

STEPHANIE NICOLE NORRIS

AUTHOR OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY
& THE TROUBLE IN PARADISE SERIES

LOVE IS A DRUG, INK PRESENTS

EVERYTHING

I Always

WANTED

Everything I Always Wanted

by

Stephanie Nicole Norris

Copyright © 2017 by Stephanie Norris

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described here are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or persons dead or alive. Any resemblances are purely coincidental.

When I opened the bathroom door, I noticed rose petals on the floor. Still wrapped in my towel, I followed the petals down the hallway into the bedroom where R&B music played. Water continued to drip from my body to the petals around my feet. I cracked a smile when I saw the huge red heart that sat in the middle of the bed. Before the heart lay a note standing on top of a thin black silk blindfold. My interest was piqued, and my arousal held firm. I flipped the silky material back and forth in the palm of my hand as I opened the note with the other.

Put your blindfold on and relax.

I didn't think the smile on my face could get any brighter, but it did. I let the note fall to the ground and lifted my thickness onto the bed. After tying the blindfold around my head, I laid back. Okay, the note said to relax, but I was on edge.

I felt him before he touched me. There wasn't a sound coming from him, but his presence made my body react. My heartbeat sped up, and I swallowed. My legs had a mind of their own as they shifted in anticipation.

I folded and unfolded my arms. My goodness, I was acting as if I'd never touched the man before. But this was different. Last night's episode was proof that our relationship was out of the friend zone. Then he touched me, grabbed me actually. His brawny masculine hand gripped my thigh, and every nerve ending in my body flew to that spot, jolting me like a stroke of lightning.

I gasped and propped myself up on my elbows. His hands began to tango around my thighs. They moved up with ease, his palms glazed with the remnants of water that still soaked me. When his fingers made it to my vagina, he paused and tap danced around her. Just knowing he was so close warmed me like no towel could. I spread my chestnut brown bodacious thighs so he could get a full look at my bare necessities.

His movements paused, and I wanted to connect with him so badly I could hardly stand it. At last he moved again, more like retreated. I missed him for a split second then his hands were on my feet, massaging them in steady rotation. Heat covered a toe as his mouth settled over my sensitive skin. The moistness from his tongue was my undoing. I moaned, twisting and turning. I couldn't take it anymore, and I didn't need eyes to go after what I wanted. Swiftly, I moved to my knees and grabbed him.

In a desperate fashion, I helped him out of his pants and boxer briefs. His chest was bare, which was all right with me. The less clothes the better. I grabbed his arms and pulled him on top of me. I drew his mouth to mine; he tasted sweet like brown sugar. His lips and tongue filled my mouth as he crushed his body against me, giving me a chance to feel his massive growth. I gasped, my imagination remembering Excalibur wasn't to be toyed with.

“Sebastian?” I said.

“Un huh,” he responded but continued his assault on my lips and center. I could barely focus long enough to put up a fight and ask my question. With little resolve, I weakened and instead, I was begging again, “Please.”

He dipped his head to my earlobe and nibbled while continuing to grind. “Please.” I begged again.

“Please what?” he whispered.

“I need you, now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” I slapped his shoulders with my palms. He kissed down my jaw, his manhood at my opening.

I inhaled at the same time he entered me...

Dedication

This book is for everyone who's found a lover in a friend.

Kudos XOXO

Chapter One

I never quite saw the world the same as everyone else. I didn't just feel the wind; I pictured it in an array of soft greys passing by. The leaves on the trees would reach out to me, and the sun would send waves of heat to touch my skin. Then in that moment, the scene before me became a still frame.

That's when my love for painting began. It would take me away from any painful day, and I thoroughly enjoyed the reprieve. As I sat in front of the canvas, the stroke of my brush created colorful images that were caught between the blink of my eyes. It was as normal as brushing my teeth. Effortless, beautiful. Sometimes it didn't take a physical depiction for my brush to flow. My imagination was big enough to create a mural of architectural elements that inevitably transformed into a masterpiece.

I moved my derriere from the tall wooden chair and took a step back to admire my work. "Nice."

"Very nice indeed." A voice behind me quipped.

I practically jumped out of my skin when I heard him.

"Sebastian!" I turned toward him, clutching the brush in one hand, the other balled into a fist.

"Who else would it be?"

He walked toward me, and I swatted him. "You scared me half to death. What are you doing here?"

“My bad, Buttercup.” He pinched my cheek. “You haven’t answered your phone all day. You know our rule.”

He was right. I’d been enthralled in my painting, and whenever creativity took over, I ignored anything that would stall it. Especially him.

Sebastian Cartwright and I had been friends since elementary school. We were thick as thieves then, but lately I’d been having some strange feelings toward him that I couldn’t figure out. Nevertheless, we had a three-ring rule. If for any reason either of us didn’t answer our phone after three calls, the other had the right to come and check up. We lived alone, Sebastian in his own penthouse on the north side of Saint Louis and I in a condo on the east side. We both had a key to our respective front doors just in case of an emergency.

But obviously, this time called for no crisis.

“Sorry, you know how I get when I’m working.”

“It’s cool,” he said. I twisted my lips. “Okay, actually it’s not cool. You still have to answer your phone or consider sending a text message if you don’t want me coming across town to invade your privacy.”

He leaned forward, placing a kiss on my forehead. I shuddered as a ripple of heat warmed me from head to toe. I fought to ignore it. It wasn’t like he hadn’t kissed me in the past, but again, those strange emotions made every action from him so potent, desirable.

“As if a text message would stall you,” I said.

“It would, not for long, but nevertheless, it would give me some sort of inkling that you’re okay.”

“Aw, you really care,” I said in a mock swoon.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I held my hands up in surrender. “I’m just saying.”

“What are you saying, that I don’t care about you?”

“You seem to have a lot of women to worry about these days. Didn’t know I was a priority.” I knew what I sounded like; it bothered me, too. Why would I suddenly care about the women in his life?

“Shelby Nichole Donohue, are you jealous?”

I threw my head back and laughed, strolling away from him. I dropped my brush in the sink that was splattered with previously dried-up paint. The water ran warm on my hands when I twisted the nozzle. I glanced at the mirror in front of me, a smile still playing around my lips. Past my reflection, I saw him. The tender endearment in his eyes caught me by surprise. For what seemed like forever, we stood, silently watching each other through the mirror. My eyes followed the intricate details of his face. Curled eyelashes that sat atop piercing eyes, a strong nose and a controlled beard that sat around a sexy pair of moist lips. I quivered under his intense stare that seemed to go on for several charged minutes. I was the first to look away.

Rinsing my brush out, I calmed my nerves and shifted my weight from one foot to the other. When I peeked back through the mirror, he was circling my canvas in hushed silence. Was I losing my mind? What we’d just shared, did I imagine it? I had to shake it off. This was my best friend. Sure,

it had crossed my mind more than once that we could possibly make the perfect couple. But that thought would quickly dissipate. There was no way I was jeopardizing our friendship. A relationship can be messy in ways I never want to experience with him. He was my haven. I could talk to Sebastian about anything.

All bets were off with him.

He broke our strange silence: “Is Alan accompanying you to the exhibit?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure. We haven’t been on the best of terms lately.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I huffed, finally facing him. I leaned my back into the sink. “He thinks I’m too wrapped up in my artistry. He feels he comes third place in my life.”

Sebastian arched a brow. “Third place?”

“In his mind, you come first, my artistry second and him third.” I shrugged again.

A smile worthy of an award lit up his charming face. “Me first? Wow, this guy doesn’t have a clue.” He chuckled, but I didn’t see anything funny. “It’s cute though.” He unfolded his brawny arms and stuck his hands in his jean pockets.

“Whatever,” I said, moving from the sink back to my canvas. “If he decides not to come, I’ll just go by myself.” I turned to him. “He actually thinks if he doesn’t go that I’ll have some sort of revelation and decide to cancel my plans.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“You’re the star of the show. This gala is being held in your honor. Why wouldn’t you be in attendance?”

“Exactly. There’s something seriously wrong with men these days. They want all the attention no matter what it costs.”

“I probably should be offended, but I’m not.” He traipsed over to the kitchen counter and removed an apple from the fruit basket.

“That’s because you’re a man,” I said, moving to stand in front of him. He feigned insult, throwing his hand over his chest. I laughed and threw a soft punch on his shoulder. “You get on my nerves.”

“You know you love me, girl.” He bit into the apple, and my eyes followed the juices that sat on his lips. His tongue traced the remnants that were left on his mouth, and I averted my eyes back to the canvas.

“How many do you plan to have available for the exhibit?”

“I’m thinking at the very least ten, but I may tip the scale and go for fifteen.”

He whistled. “That means I won’t see you for a couple of months?”

I grinned. “I’m sure you can find someone to occupy your time.” There it was again. I was being snappy. He knew it, too. I’d been doing that a lot lately, and he hadn’t complained, not even once. Occasionally, he would throw in a jab about Alan, but it was never as heavy as the ones I’d been throwing.

I turned my head side to side to stretch my neck. The crunch from the apple was beckoning me to turn around and watch him eat, but I wouldn't dare. I placed my hands on the kitchen island and lifted myself onto the white marble surface. He reached over and grabbed me, practically lifting me in his arms to the other side. With precision, he shifted me to face him and stood between my legs. He bit down on what could've very well been the forbidden fruit, taking the last bite.

“Forget about Alan,” he said. “If you need a date, I'll cancel my photo shoot and be there in a flash.”

“Don't be ridiculous. You're going to be on the cover of GQ. One does not simply cancel the photo shoot to something that's as historic as that.”

He tossed the apple core into the trash. “I should've demanded a different day. Any day but that one. Besides, I'm not fond of being in front of the camera anyway.”

It was true. Sebastian Cartwright was a world renown photographer. He crossed barriers and set records that had thrown him into a life of luminary, inspiring photographers all around the globe.

“You remember what happened the last time we stepped out together?” he asked.

I leaned back on my hands. “Yeah, but paparazzi go crazy whenever we step out. So, for someone who doesn't care to be in front of the lens, why would you offer to go to this event with me?”

“Because you’re my best friend, I love you, and I will always support you.”

There was something going on with the universe because the air around us became thick and warm. He’d said those exact words before, but somehow this time they seemed different. Determined to shake this craziness off, I sat up straight and gave a goofy smile.

“Aw, that’s so sweet, I love you, too, and being your best friend, I can’t allow you to cancel your plans for me.” He opened his mouth to respond. “Ah!” I said, cutting him off. “I don’t want to hear it. No’s a no.”

My front door opened then shut. We both turned toward it just in time to see Alan glide around the corner. He stopped short at the sight of us. Creases formed in his forehead; he frowned. I imagined what this must have looked like with me sitting on the counter and Sebastian still standing in front of me. And I wasn’t ready for the argument that would surely ensue.

Chapter Two

“Did I interrupt something?” Alan’s voice was heavy and strained.

I placed my hands on Sebastian’s chest and gave him a slight push so our bodies wouldn’t collide when I slid off the counter to face Alan. “We were just discussing the exhibit,” I replied. “I didn’t think you would be stopping by for a while. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I didn’t think I needed a reason to stop by. You are my woman.” The words crept out like venom. “Should I return when you two are finished doing whatever it is that you’re doing?”

I felt Sebastian move behind me, then his well-built arms encircle my waist. His lips touched my cheeks slow and warm, and I was almost sure I blushed. “I’ll see you later, Buttercup. If you need me just holler and I got you.”

His footsteps disappeared, then he yelled, “If you make it a habit not to answer your phone, I’ll be back!” The door shut.

“So, you’re just going to let him disrespect me like that?”

Here we go. I swear it never failed. Alan was crazy jealous of my friendship with Sebastian. Understandably so, but I’d informed him on more than one occasion not to be. Our relationship had never gone past the friend zone, well except

that one time, but that was ancient history, so it irked me to my bones because it seemed to be the one thing we argued about. That and my career.

“Please don’t start. I have no desire to beat a dead horse.”

“You always do that. Why is it that what I care about doesn’t matter to you?”

“It does, but what do you want me to do about how you feel? How can I change it? Please let me know.”

“You can stop seeing him.”

I gawked at him. Dang, did he just tell me to kick my friend to the curb? My *best* friend?

