so it means you have everything to gain. Stop trying to be the hero and go fight for what you want."

"Tracey made her feelings clear. I'm not going to be the one to disrespect her by not carrying through with what she wants. "

Jason scowls and shakes his head. "You're insane. You think she isn't missing you as much as you're missing her?"

I choose to ignore my brother's question because the possibility of Tracey not missing me, not wanting me back, not wanting *us* back... It's an absolute mindfuck. "She'll do whatever it takes to protect Deja. It's been weeks, which means she has probably moved on."

Jason glances out the window, a smile crossing his face as he shakes his head. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

There's a pounding at the door. I ignore it, hoping whoever it is will leave, but they don't. The pounding only grows louder and more forceful.

"What the hell?"

I hurry down the stairs and haul open the door, ready to start yelling at the asshole who's been banging on my door, when I see Deja looking up at me with a scowl. She crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me with a look that could send grown men running for their mothers.

She looks me over, her lips curling. If I were in her position, I doubt I would be impressed with what I saw. I'm a mess. Each night has only gotten harder to get through, especially once I made the decision to stop calling Tracey. After that, it became nearly impossible to fall asleep at night without a beer... or two... or six.

"Why weren't we enough for you?" she asks, storming inside and heading straight for the kitchen. Spotting Jason as he enters the room, she points to the fridge. Jason gives her a nod and immediately pulls a bottle out of the refrigerator, opens it and pours it down the drain—all while Deja continues to glare at me. "You smell like alcohol is leaking out of your pores."

"Deja, what are you doing here?" I ask, running a hand down my face. I'm inwardly praying she leaves just as quickly as she pushed her way inside. I'm really not up to this right now.

Jason smirks as he stares at me. Deja's glare is still in place as she takes in the empty bottles on the counters and the

takeout containers littering the dining table.

“I came here because you and my mom are giant idiots.” She leans against the wall as Jason reaches into the fridge for another bottle and starts dumping that out too. “Why weren’t we enough for you?”

“Hell, Jason. That beer is expensive.”

“Don’t care,” he says, grabbing a third bottle. “Answer Deja’s question.”

Jason grins as he unloads more bottles from the fridge. With each one he dumps down the drain, I feel myself growing more out of control. I want to stop him and kick them both out so I can be alone to wallow in my misery. I created this fucked up mess, and drinking away my sorrows seems to be the only viable solution so far. Besides, it’s only been a day since I went completely off the deep end; it’s not like this is a habit... yet.

Deja snaps her fingers in front of my face, bringing me back to the present. I can see unshed tears shimmering in her eyes, and waves of guilt wash over me, threatening to drag me under.

“Why weren’t we enough for you? I thought you loved her. I thought you loved me. Why did you let her walk away?”

“You were more than enough for me, Deja. I love you and your mom. She’s the best thing that’s happened to me in years.”

“Then why did you let her go?”

“Look, there are some things that happened—things I’m not going to tell you because your mom wouldn’t be happy if I repeated them—and we decided that it would be best if we didn’t see each other anymore.”

“Mom already told me about your mother.” Deja’s scowl deepens. “Why didn’t you come after her? Why didn’t you beg her to stay? Why didn’t you choose her?”

“I told you, Deja. We decided it would be best if we weren’t together anymore.”

“I don’t believe that.” Her expression is set in a stubborn frown as she crosses her arms. “I saw the way my mom looked at you. She used to look at my dad that way when I was little.”

“Deja, it isn’t that simple.”

“Why not?”

“Because your mom and I are adults, and we made our choices.”

She had made the choice, but Deja was right. I hadn’t fought for them. I should have gone after Tracey that night and told her I was choosing her and Deja, even though she’d told me not to. She’d needed time to think, and I could have respected that while still telling her that my choice would be them. It would always be them.

I acted like a coward, and from the look Deja is giving me, she knows it too.

Though tears roll down her cheeks, she doesn’t bother to wipe them away. She’s angry, and she refuses to show weakness. She could give me a run for my money, much the same way she had when she’d chased me away from her mother that first night. Now, Deja is standing here and fighting for me and her mother to be together. She’s so strong, so brave... much braver than I am. My heart just about bursts with pride as I look at her. This girl has stolen my heart, right along with her mother.

“Then why didn’t you fight for us?” she asks yet again. “I thought you loved us, but you let us go just like my father did.”