“Stop seeing him,” I mocked. “You say that like we’re friends with benefits.”

“If the shoe fits,” he said.

“Okay, now you’re over exaggerating.”

He folded his arms across his chest and peered at me with a contemptuous glare. “I won’t stand around and watch my woman get felt up by another man.”

I walked over to him and slid my arms around his neck. He was trying to be serious, but I just wanted him to let it go. “Baby, Sebastian is hardly feeling me up. That’s called a hug. You know we’re affectionate toward one another. We grew up together. It’s the only way we know how to be. But, I don’t want to talk about him anymore. Let’s talk about me and you.” I happily changed the subject. “You know,” I kissed his chin, “I need you.” I laid my head to the side and kissed his

neck. “I can’t show up at my event alone.” I placed a slow, soft kiss on his lips.

“Well maybe you can go with your best friend.” He grabbed my arms and removed them, taking a step back.

I was miserable with this rhetoric. “Why won’t you let this go?”

“Until you show me some respect, I’ll be gone.” He turned away from me and walked down the hall. The door slammed and I winced. Everything I’d said was true. Sebastian and I had been this affectionate since grade school. But now that we were adults, any relationship we’d ever been in was plagued by jealous mates. It was like recorded audio on a constant loop. My mother kept telling me I’d never find a man who would stay around as long as Sebastian was my friend. How sad is that? How would I find my one true love?

I should’ve blamed Sebastian, but I didn’t. I had to admit I’d never even considered cutting off our friendship for the sake of whatever relationship I was in at the time, not indefinitely anyway. The notion seemed absurd, but I was starting to believe my mother because I just couldn’t seem to keep a man around.

Alan and I had been dating for eight months on and off. He had by far exceeded any man I’d dated. But lately, I wasn’t feeling him and was just about ready to give up. Besides, his constant excessive need to argue about Sebastian and his thought about me working too much made me feel like I was fighting a losing battle with him.

I strolled to my bedroom and retrieved my cell phone. There were five missed calls. Three were from Sebastian, one

from Alan and one from my mother.

I redialed Sebastian. “I think he just set a new record,” he answered, knowing that since I was calling him, Alan was gone.

“You know you were wrong for that.”

“What I do?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know. What was up with that hug and the kiss? “

“I kiss you all the time. Since when has it become a problem?”

“Not like that!” I held my hand up in a fist as if he could see me shaking it at him. “You might as well have stuck your tongue down my throat for how sexual you made it all slow and soft. What was that!?” There was no response from him. I checked the call to make sure we were still connected. “Hello?”

“You’re right. It won’t happen again. Scout’s honor.”

For some reason, that didn’t make me feel as relieved as it should’ve, but I would have a conversation with myself about that later.

“My whole equilibrium is thrown off now.” I dropped onto my queen size pillow top mattress and slumped.

“I’m sorry,” Sebastian said. “Since it is my fault, let me make it up to you.”

I sighed. “It’s not your fault. He would’ve been jealous just by you being around.”

“Suit up. I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

I rolled to my side and squinted at the clock on the nightstand. 2:35 p.m. "I'll be ready." I ended the call and rolled to my back, exhaling deeply. Maybe Alan was right, maybe I was putting Sebastian first. I closed my eyes tight and tried to imagine what my life would be like without Sebastian in it. No one to fuss at, no one to fuss to, no one to make me laugh, or cry on their shoulder. No one to build me up when I felt down. Boy, this was beginning to sound depressing. Then a thought came to mind. I sat up, bewildered by it. No, I told myself. Absolutely not. I had to shake these uncomfortable feelings before I drove myself crazy.

My feet sank into the plush carpet I had custom added throughout my bedroom floor plan. Standing in front of my closet, I shimmied out of the short shorts I wore whenever I painted. My hair was wrapped in a turban, Erykah Badu style. I removed my shirt and stepped into my walk-in closet, circling my sets of custom-made biker suits. I stopped at the red and black Yamaha leather 'fit. It had been a while since I wore this one, so I snatched it off the hanger and grabbed my matching red helmet. Underneath my suit was a set of black boots specifically for bike riding. I dressed, peeling the suit on until it laid against my frame like a second layer of skin.

My feet slid into my boots with ease, and I bent down to zip them up on the side. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, I unraveled my turban. I had been growing my hair out for five years now. I used to keep it short and sweet, but one day I'd decided I wanted it long and strong. Now it hung a little past the middle of my back, thick in soft waves. I went to the master bathroom and grabbed my brush, taking it to the side of my head. Whenever we took out the bikes, I swept my

hair into a tight ponytail; my helmet sat better without the extra resistance. Once I finished, I went to the kitchen to get a bottle of water. The canvas caught my attention, and I glanced toward it.

I was definitely on to something. The buildings I created in the backdrop were a perfect sketch of downtown. The woman and man sitting on the bench were as close as close could be. I'd never seen either of them before, but somehow, they'd turned out to be no doubt in love. The adoration on the woman's face was evident in her soft features, pursed lips and stormy grey eyes. The man was equally fond of her, his lips sitting against her forehead, his arm wrapped around her waist. Even in the painting, you could tell he'd pulled her in for an intimate embrace. His nose slightly lifted as if he'd gotten a waft of her exotic fragrance.

My front door opened and shut. Footsteps called for attention as they came down the hallway. I turned toward him.

"I forgot to lock that door when Alan left," I said, still viewing the couple in the canvas. I blinked several times, trying to pull my focus to Sebastian.

"That's something you shouldn't forget. This is why we need to be roommates. What if someone tried to break in? You might as well leave the door open."

"Roommates," I laughed, "yeah right, there's no way I could deal with your many late nights with whomever." I put the bottle of water down.

"That's all you got?" he asked, talking about my jab.

“No, I’ve got more. If I’m unable to keep a man now, I would never be able to keep one for sure then.”

“I see you pulled out the red and black one. I’ve always liked that suit on you.”

“Ditto,” I said, admiring his black on grey jacket, gloves, and boots. His jeans, however, were made for him. I swear he got them custom made.

“Shelby, are you checking me out?” His inquisitive stare sent a stroke of tingles all over my skin.

I guffawed and walked up on him. “You wish.” I pushed past him, helmet in hand and went out the front door.

Chapter Three

Outside in the garage, I pulled the tarp off my 2017 5-speed Yamaha V-Star. An electric white, 650 custom, smooth cruiser with a plush customized seat. I loved her; she had chrome accents and could take me two hundred miles before needing to fill up. I hopped on top of her, turning on the engine simultaneously. She purred to a growl, lighting a fire in me. I looked to Sebastian who was standing to the side, watching me closely.

“You’re almost there, and we haven’t even left yet.” He winked and strolled to his bike. It was the same make and model but a sharp black and grey. He could always tell when I’d get a spark of creative juices flowing. I swear he knew me better than my mama. I couldn’t pull my eyes away when he tossed a leg over the mountain of steel, his shirt and jacket rising just enough for me to get a peek of his toned waistline. He added his helmet, and it sat perfect and sexy on his strong neck and broad shoulders. He revved the engine and looked back at me. He was right, my mind was giving me all kinds of creational vibes.

I pulled out of the driveway, leaning toward the right so the bike would curve just right. I didn’t need to look behind me to know Sebastian was close on my heels. Like clockwork, he would speed up and take the lead long enough to give me an inkling of where we were riding to, then he would slow down like a gentleman and allow me to stay in front of him.

When he passed me, my mind drifted to the time we purchased the bikes. Well, when he bought his and *gifted* me the bike.

“Now that we’ve taking classes, we should go and rent some bikes,” I suggested then.

“Why rent when we can buy?” he asked.

I stood, legs apart with my hands on my hips. “Mr. Cartwright, do you know how much it would cost to purchase bikes?”

“I do, and I don’t see the problem. I can afford it. Besides, you’ll pay me back once you sell those paintings you’ve been working so hard on.”

He knew I wouldn’t allow him to purchase big ticket items for me unless there was a payment plan in place. At the time, I had just finished my very first set of paintings and was extremely nervous that they wouldn’t sell. That was twelve years ago. I was a teenage girl with spunk and attitude. And I’d just gotten my driver’s license. Sebastian and I had been sneaking off to take bike riding courses. I should say, *I’d* been sneaking off because Sebastian was eighteen and graduating that spring. He’d made his mark in the world earlier than I, so he could definitely afford it. He managed to talk me into browsing when the salesman handed me over a set of keys.

“What are these for?”

“Your new bike.” He pointed to the set of Yamahas. My eyes had nearly popped out of my head.

“I can’t afford this bike.”

“They’re already paid for,” the salesman said.

I looked to Sebastian, mouth agape. “You’ve already bought them!”

A smile lit up his handsome face. “Come on, Buttercup, this one’s yours.” His hand slid into mine, his fingers pulling me along to the sports bike.

“I can’t take this home. My mother will kill me!”

He faced me, his hands caressing the sides of my face. “Calm down, I’ve got everything covered. The bikes will sit at my house, and anytime you want to take them out we can. Now just relax and enjoy the ride.” He kissed my forehead and handed me a helmet. When we pulled out of the lot, he took the lead until I noticed the direction and figured out he was taking us to the arch. I revved my engine and he slowed down, allowing me to get in front of him and we rode.

That was one of my favorite teenage memories. Since then, Sebastian had upgraded our bikes every year. No matter how much grief I gave him about it.

I watched him as he rode with strength in his technique, a master of the engine, hitting curves with smooth glides against soft winds. It was then that I saw it. My next painting, with the sun shining high, the wind flowing through his wheels, past his face, through his jacket as he leaned into a graceful curve. The scene became still and filed in my memory to be reborn at a later date. I sped to his side and stayed there for the duration of the ride.

Three miles into our adventure, we came to a stop at a bike riders show. Sitting idle atop our five hundred pounds of steel, we admired other motorists and their custom-made toys.

I removed my helmet and shook my ponytail, allowing it to fall to my back.

“That was exactly what I needed,” I said.

Sebastian removed his helmet, cupping it under his arm. “When did it happen?” he asked.

“On the way over here. I can’t wait to paint it.”

He swept a gaze over me. “I can’t wait to see it.”

I cracked a smile. “Why Mr. Cartwright, are you checking me out?” I joked, mimicking what he’d asked me at my condo.

He winked. “Maybe.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Shut up!” I kicked the foot stand so my bike could sit on its own, and swung my leg over. After getting off the bike, I walked to him. I pinched his cheek, knowing he hated when I did that. Sure enough, he swatted me. I continued to laugh as I messed with him. His arms encircled my waist and before I knew it, I was bent over his lap.

“Hey!” I yelled.

Now he was laughing. “Oh no, you wanted to play games, so let’s play.”

“Okay, okay, I’m done, I give up!” He smacked me across my butt, and I shrieked. He was having too much fun. “Sebastian!”

His strong hands lifted me, turning me around to sit in front of him on his bike.

“Sebastian Cartwright?” Simultaneously, we looked to the nearby biker. “Oh my God, it is you!” The woman practically ran toward us, elated that she’d spotted him.

“Can I have your autograph? Oh my God, I have your photo of the eskimo with snow frozen eyelashes. What an epic picture. You do wonderful work. I couldn’t capture that if I wanted to. You’re truly gifted. Oh please let me have an autograph!”

I tried to lift myself off his bike, but he held me close. “What is your name?” he asked the admirer.

“Lindsey Spellman!”

“Lindsey, I don’t have an ink pen, but if you do, I’ll be glad to give you an autograph.”

She squealed and ran off to her bike. Sebastian’s arm lay leisurely around my waist; the warmth of our closeness gave me weird vibes. Lindsey ran back all smiles, ink pen and her helmet in hand.

“Please sign my helmet!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” She clasped her hands together, excitement bubbling over.

I tried to stand again, and this time I wiggled away from him. He scribbled on her helmet, and she gushed, “Thank you so much!”

“You’re more than welcome.”

“You know, your friend over here looks like that famous painter, um, what’s her name?” She tapped her head

and thought for a minute.

Sebastian chuckled. “Shelby Nichole Donahue,” he said.

“That’s right! I can never remember her name.” She cheesed.

“Well, Lindsey, today is your lucky day.”

I shook my head adamantly, but of course, he ignored me.

Lindsey gasped again. “Nooo!” she said. “Get out of town, are you really her?”

I smiled thinly. “I am.”

The girl jumped up and down. “Two for the price of one! I should go play lottery. Do you mind signing on the other side?”

How could I say no? Her hopeful gleam was all I needed to grab her helmet and sign. “Of course.”

A man jogged over. “Lindsey!”

She squealed and pointed to us. “It’s Sebastian Cartwright and...” She snapped her fingers, trying to remember my name.

“Shelby,” I said flatly.

“Oh yes! Shelby Nichole Donahue, the famous artist!”

“I didn’t know you guys were bikers. I’m Ron Spellman, Lindsey’s husband.” He held his hand out for a shake.

“How are you, Ron?” Sebastian asked. “Great show, huh?”

“Oh yeah, we come to these things all the time. My wife is a serial bike rider. She’ll sit for days, mapping out the next show in neighboring states. I hope she’s not giving you too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” Sebastian and I chorused together.

“Daphney, come,” Lindsey said, waving over a friend. “Look who it is!”

Other eyes focused in on us, and before long, we were surrounded by a group. I cautiously strolled back to my bike and hopped on. We signed a few more helmets before revving up our engines. It was time to go. The crowd slowly dispersed when they saw us gearing up to leave. I hit the gas and shifted the gear, picking up speed. Once we were out of sight, I slowed and pulled into a gas station. Sebastian pulled next to me and opened the flap on his helmet.

“Everything all right?”

I twisted my lips. “You know you were wrong for throwing my name out there.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. Lindsey was on to you. She just couldn’t spit your name out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever, now we have to find another spot. You know how hard it is to find a decent place for us.”

“I know, Buttercup, but she’d already made me. It wouldn’t have been too long before we had to book it.”

“Since you were spotted first, you have to pick another destination for us.”

“I know just the place. Follow me.”

Chapter Four

Ten miles and thirty minutes later, we were in the middle of the Collection of Art's Day Parade downtown.

"Just in time," Sebastian said.

We rode up a ramp, parking our bikes onto a floating platform. An easel stood flanked with a blank canvas. Paint brushes and a color palette adorned a small white steady table top. I placed my helmet on my bike and glided to the stationery.

"Thank you," Sebastian said, grabbing a dual shot camera and tripod from a nearby volunteer. I turned completely around.

"Did you set this up?"

He smiled. "Yeah, you like?"

My surprise turned into appreciation. My face lighting up like a kid on Christmas. He focused on the right angle then sat the tripod down. I went to him, my head dropping in the middle of his chest. His arms encircled me, and I hugged him back.

"You are something else, you know that?" It wasn't usual for me to create a painting with thousands of onlookers. But it gave me the same rush I had when riding my bike. I'd tried this a couple of times before, and it seemed to ignite a fire that spread throughout my entire being. I shivered thinking

about it and pulled back, placing a kiss on his chin. A strong smile graced his face, and this time I bit his chin and moved to the side. We waved as the platform floated down the street at the onlookers. Men, women, and children smiled, some with face painting and others eating hot dogs, popcorn and drinking beverages.

I moved to the stationery and grabbed the brush. I dipped the tip into a grey and stroked the canvas. It had begun, my mind was in full effect, taking mental snapshots and delivering each frame onto the board. In the background, I could hear Sebastian's camera, and I knew he would have superior photos to coincide with my painting. Besides bike riding, it was one of the things we loved doing together. Taking the same scenery and creating different images. When it was all said, we would take the images, put them together, and sell them in a pair that would go for millions.

The world around me slowed as I captured people in the audience, on the floating platforms ahead of us and others dressed in costumes marching alongside of us. The wind whipped around me, and I added detail after detail into the frame. I caught a glimpse of a shadow and glanced to my side. Sebastian was on one knee taking shots into the crowd. My hand curved as I painted him into the canvas. His leather jacket that covered what I knew to be muscular arms underneath. The camera in his hand, the angle of his shot and the handsome side profile of his face. My eyes lingered on his lips a bit too long, and right as he moved, I turned back to the canvas and continued the subtle attack on my creation.

The cheers and yells from the crowd made me smile. The music from the parade gave off a family fun atmosphere. I

grabbed another brush, adding more colors and elements to the board. I almost never let anyone see my rough drafts. But in the case of these sporadic live paintings, I was forced to let the world see me paint from scratch. I had to admit this one was turning out to be spectacular. The platform bent a corner as we made it to the end of one street, on to the next. The never-ending crowd of people lined up to see each part of the parade on every corner. It went on for several streets before coming to a halt. How many hours had passed I didn't know. I was so enthralled in what I was doing. Finally, I took a step back, tilting my head to the side slightly as I absorbed the canvas. Someone behind me clapped their hands, and I turned to the sound.

“This is fantastic!” the volunteer squealed. “Oh my God, I can't wait to tell my husband how I spent my day on a float with Sebastian Cartwright and Shelby Nichole Donahue!” More excited squeals bellowed from her. I reached out and hugged her.

“It was a great experience for sure. Thanks for having us.”

“Trust me, the pleasure is all mine!”

Sebastian was speaking to an elderly woman from the crowd. He was a humble guy, always intrigued with anything anyone had to say. He plastered a lazy grin on his face and spoke quietly, bending and whispering in her ear. The lady was tickled to the bone at whatever it was he said. She swatted the air in an attempt to wave him off as she continued to giggle at his words. He pulled her in for a hug and gentle pat on the back. A moment passed when I realized I was smiling.

“This,” the volunteer walked to the canvas, “is high quality imagery! Look at the crowd and floats. Wow, you are truly gifted. If I tried anything like this, all those people would be stick figures.”

I laughed and shook my head. The event organizer jumped onto the float, hand held out. “Thank you so much for joining us for this parade. I’m Christina Stevens. This is truly an amazing experience. I know you’ve only done a live painting a few times before, so believe me when I say this will be something the people of this city will never forget.”

“I can’t take all the credit,” I said. Sebastian strolled to us. Even though I’d turned my back to him, I could always tell when he was near. “This was a surprise to me from this guy right here.” I turned slightly and pointed.

He leaned forward and kissed my temple. “It was long overdue for a live event, don’t you think?”

“I’m not complaining at all. It was lovely.”

“Wait,” Christina said, “so you’re saying you didn’t have a clue that you were due to be in this parade today?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

Christina’s mouth fell open. “How is that possible when we’ve been advertising your appearance on the news all week?”

Sebastian answered her question, a full devilish smile curling his lips. “She’s been in her art studio for a month now preparing for the exhibit this fall. When she goes in, nothing distracts her. She doesn’t watch TV or even answer phone calls.” It was a direct jab, but I let him have it. “Sometimes I

have to barge over to make sure she's still alive and taking her daily showers."

A harmonious giggle bubbled from Christina. I side-punched Sebastian in the arm. "Whatever."

"You guys are the cutest couple. You must enjoy romantic dates and frivolous misconduct. You set the tone for those of us who haven't given up on love."

I was almost certain a flush fell over my face. When Sebastian didn't respond, I stuttered out a nervous laugh. "Actually, we're not together. We've been friends since I was thirteen."

"Really? Well," her voice dipped, "you complement each other nicely, if you don't mind me saying. Maybe you should go on a date or something. Some friends make the best lovers."

"And some don't," I quickly stated.

She tilted her head in agreement. "Yes, you're right, but you'll never know unless you explore it." She shrugged. "But hey, I'll mind my business." She held her hand out to shake Sebastian's. "It was a pleasure having you both. If there's ever anything I can do for either of you, let me know." She handed us both a business card.

"We most certainly will," I said. Christina smirked and left. I leaned into Sebastian's shoulder. "How are we going to get this canvas to the studio?"

Two guys walked toward us, and Sebastian introduced them. "Shelby, this is Rick and Nelson. They'll make sure this canvas gets to your condo."

“You think of everything.” I watched the men put the canvas in a protective shield.

“You should be used to it by now.”

“When we were teenagers, you got on my nerves so bad I must’ve had slight memory loss.” He pierced an eye at me, and I laughed.

“I’m just playing.” I continued to laugh.

He grabbed me by my thighs and holstered me over his shoulder.

I hollered. “Okay, I’m done, I give up, you win!”

A sinfully sexy laugh bellowed from him. “Unhuh, I’m sure you give up now. I don’t know why you play with me, woman, you know you’ll never win.” He sat me down on my feet. I was dizzy and lost my footing. His grip held tightly, drawing me in to catch my fall.

“Oh.” I softly gasped, getting a whiff of his natural scent. My body reacted in a way that was unnerving.

“Be careful, silly goose.” His voice sent a beat through me like a drum.

I recovered quickly. “It’s your fault.” I pivoted, heading straight to my bike.

“Let me feed you.”

I glanced back. “Are you cooking?”

He gave a single nod. “Sure am.”

“All right. I’ll follow you.”

I pulled my helmet down and turned on my ignition. In seconds, both of our motorcycles were barreling down the street zig zagging in and out of traffic. People in the distance waved as downtown grew farther and farther away. The wind flew past my face at lightning speed. With Sebastian in my rear view, all I could think about was why I was having these unsettling feelings about him.

Once on the highway, I hit speeds at eighty miles an hour, cruising around rush hour traffic with precision. I wondered if I should have a conversation with him. After all, we'd always been honest and upfront with each other. Why would this time be any different? It shouldn't be, but there was a simmering heat in my gut that threatened to erupt every time we came into contact. It became a struggle I didn't like and one I was desperate to understand.

Chapter Five

I shivered when we entered his penthouse. “I see your air is working.”

“I’ll turn it off.”

“Too late,” I said, standing at his thermostat. I strolled to the kitchen counter and sat my helmet down. “It looks like you upgrade this place every time I stop by.”

Sebastian’s kitchen was modern with stainless steel appliances, hardwood floors, and marble countertops. There were floor-to-ceiling mirrors located in various corners of the place. An immaculate bar station was in the corner of the living room with every liquor you could think of. The soft grey and white colors were perfect for his bachelor lifestyle. I could tell no woman had decorated the place, not that one would. I’d kill him if he let someone besides me put their hands on the place.

“You should stop by more often then.” He pinned me with a divine gaze.

“How often should I come over? I do come weekly, you know.” I went into his fruit bin and grabbed a handful of grapes, popping one into my mouth. He was watching me intensely. This is when I should have asked about the awkwardness between us.

Go ahead, Shelby, I coached myself. *Spill it*. My mouth opened, but no sound came out.

“Why don’t you get comfortable?”

I raised an eyebrow. “We’ve had this conversation before. There’s no way we could be roommates. Besides, you have no guest room. It’s rude, I’m telling you. How can your guest be relaxed staying when you have no accommodations in place for them?” I was perplexed about it and seriously needed to know.

He walked to me with a controlled stride and invaded my space. He brushed a string of hair that had fallen out of place behind my ear, and I quivered from our brief contact.

“What I meant was, you should get comfortable tonight,” he said. “There’s no need for you to ride back across town to your place.” I hadn’t been embarrassed around Sebastian in years, but somehow, I felt like a fool now. “And to answer your question, anyone who stays over here sleeps with me, uses my bathroom, and has plenty of space in my closet to turn it into another bedroom, which means there’s plenty of space for clothes.”

He was too close, his peppermint breath stalked my mouth, and my lips parted. There was nowhere for me to run; my back was against the refrigerator. There was that nervous laugh again. I slid my arms around his waist and placed my head just below the apple in his neck.

“That’s what I get for talking to soon, huh? You’re right about one thing, you do have enough space, but I hope there are no other clothes that reside where mine are.” I moved to the side to escape our proximity.

“Shelby, have you ever seen another woman here?”

I shrugged. “No, not really.”

“Not really?”

“There was that one morning I stopped by and a woman was leaving in a rush.”

“That woman had managed to talk security into letting her up to my floor. I didn’t know her, and she never set foot into my place.”

“Oh my God.”

“You’re the only one who’s been in here, Buttercup.” He strolled to the cabinets and pulled out two glasses and removed a cold bottle of wine from the fridge. It was getting warm in here. I looked toward the thermostat.

“Did you turn on the heat?”