Ouch kid, that one cuts deep.

I know what Deja is going through with her father—at least, I had known before I walked out of their lives too.

“I do love you and your mom.” I have to make her see that. She needs to know I love her. “Loving you and your mom was never in question. I love both of you, and that’s not changing whether your mom and I are together or not, okay? I love you.”

“Then fight for us,” Deja says, her bottom lip quivering. “Stop drinking yourself to death, and fight for us.”

“Come here.”

Deja lunges herself in my arms and buries her head against my chest. I wrap my arms around her. “I love you, okay?”

With her head still buried in my chest, she nods. I give her some time to compose herself. “No matter what, Deja, I will always love you.”

It is then I become aware of the silence in the kitchen. Jason has stopped emptying the refrigerator and now leans against one of the cupboards, just taking in everything going on between me and Deja.

After taking a deep breath, she lifts her head and looks at me. My arms drop to my sides.

“She told me about what your mother said. I asked her one night before she started crying and eating ice cream. She’s been doing that a lot, you know. After she thinks I’ve gone to bed, she starts eating ice cream and crying. She misses you as much as you miss her.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible,” I say as I look at her, my shoulders slumping. “Your mom did what was best for you. She is protecting you from toxic people.”

“Why did your mom say those things to my mom? Why did she hurt her?”

“My mother has ideas about what she wants my life to be, and she’s upset it isn’t going that way. She thought if she tore your mother down, I would do what she wanted,” I tell

her, even though I'm honestly still trying to make sense of it all myself.

"Then why did you stay with her? Why didn't you choose us?"

"I do choose you." A lump rises in my throat as I look at Deja, seeing the evidence of her broken heart all over her face. "Of course, I choose you and your mom. You guys are the best things to ever happen to me."

"Then why haven't you told Mom that?"

"I think your mom needs some time before she's ready to listen to me."

"She misses you. A lot. She won't tell me that she does, but I know it. She cries in her sleep sometimes, says your name a lot."

Running my hands through my hair, I say, "Way to rip out my heart, kid."

"You ripped out ours first." Deja blinks away the tears. She doesn't look at me again as she walks to the front door and leaves.

Jason resumes dumping out the bottles, glancing at me every now and then as he does it. I slump against the wall, wondering what there is that I can do. Yes, Deja says Tracey misses me, but she hasn't reached out. If she had, I certainly wouldn't have been wasting my time getting drunk last night. And besides, all my calls to her have been left unanswered, and when I go to her place she doesn't even let me in.

"What are you going to do?" Jason asks after he dumps the last bottle and turns to face me. "You going to grow a fucking pair, or are you going to continue to pretend there's nothing you can do to fix this shit?"

"What do you mean?"

"Deja just told you everything you've been waiting to hear as you wallow in your misery. So, what are you going to do about it?"

“I don’t know. She doesn’t want me in her life, not after what Mom did to her.”

“Mom is acting bitchy, so you aren’t going to bring Tracey and Deja around her anymore. Maybe you should tell her that. Maybe you should find her and tell her that the moment you met her is the moment you started living again.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been nothing but a hollow shell for years. You go to work, you come home from work. You attend every family function and hate every minute of it. You never do anything for yourself. Years ago, you never would have been like that. After all, you stood up for your own damn self and refused to work in the family business. You paved your own way instead.”

“You might be right,” I say, slumping against the wall and running my hands through my hair. “I’ve really messed everything up.”

“Yeah, you have. But it’s never too late to try and fix everything.”

“You think she’d take me back?”

Jason shrugs. “You won’t know unless you try.”

I nod, and a picture begins to take shape in my mind, a picture of my future... our future, or at least the possibility of it. I want Tracey in my life. I need her like I need oxygen. I want us to grow old together. I want Deja to be mine. She and Deja are the loves of my life. And if Tracey wants it as much as I do, we could have another child. My heart has enough room to love more children, as long as it’s what we both want. In my mind, I can see everything coming together now. And I want it all.

I shake my head, still a little incredulous about Deja coming over and giving me a piece of her mind. It shouldn’t have come down to a teenager pushing me around, but her presence did help me to pull my damn head out of my ass.

Yes, Deja is right. It's time for me to fight for her and Tracey.

I just hope it isn't too late.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tracey

The summer air is sticky, and carried on the breeze are the smells of burning fires and barbecue. I stand on my front porch, a glass of wine in hand as Deja snaps a few more pictures. I've become her model over the last few days, posing whenever she asks. For the first time, she has a vision of her future, and I'm going to do everything I can to help her achieve it.

Today that means coming home from work to have a camera shoved in my face and a glass of wine pushed into my hand. Not that I'm complaining about the glass of wine, mind you. It has been a long day of visiting families and deciding whether or kids should be rehomed. The decisions always weigh heavily on my mind, haunting me if it turns out I've made the wrong decision.

"Okay, I think I have the shot I need," Deja says, looking down at her camera. "Can you go get changed into that pretty green dress? I have a few pictures I want to take on the swing in the backyard."

I roll my eyes, a smile on my face. I'm soaking up every moment of her wanting to spend time together, knowing that in just over a year she'll be heading off to college.

"Alright, give me a few moments and I'll be ready."

She grins and nods, following me inside before heading straight to the backyard. I make my way up the stairs and wander to the shower. The lukewarm water melts away the stress of the day, grounding me in the reality of my home life.

When I get out of the shower, I smother my legs and arms in body butter before sliding into the dress she's asked me to wear. I rearrange my hair, pulling it up on my head and

allowing tendrils to fall around my face. After slipping into a pair of heels, I make my way downstairs.

My phone buzzes, and I smile when I see who's messaging me.

Dawn: *Hey, Queen. Just checking in.*

Tracey: *I'm good. Busy being Deja's guinea pig for her photography project.*

Dawn: *My god-daughter is talented. Super proud of her.*

Dawn: *Still avoiding Liam?*

Tracey: *Not avoiding him. Just taking a minute, you know?*

Dawn: *The thing with Jake was tough, but you shouldn't let what happened ruin*

you for any future relationships. You know I never liked him, but I loved you —

still do, BTW — and that's why I supported your relationship with him.

Dawn: *Now, I'm free to tell you this truth. Liam may have been in your life for a*

relatively short time, but I think he gets you, and he knows both you and Deja

come together in a pretty package.

Dawn: *He loves you, babe, and you love him. It's a foregone conclusion that you*

guys belong with each other.

Tracey: *And now that I can finally get a word in edgewise... *laughing emoji**

Tracey: *But seriously... I know you've been telling me that for ages. Thank you for always being there. I'll give you a call tomorrow so we can make plans to meet up. *heart emoji**

Dawn: **heart emoji**

The backyard is lit with little lights strung from the trees as the sun sets in the background. Music is playing softly, and flower petals and candles are scattered along the grass. I laugh as I make my way to the swing, knowing Deja is nothing if not elaborate.

“This is lovely,” I say as Deja appears from around the corner of the shed with a smile on her face. She lifts her camera and takes a picture of me. “I feel like I should have a glass of wine for this shoot too.”

Deja grins and walks over to me, pulling on my arm. “Come on, I want a picture of you at the table.”

She leads me to a small table on the patio, brushing the wrinkles out of a white tablecloth. There are two plates on the table, a couple of wine glasses, and more flower petals scattered.

“This is starting to feel oddly romantic.” My tone is teasing as I pluck a rose from the flower arrangement in the middle of the table and tuck it into Deja’s hair. “I’m sorry, honey, but I’m afraid I don’t quite feel the same.”

Deja laughs and shakes her head, taking a step back and lifting the camera again as I sit down at the table.

“Actually,” a deep voice says, “I may have asked Deja to help me set all of this up. We spent all day planning and decorating, believe it or not.”

My heart catches in my throat as Liam appears, his hair falling softly as he stands tall in a dress shirt and slacks. He

smiles at me, but there is a nervous quality in his smoldering eyes. He sits down across from me as Deja disappears into the house.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my hands shaking as I place them in my lap.

Ignoring my question, Liam says, “Know this song?”

Feeling a bit confused, I say, “Aerosmith’s *I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing*?”

“It’s the song that was playing in the bar when I saw you in real life for the first time. And I remember thinking you were so beautiful. Getting to know you gave me the chance to see your inner beauty, as well. And seeing you loving and raising Deja brings me so much joy and has made me love her too. Every moment with you is one I cherish.” His eyes—those intense eyes—mesmerize me. They’re so earnest. I know Liam means every single word he says.