He grinned and poured. “Haven’t touched it. Are you hot now?”

I squirmed. “Um, not hot, just a little warm that’s all. Maybe I should get out of this suit. I fled to his bedroom, practically running to his closet. Inside, I leaned against a shelf, giving myself time to relax my churning gut and fast-paced heart. Our verbal exchanges were becoming more and more indifferent as time passed. If I’m to be honest, this all started a long time ago. Back when I was celebrating my twenty-first birthday and had just sold an art piece for the largest amount ever.

“I’m so proud of you,” Sebastian had said. “I always knew you had it in you.” He pinched my cheek.

“Did you now?” I leaned into him casually.

“Of course. How long have I been saying it would happen?”

“Forever! It used to drive me crazy, too.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, you’d just roll your eyes and say, whatever.”

“That’s because I wanted it to happen right then.”

“Everyone does, but it takes time, Buttercup.”

“I know that now.”

We were standing outside of Cavern, a local night club where we’d just danced the night away. Then out of nowhere, he leaned in and kissed me, setting a fire to every nerve in my body. I pulled back, slightly surprised at the intense intrusion. I’m a woman, so sure it had crossed my mind a time or two. Sebastian was incredibly sexy and all male. He’d grown into his masculinity quite nicely, and I had noticed on more than one occasion. But that need to continue our friendship was a must, and even though I was aware of this, at that moment, looking into his dark eyes with the buzz of electric currents still tingling on my lips, I gave in.

Like an addict, I needed more. I wanted to forever feel the intense blaze that just ran through me. I’d never felt that with any of my boyfriends, so I was more intrigued on how or why our connection sparked the way it did. We pulled apart, breathless and saturated with a molten furnace. I don’t know who was the first to move, but we were in the car riding to my place. When we got there, I was focused on letting go of reason and having him if only for one night. But he seemed to

go distant. I'd pulled him into my bedroom and let him watch me strip down to my bra and panties, and he went cold. His eyes had given off an intense glow, but his body language had completely frozen up. Like snapping out of a dream, I realized he didn't want me, and that was the first time I'd been embarrassed around him. Quickly, I'd moved to put on some clothes, and he still hadn't said a word. When I looked to him, his jaw was tight, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

"I'm sorry," I'd said.

Finally, he spoke, "There's no need to be sorry. This is all me. I shouldn't have kissed you. I'm such an idiot."

That made it even worse. I don't think he realized it. I blushed. "It's fine, really. You should probably head home, it's late."

The next few weeks were the most awkward. He'd called countless times, and I'd answer before the third call, "I'm okay, just working." I could tell he wanted to make sure I wouldn't jump off a cliff, but I was good, truly. At least that's what I thought.

He tried to explain, "About your birthday night..."

But I'd cut him off every time. Honestly, I didn't want to rehash it. I'd gone over it, time and time again in my mind, and it was embarrassing enough. "It's fine, seriously. I'll talk to you later."

Our repartee went on a while like that before I'd finally settled down long enough to get over it. My relationships with men had come and gone, and I couldn't quite seem to settle down. I wanted to be in love, but I didn't know why it wasn't

happening. That was when my mother said I'd have to get rid of Sebastian to make that work. At the time, it seemed crazy, but now I was having second thoughts. It was becoming more obvious to me that those ravenous emotions I felt toward him still lingered. They'd been dormant for a long time, but now they were trying to escape, and I would not embarrass myself again.

Shaking memories from my mind, I took in deep breaths and went to the corner of his closet that held my overnight bag of belongings. Yes, we were just that close that I would keep a bag at his place; he kept one at my place, too.

I could probably go on and on about the many things that drove our previous and present spouses away because of our friendship, but that would take forever. I crouched down and went through the bag. There was an old high school sweater in there that he'd given me after winning the championship game his senior year. I pulled out the sweater, and once again, memories rushed through me.

Sebastian had made the catch and ran in for a touchdown, sealing the win. The crowd had run onto the field to celebrate, and he'd been picked up. They were like a wave in the sea as he floated on top of people with the ball in his hand and a humongous smile on his gorgeous face. When he left the locker room later that night, the sweater covered his broad shoulders. I stood, waiting for him, still in my cheerleading uniform. Immediately, he removed the sweater, covering me from the chill of the night. The T-shirt he wore underneath was thin and frail.

“No, you'll freeze,” I'd said.

“Hush, woman, I’ll hear none of that. Let’s go.” He’d thrown his arm around me, and we went to party with everyone else.

I pulled the sweater to me and sniffed; I could almost smell the breeze from that night. After unzipping my suit and boots, I took the sweater and strolled to his master bathroom. The lights illuminated as I walked into the sanctuary. Like the rest of his place, it was huge, stocked with all the essentials one would need. He said no other woman had been here before, and I was starting to believe him. The Dove body wash I loved sat on its own shelf along with bath beads, aromatherapy candles, shampoo and conditioner that I used faithfully. It had become no big deal. His daily essentials were also stocked at my place. It was beginning to seem painfully obvious that we had a thing going on. But we were just always around each other. What would be the point in constantly dragging items with us when we could just stock them?

I tried clearing my thoughts. This was perfectly normal, I told myself. I slid open the glass shower door and ran the water. The bathroom steamed, bringing a warmth of heat with it. With my hair still pinned, I removed my panties and bra and stepped in.

Please get a grip, Shelby, I said to myself. Why didn’t you just have the conversation?

It was a no-brainer. I didn’t want to embarrass myself again. I sighed and held my face toward the spray of the shower head. The heavy sting of the water drummed a deep massage into my shoulders. I turned my back to it and dropped my head, allowing the spray to work through my bones.

Today had been very eventful. I'd lost my flow and regained it as soon as Sebastian and I had left my condo. He always knew exactly what I needed. Then that voice crept into my thoughts. The one that always tried to push me forward into considering a romantic relationship with him. I shut my eyes tight to try and rid myself of them. It didn't work. Instead, an image of him glided through my vision. His muscled physique standing strong and tall. Broad shoulders, a wide chest and washboard abs. I licked my lips as my hand slid down my bare belly to my clitoris. I moaned and almost slip. My eyes snapped open and my arms shot out to brace myself from what would surely be a painful fall. My breathing was heavy and my throat parched. This was too much. I had to know if he was feeling this, and I needed to know now. I finished my shower and got out, my determination set in stone.

Chapter Six

Feeling relaxed I walked down the hallway and reentered the kitchen, comb in hand as I took its bristles through my wavy mane. Sebastian had shed his jacket, gloves, and boots. He stood with his back to me, facing the stove, stir frying our dinner. There was no sign of his shirt, just his bare back and endless expanse of unembellished skin. My body tensed as a simmering pathway of nerves nestled between my thighs. I cursed silently. What was I going to do about this insatiable desire I had? With every moment that went by that I spent with him, it became uncontrolled. I pressed my thighs together to diminish the arousal that throbbed from them. Although I made no noise, he paused his movements then slowly turned to face me. I couldn't read his mind, and it was driving me crazy. His eyes roamed the full length of me, lingering a bit on my bare legs.

“Look what I found. I forgot it was in my bag.” Nervous and disconcerted, I was acting like we hadn't known each other for years. This was ridiculous, I thought.

“It still fits you... with the exception of a few curves,” he said through husky vocals.

I looked down at myself. The sweater stopped mid-thigh; it had never really fit, so it was funny that he would use those words to describe it as such. A sudden shift in my movements caused the oversize top to drop off one shoulder.

His stormy dark eyes followed the movement, and his jaw clenched.

“I see you’re almost done,” I said, my mouth drying at the hunger I thought I saw in his eyes.

He turned back to the stove and removed the skillet to another burner. “I am.”

I found a seat at the isle and reached for the glass of red wine he had sitting there for me. I took a much-needed sip. The sweet and sour alcohol journeyed down my throat, sitting on top of the tingle that circled my insides. He fixed our plates and placed them before us on the isle. The three flat screen TVs that hung from the wall begged us to watch them. Really, I could use the distraction myself. When he came to sit next to me, I couldn’t help but examine him. His front looked just as delicious as his back, even more so. I squirmed again and wonder if he could read my body language.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I closed my eyes and built my confidence. Impetuously, I said, “Are we okay?”

The glass of scotch that was halfway to his mouth paused as he turned to me. “Why wouldn’t we be?” He took the gulp of hot liquor and placed his glass down.

I shuffled between my thoughts. “I’ve been feeling some weird vibes coming from you. Are you feeling this or am I tripping?”

He gave me a lengthy, considering look. “I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

I shook my head. “Never mind, I must be out of it.”

“Let’s talk about it. What is it you feel,” he paused, “weird about?”

Now that we were here, in this place, in this time and we’d arrived at this conversation that I’d been thinking about all day, I froze up. I tried to laugh it off like it was nothing. My eyes faltered to his bare chest, and somehow my bottom lip ended up between my teeth. I let out an exasperated sigh. “Can’t you put on some clothes or something?”

He raised an amused brow. “This bothers you now? It never has before.”

Sebastian was right, but it bothered me now. “I’m just saying.”

“You’re walking around in a sweater, and I’m not yanking your chain.” A smile played around his lips.

“You’re right.” I hopped down off the stool. “I should go change.” I took a step before he graciously swept me up in his arms. My heart hammered in my chest, and I was caught in the undertow of his dark eyes. My arms snaked around his neck, and I dropped my head.

“You scared me to death.” I looked back up, inches away from his mouth.

“I was just teasing you, Buttercup. If you want me to put a shirt on, I’ll put one on. I forgot that when you get into a relationship you’re all about the rules.” He placed a kiss on my forehead and released me. I instantly missed his nearness. Relationship? Oh, yes, that would be between me and my boyfriend. I sulked as I watched him walk to his bedroom and disappear.

This was bad. I didn't know how I would be able to focus on my current relationship when I no doubt had romantic feelings for my best friend. I looked down at my bare thighs and wondered if I should also put on some clothes. It didn't seem like Sebastian was having a hard time controlling himself around me, just the other way around. Still I should probably put some on. I strolled to his bedroom just in time to see him putting his long arms into a T-shirt. His chest expanded, and the ripples in his abs extended as he put the garment over his head. In my mind's eyes, I took a snapshot and filed it away. I'd drawn him in paintings before, but I was certain this painting would most likely portray every sensual feeling I was toying with. I changed my mind about putting on some pants and backed away. When I got back to my wine glass, it was empty. Nothing like the present.

I grabbed the bottle of wine that was sitting on ice and re-popped the cork. The red liquid reminded me of how I was feeling, sweet and squishy at the same time. I needed to get my mind off him, but how would I accomplish this with him being around?

I sat back down and said a small prayer over our food and began to eat without him. I figured it was the only way for me to get any of the food down.

“So that's how it is, eat without me?” He wrapped his arms around my waist and squeezed, placing a kiss on my temple. My seat toppled back and I yelped, fighting against him.

“Release me, you madman!”

He laughed and found his seat. If he knew what a distraction he was, he would understand.

“Football season is starting back up,” he said. “We’ve got to pick our fantasy players.” It was a nice change of subject.

“This year has been an interesting one. For quarterbacks, I’ll have to go with Dak Prescott this week.”

He nodded. “Yeah, Dak is showing out this year, and I respect his game, but Imma have to go with Tom Brady.”

I twisted my nose. “Come on, man. What about Marcus Mariota though?”

“I feel like he’s got it but he doesn’t have it.” He laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“He’s got it, but not like these other guys.”

I took another sip of my wine. “I want to thank you for the parade today.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “It was so needed. Only you would think to pull off something like that.”

“Only you would appreciate it and go with the flow,” he responded.

My head was swimming with all the only you’s we’d just spoken, and I was starting to feel weird again.

“Is the food good?”

I smiled brightly. “You know it is. Delicious actually, that’s why I couldn’t wait for you to finish changing before I started eating it.” We laughed. Okay so I lied, but I couldn’t very well tell him I’d starting eating because when he came

around the notion to feed myself evaporated and in its place were thoughts of making love to him.

I took another sip of my wine. “Do you think you’ll ever get married?”

His thoughts didn’t need to process before he responded, “Nah, probably not.”

I think I must have looked like a wounded puppy. He laughed. “What’s up with the sad face, Buttercup?”

“What do you mean, you just told me you’d never find true love.”

“I never said that at all. I said I probably won’t ever get married.”

“Why wouldn’t you get married if you found true love?” I folded my arms, needing to hear his excuse.

“Sometimes the person we love is unattainable. I could never settle for less.”

His eyes bore into me, and I could swear I heard a double meaning. But that thought went away just as quickly as it came.

“We’ll just see about that.”

Inquisitively, he asked, “How do you plan to make sure I marry my true love?”

“I’ve got my ways. I can be a bit of a detective, you know.”

He chuckled. “Oh, you’re going to search her out?”

“So there is a her!” I pointed at him.

He agreed with a tilt of his head. “There is.”

I gasped. “You have to tell me who it is. I can’t believe you kept this from me!” I jumped off my stool and stood in between his outstretched legs, my hands on his thighs, leaning into him with excitement. “Tell me now!”

His arms circled my waist, and he brought his lips to my ear then whispered, “I’ll never tell.”

I jerked back and pushed him. “You suck so bad. I can’t believe you’re keeping her from me. Why? What did I do to you? I thought we told each other everything!”

“A man has to have his secrets.”

I gasped again. “Not from me!”

His charming face bellowed out a laugh, and I pouted.

“Aw.” He pinched my cheeks. “It’s cool, Buttercup. It’ll never happen, so there’s no need to dig into things.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Trust me, I know.”

I felt a sense of sadness for him, but relieved in the same notion. That was so bad.

“Come, let’s Netflix and chill,” he said, pulling me toward the living room.

I allowed him to drag me to the sofa, my mind stuck on what he’d just shared. There was a her. A love he couldn’t obtain. My stomach twisted in a knot. This information unsettled me and it shouldn’t have. I needed to be an adult about this and do one of two things. Tell him I wanted to be his or tell him we needed space. Either way, it was another

conversation I wasn't too thrilled about. If he rejected the notion of a relationship with me, I doubted that I would survive it.

He got comfortable and I sunk into his side, exhaling a heavy breath. What in the world was I going to do?

Chapter Seven

I woke up to strong arms wrapping me in a tight embrace. The heat that enveloped me was warm and soothing. I blinked before realizing I had spent the night at Sebastian's and I was in his bed. His soft snore was music to my ears. When had I start to love it, I wondered. It didn't matter one way or the other, last night he'd told me he was in love. It had taken me by complete surprise, but nonetheless, I was sincerely happy for him but sad for myself. I needed to get over it. He'd been the best thing that happened to me, so surely he would make someone the happiest woman on earth. My thoughts drifted to Alan. He'd left angry the day before, and I'd let him fester in it. I was an awful girlfriend.

To be honest, I didn't feel like more of the same argument. He'd made it easy for me. But today I had to get it together. If I wanted to give our relationship a chance, the ball was in my court. I needed to distance myself from Sebastian, but how in the world was I going to do that? I sighed and shuffled around to face him. His masculine features were soft in his slumber.

Look at you, Shelby, I thought, you couldn't possibly think this is acceptable. What man in his right man would be okay with his girl spending the night with her so-called friend in his bed? But did he have to know? This was harmless. I shook the notion out of my head, knowing I couldn't keep it

from him. If my relationship with Sebastian was as friendly as I said it was, then there's no reason to start hiding stuff now.

I leaned into his neck, nuzzling my nose on his skin. He smelled so good. There was a layer of energy that surrounding us that I just couldn't explain, but I would have to be strong enough to push that to the side and nurture the relationship I had with Alan.

“Good morning.” His rough voice took me by surprise. I moved from against his neck and looked into his eyes. They were barely open, the specks in his dark brown irises compelling me with spellbound attraction.

“Good morning,” I said. “I fell asleep on you.”

“You sure did. I won't hold it against you this time. You needed your rest.”

I put my fingers to my lips and toyed with biting my fingernails.

“What's wrong?” His eyes spread with the notion that I was worried.

I rolled away from him and sat up in bed. I turned my head side to side to pop my neck but no relief came. “Buttercup.”

At the mention of the childhood nickname he'd given me, I exhaled heavily. “I need to leave.”

“Okay.” I heard him move behind me and knew he was probably looking for the clock. “It's still early. Do you need to go now?”

I was prolonging the inevitable. “Do you love me?” I asked.

More movement and now he was beside me. “What’s going on?”

I dipped my head to the side to glance at him. “We need to stop seeing each other for a while.” He didn’t respond, which made this more excruciating. “Alan...” I closed my mouth, thoughts running rapid through my mind. “Alan feels like you’re disrespectful to our relationship. I know you don’t mean to be, and I’ve tried to tell him that, but he can’t see what I can.”

“You know I don’t mean to be?”

I glanced at him again. “Oh come on. You know what I’m saying.”

“Sounds like you’re saying I am disrespectful to your relationship unwittingly.”

“No, you’re not, it can just seem that way because of our affection.”

“I see.”

“It won’t be long just enough time to bring him around.”

“Okay.” His answers were short and curt.

“You understand, don’t you?”

“This is not news. Happens all the time.”

“You can still call me!”

“Goody.”

“Don’t be like that!”

He raised his hands in surrender. “You should get going, I do love you, and I want you to be happy.”

I fidgeted. Everything about this felt wrong, but how would I find out if Alan and I had what it took to be in a meaningful relationship if I didn’t give it a chance? I was second guessing myself. I stood, went into the closet, and replaced his sweater with my Yamaha suit. When I came out, there was no sign of him, but I could hear the shower running from the bathroom. I pursed my lips. We’d had times like this before, so why did it seem so different? I went to the door and raised my hand to knock then opened my fist deciding against it. I left the room, grabbed my helmet, and made it to the door. I lingered there for about five minutes, then turned back around. There he stood, leaning against the door jam, a towel haphazardly thrown around his remarkably sculpted waist, athletic arms, broad shoulders and an extraordinary set of abs on display.

“Leaving without saying goodbye?” his thick voice caused vibrations to ruffle me.

“I thought you were already in the shower. Hey, no hard feelings, right?”

“No hard feelings.”

I went to him, placing a kiss on his jaw. “Call me.” I was out the door, punching the elevator with a frantic finger. I had to get out of there quick before I threw caution to the wind and went back to him. My overbearing emotions justified even more why I needed to space myself from him.

Fifteen minutes, that's all it took to get me back to my condo, which I knew with certainty was a twenty-five-minute ride. I slammed my door and dropped my helmet on the carpet in frustration. If Sebastian was a female, I wouldn't have this issue with Alan. I would also be gay. I huffed and went to my bedroom, peeling off the leather body shaper. My cellphone still sat on the charger, blinking for me to remove it. I had no plans to spend the night over Sebastian's, so I'd left it only thinking I'd be gone for a while. I looked at the screen: two missed calls. They both were from my mother. No texts from Alan either. Seemed like this time he was sticking to his guns. I dialed him.

"You have reached Alan Beckford Attorney at Law, if this is an emergency..." I ended the call and redialed him.

"Alan Beckford," he answered as if he didn't know who I was.

"Good morning, Alan, are you busy?"

"It depends, who wants to know?"

"Okay, I deserved that." I swallowed back the smart comment that was doing practice jumps on my tongue. "I'm sorry." My apology must have caught him off guard. Even I didn't know why I was apologizing. I hadn't done anything wrong.

"Is that right?"

"Yes, you were right, and I want our relationship to truly blossom." He was quiet for a minute. His throat cleared.

"What does that mean, Shelby?"

“I won’t be seeing Sebastian anymore.” It sounded like a curse leaving my lips. It even tasted funny, and I caught myself shifting my tongue around my mouth.

“You mean it?”

“Yes, baby, look. I love you. Let’s stay together.”

I could hear him exhale. “You have no idea how you’ve made my day.”

I smiled genuinely knowing I’d done a noble thing. “Can we have dinner tonight?”

“How about lunch?” he said. “I miss you and want to see you sooner.”

“Sure, where should we meet?”

“What do you feel like?”

“Um, maybe seafood.”

“Davidson’s?”

“Sure, that’ll work.”

“Meet me at 1:30.”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” We ended the call. I was feeling better already. I went to the bathroom and began my morning routine of brushing my teeth and washing my face. Once finished, I made my way to the refrigerator and opened it in pursuit of breakfast. My eyes fell on the buttercup cupcakes I’d bought on a whim while at the grocery store. I looked to the pancake mix sitting on the door, buttercup flavored. I

snatched the mix out aggressively, annoyed that they reminded me of Sebastian.

Who was I kidding? This was going to be harder than the million times before that we'd halted our multi-conversations and pop-up visits, trying to make our significant others content. I fixed a few pancakes and smothered them with syrup. Once I'd eaten one, I left the second one and started off to my studio. Inside sat the canvas I'd finished yesterday. There was a knock at the door.

I grabbed my phone and checked my calendar. There were no appointments today. Strolling to the door, I peered through the peephole. "Can I help you?"

"Delivery for Ms. Shelby Nichole Donahue."

"Just a minute." I went to my bedroom and threw on my terrycloth robe and grabbed my stun gun. You could never be too careful. I unlatched the door and opened it.

"Sign right here, ma'am." He handed me an ink pen. I scribbled my signature.

"What is it?"

He stood to the side and two other fellas held up the canvas I'd painted on the floating platform the day before. For a minute, I just stared at the images I'd created. They all brought me back to the event.

I stepped to the side. "Come in and follow me." I led a trail to my art studio. "You can leave it on that easel over there."

The men were careful with the magnificent piece.

“Have a good day, miss.”

“You as well.” Then I was all alone with the crowd, the floats and the snapping photographer that I couldn’t seem to separate myself or my thoughts from.

Chapter Eight

Seven days. It felt like an eternity. No phone call, no text message, not so much as a just wanted to see if you were alive. Nothing. The week surprisingly had gone by pretty fast. I'd spent most of my time in my art studio painting like my life depended on it. On one hand, it was good. Whenever I felt stressed, I could live in this studio, creating depictions that ended up on living room, gallery and museum walls throughout the nation. On the other, I loathed the feeling because every time I was finished, the escape was over. Yeah, I lived through it every time I revisited my painting, but it was a brief experience. Like an addict, I started with a fresh canvas. I stared at the eight canvases that stood side by side on easels.

I needed to add texture to some of them; others needed softening. The thing about my skill is that I am a perfectionist. I go over each piece, adding details in everything until the story I wanted reflected was undeniably told. So, although I could create the main attributes of the canvas quickly, it took me weeks, months, and sometimes when I was exceptionally picky years to finish them.

I didn't have that kind of time now. The Annual Gala and Art Auction was honoring me this year. It was only four months away. I knew better, but I worked well under pressure,

and staring at the paintings before me was a sure declaration of that. I checked my phone; I was meeting Alan at Tony's Italian restaurant for dinner tonight. He had some great news he wanted to share, and he wanted to make it a celebration. I predicted he would make partner this year, so I was almost certain that was the case. I had two hours to get ready. I put down my brush and trucked out of the room.

What shall I wear? I thought as I slid clothes down the silver bar they hung from. I pulled out a royal purple knee length spaghetti strap dress that I'd never worn. It had been sitting here for a special occasion, and I guess this was as good as any. I showered, lotion and dressed in record time. I had forty-five minutes left. Standing in the mirror, I ran my hands over my attire, the dress fitting in all the right places. Alan was very old school; he'd probably rather me be in a knapsack than this dress. I giggled to myself and shook my head. The diamond studs in my ears sparkled, my tresses hung down my back, and my high heels gave me three extra inches. I grabbed my clutch and keys and left. It took me thirty minutes to get to the restaurant. In times like this, I appreciated the swiftness of my Yamaha.

When I arrived, I handed my keys to the valet and thanked him. Inside, the restaurant was busy with busboys, waitresses, and the hostess moving about.

“Good evening, madam, do you have reservations?”

He couldn't have been any more than twenty years old, his hair slicked back like it'd been brushed with pounds of gel.

“Yes,” I said, “under Beckford.”

“Yes, follow me.” My steps were slow, even as I surveyed the dining area. Alan was already seated; he stood when we approached.

“Sweetheart, you’re right on time.” He beamed.