He reaches out and clasps my hand in his. “I’m sorry about everything you’ve been through. I let my guilt and fear come between us, and I want to spend the rest of my life proving to you that I will always, *always* put you and Deja first.”

“I won’t knowingly put Deja in a position to be hurt.”

Liam shakes his head, playing with some of the petals on the table as he stares at me. “She’s been hurting, Tracey. She’s been seeing her mother upset and unhappy.”

I reach out and caress his cheek, reveling in the stubble on his jaw. “I love you so much, Liam... and I’ve missed you, but—”

“Don’t go breaking my heart now,” Liam interrupts, a small smile on his face as Deja reappears with a tray of food and sets it between us. “I made Deja a promise earlier today that I wouldn’t let you go without a fight again. Don’t make me break that promise.”

“But what about your family?” I rest my hands on my lap, immediately missing the warmth of Liam’s skin.

Ahem. Deja clears her throat and pins me with a look of warning. Then she spins on her Chucks and heads back to the house.

“My dad and I still talk,” Liam says. “He likes you. Jason does too. My mom and I haven’t spoken since the day I was an idiot and let you leave.”

“What does all of this mean?” I ask, gesturing to the backyard. I glance at Deja, seeing the bright smile on her face.

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving it to you, Tracey,” he says getting up from the table and kneeling at my feet. “I love you. Since the moment you walked into my life, I knew you were it for me.”

“Liam, there’s no way you knew that.”

“Of course, I knew it. How could I not?” Liam laughs, lifting my hand to his lips for a kiss. “Like I said before, I’ll spend forever proving my love to you and Deja. I should have fought harder for you weeks ago. But I’m fighting with everything that is in me now.”

I lean down, pouring my heart into the kiss before sitting upright. Liam watches me, his thumb running over the back of my hand. A strong desire to erase the small distance between us suddenly overcomes me, as I reach up to cup his handsome face.

“How about we start with you making love to me tonight? Forever can start tomorrow.”

THE END

Another couple's story will be
coming soon!

Thank You



Thank you for taking a chance on *EVERY MOMENT WITH YOU* and trusting me to give you a few hours of reading pleasure. If you enjoyed this book, please do me the favor of leaving a review. Reviews are the life's blood of the independent author, and many potential readers depend on honest reviews to determine if they should 1-Click a book. Please help them make an informed decision by posting a review of *EVERY MOMENT WITH YOU*. Your review doesn't have to be long to be helpful.

I love hearing from readers, so you may shoot me an email to author.roxywilson@gmail.com. That's how our friendship will begin, if we aren't friends already.

I also hope you'll consider joining my mailing list. By doing this, you'll receive updates on my upcoming releases, giveaways, deals and free reads. It will surely be an honor if you decide to subscribe. To join my mailing list, visit <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/ecwew3qpox>

Kind regards, always!

Roxy



[SIGN UP RIGHT HERE FOR NEW RELEASE ALERTS:](#)

<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/ecwew3gpox>

FOLLOW ROXY WILSON ON BOOKBUB:

<https://www.bookbub.com/authors/roxy-wilson>

FOLLOW ROXY WILSON ON TIKTOK:

<https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMLYW8pH5/>

EMAIL:

author.roxywilson@gmail.com



Books by Roxy Wilson

Dark Romance

Alessandro Mancini - <https://books2read.com/u/mqr291>

Holiday Romance

A Christmas Kiss - <https://books2read.com/u/3nWzdB>

Second Chance Christmas - <https://books2read.com/u/3kW70R>

Christmas Cupid - <https://books2read.com/u/mdnPrW>

Mistletoe Miracles - <https://books2read.com/u/bojprv>

A Bundle of Joy Series

Baby Wanted - <https://books2read.com/u/3JXWpA>

The Baby Proposal - <https://books2read.com/u/b5kzWk>

Baby, You're Mine - <https://books2read.com/u/bQdWEE>

Secret Baby Seduction - <https://books2read.com/u/b6Kgg0>

This Time, Baby - <https://books2read.com/u/bWPWeM>

Corbett Ranchers Series

Desired by the Cowboy - <https://books2read.com/u/38dy7V>

Tempted by the Cowboy - <https://books2read.com/u/4X6oP6>

Rescued by the Cowboy - <https://books2read.com/u/med2Nr>