“Excellent,” I said. “I see you’ve already ordered champagne.” He pulled my seat out, allowing me to sit.

“I did,” he regained his seat, “you know I like things in order, and this definitely calls for order.”

I was happy for him; the elated smile on my face was proof of that. “So tell me. I can’t stand the suspense any longer.”

“Let’s order first.” He snapped his fingers and a waiter appeared. I always thought it was rude to snap at people, but the servers never seemed fazed by it.

“Yes, sir, are you ready to order?” Brandon was his name.

“Yes, we are,” Alan said.

“I haven’t had a chance to go over the menu,” I spoke.

“You’ve seen that menu before. Besides, I’m ordering for you tonight.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “Okay.” I closed the menu and handed it over to Brandon.

“You don’t mind, do you?”

“By all means.” It wasn’t the first time Alan had ordered for me. At first, I found it cute, but then I realized he did it to be in control. Look like ‘the man’ so to speak. We’d had many conversations about relationship roles, and I can’t

tell you how many ended in arguments. Nevertheless, we always got over it and agreed to disagree. Alan had served in the U.S. military for four years. He had a medical discharge due to a knee injury that was not related to his service. When I met him, he was sweet, kind and very motivated. This held true till today. However, his authoritativeness had come out later in our relationship, which caused more conflict than I cared to have. My mom thought he was crazy, but every couple had their disagreements here and there, so it wasn't something I was concerned about.

Our food arrived minutes later, the aroma making my stomach growl.

“I would like to propose a toast,” Alan stated. I held up my glass as the atmosphere shifted and I squirmed in my seat. “Sebastian!” Alan yelled. My breath caught in my chest as I covered it with my hand. I turned slowly and saw him with a tall slender woman on his arm. Is that her? I wondered. His true love? Smiling brightly, Alan waved her over. This news must have been extremely good because this was a first.

Sebastian whispered something to the waiter and sauntered over with his woman friend hanging from his arm. I looked to Alan questionably. I wanted to reach out and feel his forehead to make sure he wasn't running a fever. My eyes landed back on Sebastian, and he was as handsome as ever. His six-foot-five frame hovered over our table in a custom-tailored suit, his wrist adorned with an expensive watch. His freshly shaven face was smooth, his low haircut shaped to his head. There was a sparkle in his eye that I couldn't connect with, and I didn't like it.

“Good evening, Alan.” He turned to me. “Shelby.” I groaned inwardly; he was mad. I couldn’t remember the last time he’d called me by my government name, but then again it was probably best for him not to call me Buttercup.

“I have big news tonight, why don’t you guys sit with us? There’s more than enough room. Who’s your friend?” Alan was all too happy to extend the invitation to them. Was I in the twilight zone?

“Oh, we don’t want to intrude,” Sebastian started.

“I think it’s fine,” the woman on his arm stated. “There’s nothing wrong with a little company, is there?”

His attentive eyes lingered on her, forming a knot of jealousy in my gut. I held my ground, making sure no emotion appeared on my face.

“It’s a celebration,” Alan said. “Wouldn’t be right without witnesses.”

I furrowed a brow at Alan. “If you don’t spit it out!”

He laughed. “This one right here, huh?” he stated toward Sebastian.

Sebastian smiled and it was as phony as all get out. I cracked a smile. I hope he didn’t think he was fooling me because nothing could be farther from the truth. It seemed he was dreading joining us just as much as I was. You’d think we would prefer it, but I’d literally tried to distance myself for the sake of our relationship and here Alan was talking to him like they were best friends. Oh, the irony. I took a much-needed sip of my champagne since I’d been holding the glass for what seemed like forever.

“Shelby, Alan, this is Melanie Travis Scott.” He offered no more knowledge of her, and I needed to know more. Was she the one?

They decided to stay and took their seats. “So Melanie, what is it that you do for a living?” Alan asked.

“I’m the operations manager over A Few Good Men Male Modeling Agency.” She smiled demurely at Sebastian. “I’m trying to get this gorgeous man right here to shoot a spread for us.”

My eyes fell on Sebastian. “He’s all right, I guess.” I shrugged and everyone at the table laughed.

Sebastian leveled me with a glare that was meant to intimidate, but it only fired up my loins. I gave him a haughty fake smile then turned my attention back to Alan. “Okay, you sir are going to tell me what this surprise is, although I think I have a clue.”

Alan looked pleased. “Okay,” he held his tongue for a moment, “I’ve just made partner at the law office.”

I squealed, delighted for him. “I knew it! I knew it!”

“Congratulations!” Melanie cheered.

“Excuse me!” Sebastian spoke to a passing waiter.

“Yes, sir.”

“Can I get a bottle of your finest wine please?”

“Coming right up.” The waiter scurried off.

“You didn’t have to Sebastian,” Alan said.

“This calls for a celebration. Shelby’s told me about your tenacity, and I applaud you for it. Congratulations!”

Alan’s smile was larger than life. This was turning out to be some dinner. “There’s one more thing,” he said suddenly.

“More?” I said.

“More,” he confirmed.

“I want to make a toast.” Everyone held up their glasses. “To you my foxy lady.”

I blushed. “This is sounding good already,” I joked. They snickered.

“You’ve been a beautiful addition to my life since the first time I laid eyes on you. Supportive, attentive, comical, crazy and sexy.” More snickers. “My world wouldn’t be complete without you in it every day of my life.” I held my breath. “Shelby Nichole Donahue, will you marry me?” He reached inside his suit jacket, pulled out a blue box, and popped the top with smooth transition.

I wasn’t breathing, my eyes stuck in amazement at the rock that gleamed from the Tiffany’s box.

Melanie rubbed my back. “Breathe, girl,” she whispered. And I did.

“Oh my God,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting...I had no clue you...” I couldn’t get my words together. He sat his glass down and reached for my hand. I looked into his eyes at his probing stare. Flustered, I blubbered out, “Yes.”

Chapter Nine

Sebastian

She said yes. The restaurant erupted with applause and congratulatory praises as I sat there stunned. She said yes. Melanie grabbed my hand, her eyes bright. She was sincerely excited for them, but I hadn't moved, blinked, or said anything. Alan moved from his seat and lifted Shelby, an overjoyed smile on both of their faces. A waiter approached with the bottle of wine I'd requested. He poured everyone at the table a glass and sat it in a bucket on ice.

"Congratulations!" he quipped. I gathered myself, standing to my full height and closing the few buttons on my jacket.

"Ms. Scott, excuse me for a moment." I beat a hasty retreat, my long strides taking me past the bar to the men's room. Inside I washed my hands and checked my reflection in the mirror. My mind was reeling from what just happened. She said yes. I smirked, my mood not even close to hearty. I composed myself. Shelby was the ultimate catch. Why wouldn't he want to marry her? I convinced myself it was for the best. She deserved every moment of happiness in her life. Who was I to feel indifferent about it? I didn't even congratulate her. Foolish. I was acting like a child, why? That was a question I didn't need to answer. I had no right to want

her. I was her friend; she confided in me about every part of her life.

I was to keep her safe and allow her to bare her soul without thoughts of stealing her heart. It was not my place, I couldn't, I wouldn't. I thought back to her twenty-first birthday. Something had taken over me that night. I don't know if it were the alcohol that gave me the courage, but I'd stolen a kiss that night, and it was phenomenal. Nothing like I'd ever felt before or since. When she responded with such vigor, I'd convinced myself that we were good, and I wanted more of her, but the drive to her place gave me time to think.

None of my relationships thus far had lasted. Mostly because I couldn't keep up with the demand of quality time. I was busy, all the time, and no woman wants a man who spends more time at work than with them. More than that, I'd shared countless stories about women I only bedded for my own pleasures. Simply because I saw no interest in pursuing a relationship. Our bond was as tight as a hogtie and I couldn't very well offer her the love she deserved and then fail to deliver. The thought of breaking her heart was too monumental for me to pursue anything other than friendship with Shelby.

And even though I knew this and continued to tell myself it was for the best, I felt despondent. I had to find a way to rid myself of these emotions and move on. I inhaled and exhaled a deep breath and left the restroom. At the bar, I asked for another bottle of the rich wine the waiter had brought over to the table before my abrupt retreat.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a gift bow to attach to it?” I asked.

“Ah, yes.” The bartender disappeared for a moment and returned just ask quickly. He slid a ribbon onto the bottle and fastened it into a bow, clipping the edges. “How’s that?”

“Excellent.” I made the purchase and strode from the bar a determined man. I pulled a smile back on my face as I neared. “Congratulations.” I held the bottle out to Alan and slapped him on the back. He stood and shook my hand.

“Thank you.” His smile was burgeoning.

I stepped to Shelby, taking notice of her downcast expression. I reached down and pulled her out of the seat, capturing her in a sealed embrace. “Congratulations,” I whispered, my lips hovering just slightly over her ear. I could feel a vibration run through her.

“You disappeared.” I could hear the question in her voice.

“Never fear, I’m back.”

She pulled back from me. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course. I want you and your fiancé to take this bottle of Tony’s finest wine and celebrate the night away.”

She smiled. “Are you coming along?”

I kept my face void of expression. “Why would I tag along, silly goose? This night is about you and him.” I released her and looked to Melanie. “We should get going so these two can enjoy their night.”

“We haven’t had a bite to eat yet,” she said.

“We’ll get something.” I looked to Alan then Shelby. “You guys have a great night.” We took our leave. I made sure to get Melanie something to eat before dropping her back at her vehicle. She was interested in more than just a five-page spread, but I wasn’t.

“Thank you for your generosity tonight, Mr. Cartwright,” Melanie said when we approached her car. “The night is young. Are you sure you’re ready to call it a night?”

I grinned. “I have to get an early start.” I placed a gentle kiss on the back of her hand and opened her driver side door. She crawled in. “Drive safely,” I said, closing the door and watching her pull away from the curb before retreating to my vehicle.

I wouldn’t be getting much sleep tonight. In my garage, I switched gears, leaving my truck for my bike. I rode through Saint Louis for an hour and a half before returning to my penthouse. I strode through the rooms in darkness, tossing my keys on the counter. My eyes shifted around the cold, lonely place, and I settled on a bottle of scotch. My cell phone buzzed and my screen lit up. I check the Caller ID and found Shelby’s face plastered across the screen. Why was she calling me? I decided not to answer the phone. I wasn’t in the right frame of mind to have a reasonable conversation with her.

I left the phone on the counter and went in search of a shower. I was determined to get over tonight no matter what it took. Maybe I should’ve invited Melanie over. It had been months since I’d been intimate with a woman. Mainly because the one night stands and brisk temptations were not enough to

fulfill the desire I had for her. Shelby, Shelby, Shelby, I thought. A grumble moved through me. I opted instead to drink the night away, by myself. Maybe things would be better after I'd had a little sleep. It seemed like a good idea at the time, until I found myself flat on my back staring at the ceiling.

This night was going to be a miserable one.



I threw myself into work for days at a time. It seemed to have its desired effect. My assistant had booked appointment after appointment, and I'd told her to keep them coming. Behind my lens, I worked in succession, sometimes throughout the lunch hour. Everyone didn't appreciate it as much as I needed it.

"Boss man," my assistant Allison said as she bounced over to me, "you're working hard today. You've got plenty of time to grab a bite to eat before your next session."

"I don't need it."

"Sure, you do. How else will you continue to keep up with this rigorous work schedule if you don't fuel yourself?"

She handed me a deli sandwich wrapped in the signature paper from the restaurant on the first floor. "Yes, ma'am," I said, taking the offer.

"Give me that." She removed the camera from my clutches. "Now take five." I chuckled and walked to my office. Inside, I checked my messages. There were three.

“Hey sweetheart, this is your mother. I haven’t heard from you all week. You know better than that. Call me back.” I smiled and moved on to the next message.

“Good morning, Mr. Cartwright, this is Melanie Travis Scott. We want you in Italy this weekend for your spread. I know it’s last minute, but we’re willing to pay you double your fee. I can be reached by cell anytime. Call me back before the end of the day.”

I moved on to the next message. “Sebastian, please call me. I haven’t heard from you.” Shelby hesitated. “I know I said we would cool it for a while, but just let me know everything’s all right.” She paused and went to speak again but decided against it and ended the call. I sent her a vague text message about being busy at work.

Then I called my mother. “Hi darling, are you having a busy day?”

“I am, but that’s all on me. How’s everything with you and dad?”

“Your father’s been going on and on about a golf tournament he wants to attend, and you know I don’t care for golf, but I’ll go since for his sake I do love him.”

I smirked. “Always a trooper you are.”

“Those are the little things we women do to support our men. How are you and Shelby?”

“Mom, why do you always ask about us as if we were an item? We’re not, but she’s fine and newly engaged.” There was a silence on her end that was deafening. “Hello, Mom?”

“Oh my, I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Why are you sorry? That’s a time for celebration not condolences.”

“You can pretend with everyone else all you like, but Mommy knows what she knows.”

“And what is it that you think you know?”

“Oh honey, I don’t have to spell it out for you, do I? You and Shelby’s had a thing for each other since grade school. I’m surprise you’ve let it go on this long.”

“I’ve got to go, Mom, my lunch is over.”

“Rushing me off the phone isn’t going to change a thing. But it’s your life. If you want to spend it without her or better yet, if you want to let her spend it with another man, then be my guest. But you’ll always wonder about the one that got away.”

The thought of Shelby spending her life, love and friendship with someone else caused me to lose my appetite.

“You sound as if you’re speaking from experience.”

“I am. Your father and I were friends for ten years before we got married.”

I sat forward in my chair. “Why didn’t I know this?”

“Well it wasn’t something we’d advertised to our children. But I almost married someone else, and my heart wasn’t in it. Anyway, I don’t want that for you. What’s the worst that can happen?”

My mind was spinning from this tidbit of information. “I hear you, Mom, but everything is fine. We’re not in love. We have a beautiful friendship and that’s all.”

“Maybe not today, but one day you’ll wake up.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

I hung up the phone and thought about calling Shelby. As bad as I wanted her, my restraint was working wonders at keeping me at bay. And one thing was certain, I didn’t want to live my life without her, but I couldn’t very well interrupt her happiness because of my own selfish wants. Frustrated, I dialed Melanie Travis Scott and agreed to meet her in Italy for the spread. I needed this time to get my head on straight and figure out if I would bare my heart to Shelby or let her go.

Chapter Ten

It was 8:30 p.m. when I turned into the garage. These twelve-hour days seemed to give me more energy than I kept on reserve. I hit the alarm on my Mercedes and strolled to the elevator, stepping on with my duffle bag stuffed with cameras and equipment in my hand. My mind was in the clouds when I stepped inside my penthouse. I dropped the bag by the door and walked to the kitchen, pulling a bottle of water from the refrigerator. There was movement in the shadows. Someone was sitting in my living room chair.

“I have a gun,” I said, putting the water to my mouth for a drink.

“You won’t need it, unless you mean me harm.”

That choice of words was interesting since that was something I was on a mission not to do. She turned on a light. In a thin-strapped halter top, blue jeans and flip flops, Shelby crossed her legs. “We need to talk.”

Her hair sat on top of her head in a loose ponytail, strands hanging lightly out of place. She seemed disheveled in a way that only made her sexier. “So talk.” I sat the water down. My floor plan was open so although I was standing in the kitchen and she in the living room, we had clear line of sight of each other.

“You’re ignoring me.”

“I’m working.”

“Come here.” She got to her feet and found a spot on the couch, patting the cushion beside her. I strolled to her side and sat next to her getting comfortable, letting my arm hang languorously over the top. My head fell back with my sight focused on the ceiling.

“What’s up, Buttercup?”

Her movement brought her to my lap where she straddled me, forcing us to come face to face with one another. She had no idea the danger she was in; her presence alone sent a blaze of heat dragging through me. I resisted the urge to grab her and kiss her senseless.

“I miss you.” She pouted.

“I miss you, too.” I brought her forehead to my lips, placing a soft kiss there.

“Why are you ignoring me? I need to know. This is so unlike us.”

“I’m giving you the space you wanted.”

“I didn’t want this.” She continued to pout.

I swept my thumb across her bottom lip. “Stop that.”

“That’s how I feel.”

“Why, I’m the one losing a friend.” It slipped out before I had a chance to think about it.

A shocked gasp left her. “Don’t say that.”

“Do you love him?” I asked.

“Um, yes...I mean of course.”

“Is he the love of your life?” She didn’t respond right away.

“The thing is, when he asked me, I wasn’t remotely expecting it. My initial response wasn’t yes, which is what took me so long to reply. I’m having this tug of war inside me, and it’s driving me crazy. I need my friend to help me out. What should I do?”

“What do you feel here?” I reached out and touched her heart.

An exasperated sigh left her. “I don’t know.” She groaned.

“But you do know. Listen to it.”

Her watchful stare outlined the features of my face.

“You should love him to the point where living without him is impossible.”

Her body slid to the side, her bottom sinking into the cushion next to me with legs that arbitrarily clung to my lap. She attempted to crawl back on top, but this time it was I that denied her. I stood and moved away. She followed me to the kitchen where I replenished myself with another bottle of water before returning to the couch. She decided to lay on her back with her head in my lap. I glanced down at her chest brown face. I’d never felt anything but relaxed by our closeness, but she was making it hard for me.

“You called me the night of your engagement,” I said. “Why?”

She huffed. “You let my call go to voicemail, didn’t you?”

“You’d just got engaged. I wanted you to enjoy your night.”

“Maybe I would have if you’d have answered your phone.”

“Was there a problem?”

“I needed to talk to you and make sure you were okay.”

“What if I wasn’t?”

She sat up and turned to me. “Then I would’ve come to you.”

“Why?” I asked.

Her forehead crinkled. “Do you really have to ask me that?”

I studied her for a moment. “I don’t pretend to read your mind, Buttercup. Why did you come over here?”

“I told you I miss you.”

“Didn’t you know I would call you back? I know a few have gotten past me.”

“You missed three.” She held up three fingers, and I grinned.

“Okay you got me, like I said I was being a bit selfish. I’ve had you all to myself for so long I hadn’t thought about what it would be like without you around. That’s my fault.”

She found her way back on top of my lap and slid her arms around my neck. “Sebastian, you will never lose me. Nothing can separate the friendship that we’ve built, are you kidding me?”

“Shelby, you should move.” My voice grew heavy and gruff; any movement from her at this point was sending me into overdrive. I was almost sure she could feel my rigid erection.

Instead of taking my advice, she did the opposite.
“No.”

I took a deep breath and willed myself to be strong.
“Shelby.”

Her eyes blinked back at me, her persistence just as sturdy. My hands scooped her up by her waist and maneuvered her next to me. I sat forward to keep her from trying that move again. “I know I’ll never lose you, but I recognize that you’ll be married soon, and we can’t very well be as close as I’m used to. You’re not even married yet and already you’ve asked me to give you space. If it were up to me, you’d never marry.” I quirked a smile at her.

She fumbled with her fingers and twisted her lips like she wanted to say something but didn’t.

“Hey,” I said, lifting her chin, “it’s all good. I’m a big boy, I’ll get over it, right? I want you to be happy and have everything your heart desires.”

“What if I don’t want you to get over it?”

I frowned. “What do you mean, Buttercup?”

“What if it’s you I desire?” Her words took me by surprise but strengthened a surreptitious need that traveled like molten fire to my core.

She inched closer to me. “I’ve been thinking—“ I cut her off, my hand gripping the back of her head as I pulled her

in for a ferocious kiss. I was a man possessed, needing to taste the intricate curves of her mouth. She bellowed a moan down my throat. Her legs around my waist, I leaned into her, my mountainous frame covering her delicate one. Her hands clasped the back of my head, and our lips moved in sync. My hands trailed a path down her thighs, clutching the jeans she wore in my fists. I was on the verge of giving her all the pent-up emotions, love, and sexual craving I had for her. Her bottom lifted, and she wiggled to remove the material that separated us. It was that split second that brought me back to my senses. I was about to make love to her. It would change the dynamic of our relationship forever, and she was engaged. I withdrew but not without remorse.

“What’s wrong?” The questionable arch of her eyes and frown on her face sent a pain through me.

I tried to compose myself. “We should chill out.” I rose and walked away from her once more.

She scurried to her feet and caught up to my long strides. “You’re doing it again,” she said. I didn’t respond, and she reached out and yanked the back of my shirt. “No, you can’t do this again!” she yelled. I whipped around on her with what I knew to be a deadly glare reminiscent of the one I shared on her twenty-first birthday.

“Shelby,” I growled.

“No!” she said, pointing a finger at me. I attempted to walk away again, but she scurried around, blocking my escape with the palm of her hands before pushing me. I took a step back, wanting to avoid this line of questioning. “Why are you doing this, Sebastian?” She pushed me again.

“Shelby!”

“No!” Her hands turned to fists that padded my chest in a frustrated sequence. “Why are you doing this to me, why don’t you want me?”

Her words cut into me with a razor-sharp edge; her attack on my chest was never ending. I dipped down, sweeping her up in my arms, her legs holstered around my waist, her arms snaking around my neck. I took in her lips, the savory taste of her mouth waking the ravenous animal that lived within me. I took steps forward until we bumped into the center kitchen isle. She was breathless, and I was distributing every bit of untamed fervor. Surely when I finished ravaging her, she’d be unbalanced with bruised lips. But she never wavered, giving just as much as I gave. It turned me on even more. My body was the temperature of an incinerator, my hardness stretching the material of the boxer briefs I wore. I led a trail down the arch of her throat, placing a bite on her neck.

“Sebastian,” she purred.

I nibbled up to her ear. “Yes, Buttercup?” I whispered.

“Take me to your bedroom.” My nibbling slowed, and my forehead fell to her shoulder. My bated breath slowed, and I regained control of myself. I looked into her beautiful brown eyes. There was sexual desire built in the depths of them, along with hopefulness, trust, and love. I knew she was attracted to me, but I didn’t allow myself to think she wanted something serious, and there was no way a relationship like ours could only be physical. I hung my head again and shut my eyes briefly so I could think straight. “Please,” she begged.

“Don’t,” I said.

She pulled my face to hers. “Tell me what it is. Be honest and if it’s reasonable, I’ll let it go.”

We had an intense stare down. “You’re not this person, Buttercup.”

She folded her arms. “What person would that be?”

I chose my words carefully. “The person who cheats on her fiancé.” She visibly flinched like the words had stung. “And...”

She watched me carefully. “And what?” She patted her forehead as if she’d remembered something, “You’re in love,” she added, looking ashamed. “I forgot.” She sighed. “How can I be so stupid?”

A moment passed before I realized what she was talking about. I didn’t dispel her revelation, so she took it and ran with it. “Sebastian, I’m so sorry, please forgive me. You must think I’m crazy.” She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. The hopefulness I’d seen just a moment ago was dashed and left to evaporate like a doused campfire. But my truth remained the same; breaking her heart was something I would never do, even if that meant I’d have to live the rest of my life never knowing what could’ve been.

Chapter Eleven

Shelby

“Listen to me, you’re not stupid. Don’t talk like that. There’s no reason for me to forgive you. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Sebastian straightened his posture and grabbed my hands, helping me off the marble isle. I slipped down slowly, our bodies sparking with friction from our nearness. My head dropped. Once again, I’d embarrassed myself and for what? I knew he was in love with someone, but I couldn’t take any more of the quiet nights and eluded phone calls. I couldn’t deny myself what I wanted, and now I was regretting it.

I stepped away from him when he caught my fingers in his hand. I looked back to catch the same dark desire in his eyes that I knew I’d seen moments ago. I was hopeful that our relationship wouldn’t diminish because of our awkward cherished moments like this one. “I’m catching a red eye to Italy tomorrow. I’m going to do the spread for A Few Good Men Modeling Agency. I just wanted you to know so you don’t think I’m ignoring you. I’ll most likely be shooting most of my time spent there.” He paused. “That’s not certain, so don’t hold me to it and that doesn’t mean you can’t call.”

I pulled my hand out of his grasp and covered myself with my arms. “Congratulations, I can’t wait to see the final results. I’m sure the spread will be amazing.”

“I’ll save you a copy,” he said, winking.

“Do you already have hotel reservations?” I asked, ignoring my body’s reaction to his flattery.

“I do, if you need me I’ll be at Hotel Danieli in Venice.”

I nodded. My feet drug across the hardwood floors to the chair I occupied and grabbed my purse. He met me at the door.

“I need you to smile,” he said. I mustered up the fakest grin I could conjure. “That won’t work.”

“I’m fine, I promise.”

“I know you, and you’re not fine.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

His fingers caressed my chin. “You can spend the night if you want, and we’ll walk out together in the a.m.”

That would usually be a no-brainer, but not today. “That’s probably not a good idea,” I said.

“Are you sure? I promise to keep my hands to myself.” He grinned.

As if he was the one that needed restraint. “You’re fine and so am I. I’ll see you later.” I found myself at the elevator with that frantic finger again. When the doors opened, I stepped on and waited for them to close. I didn’t look back to see if he was watching. Honestly, I didn’t want to know. When

the doors closed, I burst into tears, letting my head rest on the cold elevator wall. My sadness picked up momentum, and I covered my hands with my face. This was so pathetic.

The man I was truly in love with was in love with someone else. It would take some time to get over this, if that were even possible. I'd shown my hunger for him and felt like he reciprocated, but he didn't. I couldn't possibly face him again. I felt an insurmountable devastation settle in my bones. My body jerked as the pain in my heavy heart released through my shattered soul. The elevator reached the bottom floor and the doors opened.

Seconds passed before strong arms swallowed me and I knew it was him. "Come here, girl. What are you doing, huh?" he said, his voice gentle and warm.

I gave him a shove and turned my back to him. He pulled me into the comfort of his chest, dropping his lips to my ear. "Don't fight, you're coming with me."

I tried to pull myself together. "I'm okay, I promise." I'd completely forgotten about the camera system in the elevator. Embarrassment washed over me knowing my emotions had been on display the entire descent.

Sebastian refused to listen to my assurance that things were okay. He led me back onto the elevator, and when the doors opened on the top floor, he swept me up in his arms and carried me inside, straight to his bedroom. He sat me on the bed before shedding his shoes and his shirt.

Bending in front of me, he placed his hands on both sides of the bed, leveling his face with mine. "Listen to me,

whatever this is, I need you to talk to me about it. Am I the reason for your tears?"

Tell him he is. I took a deep breath. "No." That was the third time I'd lied to him within 30 minutes, but I couldn't tell him the truth. Not after being rejected a second time. That nagging voice kept telling me to confess, just straight out lay my heart on the line, but I couldn't; a third rejection would surely be my undoing. I lied with dried-up tears in my eyes and somberness written all over my face.

"Tell me what it is." He dropped to his knees and nuzzled in between my legs, his long arms holding on to my waist. His lips mere breaths away from mine, I scooted separating even further from him.

"I'm being immature," I said. "You were right earlier. I'm not a cheater, so what's gotten in to me?" I didn't really need the answer to that question. "I'm a horrible girlfriend." I sniffled. He pulled back the sheets and crawled into the bed before pulling me against him and cradling me to his chest.

"Well you have to cut yourself some slack. You were with me." He joked. I gave a small smile. "That's my girl." He kissed my temples.

After a few moments of silence, we fell into a slumber.

When I woke, I knew instantly he was gone. The sheets on my back were cold and void of any human heat. I wanted to just shut my eyes and drift back off to sleep, but that was impossible now. I rose on my elbows and glanced around the room. The clock on the nightstand read 5 a.m. There was a note lying beside it with a red long stemmed rose on top. I

reached toward the lamp, allowing a glow of light to illuminate the room. I opened the piece of paper and read:

Good morning Princess. You were sleeping so peacefully I didn't want to wake you. There were moments in your slumber when you called my name. It's nice to know that you think about me in your sleep. Means I'm an all-aroundtype of guy. ☐ I want you to know that I'll always be here when you need me, no more missed phone calls if I can help it. I hated to see you with tears in your eyes. It almost tore me apart. I take full responsibility for what happened with us tonight. That wasn't the first time I'd wanted to kiss you since your twenty first birthday. I know my feelings for you have evolved and that's not a bad thing. It just brings us closer. I'm lucky to have you as a friend. You'll always be my number one girl. Don't tell my mom I said that. Feel free to stay as long as you like. I'll see you in a few days. With love. – Sebastian

I read the letter three more times before putting it to the side. My eyes drifted to the rose. I retrieved it, placing the flower under my nose. With my eyes closed, I inhaled. I was riddled with emotions. His feelings for me had evolved. What did that even mean? As much as I didn't want to look too deeply into the words, I couldn't help but feel a hidden message. I needed to know and a phone call wouldn't do it. I needed to look in his eyes when I asked him.

What are you going to do, Shelby? That voice that sat at the back of my mind nagged me. I gritted my teeth. Maybe I should take it slow, I thought. Simply show up at his photo shoot as a surprise. Pretend that I just wanted to enjoy the scenery and get a feel for the creative energy I knew Venice would bestow on me. *Or you could just keep it real and tell the*

man your inexorable truth. I swallowed hard, almost breaking out into a sweat. Fear was holding me back, but my heart was pushing me forward. But what about Alan? I sulked and fell back into the sheets. Poor Alan didn't have a chance. My heart was already taken, even if the one who possessed it didn't know it. I didn't feel remotely enamored with him as I did for my friend.

This was a mess. I could just ignore it all and go on with my life business as usual. But who was I kidding, living life that way wasn't living, merely existing. I sighed, pulling myself to my feet. I went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Sebastian had buttercup bagels. That made me smile. I reached in and took one out of the bag. I was stalling. I knew what needed to be done, but I was procrastinating. I wondered how long Sebastian had been gone. I trudged back to his bedroom and dialed Alan.

“Good morning, my soon-to-be wife,” he answered. A knot in my gut twisted as I thought about what I was getting ready to do.

“How are you this morning?”

“Great actually. Hey, this is early for you. Is everything okay?”

My eyes closed and I told myself to be brave.

“Actually, we need to have a conversation.”

“What about?”

“Our engagement.”

“Go on.”

“I think we should postpone it.” I bit down on my teeth.

“Oookay, is there any reason why?”

“I’m not one hundred percent ready.”

“So we’ll just have a long engagement. When do you think you’ll be ready?”

“That’s just it, I’m not sure if I ever will.” There was a silence on the phone that screamed in my ear. “Alan?”

“So what you’re saying is you don’t want to marry me?”

I swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“Then why did you say you would?”

“I was put on the spot. I didn’t want to just say no in front a restaurant full of people.”

“Shelby, it’s been weeks, when did you think was the right time to tell me?”

“When is there ever a right time to tell your fiancé you don’t want to get married?”

Both of our attitudes were beginning to elevate, but truth be told, he had a reason to be angry. “I don’t understand the problem. Don’t you love me?”

“Of course I do.” I felt like a complete scrooge. “I’m just not in love with you, Alan.”

He sighed in frustration. “I thought we had something going here, Shelby. I thought we were moving forward. I really love you. I see us living the American dream with the

white house and picket fence. I envisioned you giving birth to my babies. Now you're telling me that's not what you want!"

"I'm sorry, Alan, I really am. I didn't want this to happen. I thought we had a chance."

"So what's changed?"

"I'm just being honest with you. I don't know what else to say."

"This doesn't make any sense, I just don't get it." He quieted down for a moment. "It's him, isn't it?"

This is something I didn't want to get into, especially with him. "Him who?"

"Your so-called friend."

"Alan, don't make this about him."

"I asked you a simple question, Shelby." I didn't respond. "I saw this coming a mile away, and I didn't want to believe it."

I grumbled, "Seriously, don't make this about Sebastian."

"But it is about him, isn't it? You're being honest with me, right? Just tell me the full truth. I deserve that much."

"I don't see what good that will do."

"So you admit it then. You want to be with him."

"Alan, please."

"Typical, men and women can't be friends! How many times have I told you this and how many times did you blow me off? You set out to prove me wrong, but it backfired!"

“I never meant to fall in love with him!” I screamed. The revelation caused us both to go mute. Several beats went by before either of us spoke. “I’ve been his friend for over ten years. If there would be anything between us, I thought it would’ve happened sooner. Not now.” I fumbled, trying not to dig at what I knew to be a sore wound. “I don’t know where it’s coming from,” I confessed.

“Wow,” he said. “So that’s it then. Our relationship has been a complete fabrication.”

“That’s not true.”

“Whatever, Shelby. You’ll regret not making a life with me. Goodbye.”

The line died, and I hung my head. I felt horrible, but it had to be done. I dialed Sebastian then decided I was going to see him.

Chapter Twelve

The fourteen-hour flight from Saint Louis to Venice was one I didn't look forward to. There were many reasons for this. One, I still wasn't used to the fact that planes were my common way to travel. I was scared of heights. I literally had Sebastian everywhere with me once I began to make a mark in the art world. Two, I was a ball of nerves. This was something I didn't know if I could get used to. *Calm down, Shelby. Sebastian is your friend.* The problem with that thought was I wanted to be more than friends. There was an inner torment that was just about to drive me crazy.

Was it ridiculous to be on the plane knowing he'd told me he was in love with someone else and nothing could replace her. I was beginning to feel hopeless. *Focus, Shelby, just plan this as a friendly trip nothing more. You'll worry yourself to death.* I settled in my seat. I needed a drink. I hit a button that brought the flight attendant to my area.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hi, can I have a miniature bottle of wine please? Pinot Grigio, would do."

"No problem, anything else?"

"No thanks."

The flight attendant went in search of my request while I sat with my eyes glued to the flat screen monitor that was

showing the movie Snakes on a Plane. I pulled my headset back on and tried to focus on Samuel L. Jackson, but my mind continued to wander. Five minutes later, the flight attendant was back with three miniature bottles of wine. My face lit up.

“Thank you so much.”

She winked. “During long flights like these, it’s always nice to have an extra one or two.”

“You’re so right,” I said.

“Let me know if there is anything else I can get you, snacks, refreshments, or otherwise. Use the same button and I’ll be here in a flash.”

“Most certainly,” I said. “Thanks again.”

I unscrewed the top to one of the bottles and sipped it leisurely. I finished it off and fell asleep before I could make it to the next one.

When I woke up, the plane was landing. That was refreshing and alarming at the same time. I’d never slept that long before even in the comfort of my own home. Nevertheless, here I was across the world in Venice. As I strolled into the airport, pulling my luggage behind me, I made a beeline for a water taxi that would sail me across the beautiful blue waters to the floating city.

I tossed my single bag into the boat and stepped down with the help of the driver. The leather plush interior was fit for a queen. I powered on my cell phone and the time zone automatically updated. It was 9 a.m., which meant it was late night back in Saint Louis. It was a good thing I’d gotten some

rest on the plane or I would be no good. My phone beeped with an incoming notification. I opened the text message.

“Hey Buttercup, I know it’s late there, but I wanted to check on you anyway. Call me when you get a chance, even if it’s late, I want to hear from you. Oh, today is the first day of the shoot, I’ll send you a few pics when I get the chance. One love.”

He was still worried about me. I guess I would’ve been, too. I did practically fall apart in his elevator. I wanted to text him back, but I knew if I did, he would surely call. I didn’t want him to know I was here yet, so instead, I sat back and enjoyed the ride to the dock. Since he was out, I didn’t have to worry about running into him. I pulled out my cell and dialed his assistant.

“This is Allison Stewart; how can I help you?” she answered.

“Hi Allison, this is Shelby, how are you?”

“Shelby!” She squealed. “Long time no hear. I’m great, how about yourself?”

“Doing very well, I thought maybe you could help me out.”

“Anything.”

“I’m in Venice trying to surprise Sebastian. He told me he’d be staying at Hotel Danieli, but I didn’t get his room number.”

“Oh yes, you know I could lose my job for giving out this information, right?”

“Yeah right.”

She snickered. “I know, I know. Sebastian would probably be more irate if I didn’t give it to you.”

“I need the location of his photo shoot as well.”

She ran off his room number and the location of his shoot, and I thank her. At the front desk, I asked for the only other room on the same floor and retrieved my keys. Inside the room, I showered, oiled my legs and checked on a reservation I’d made at a local hair salon. I left shortly, after humming to myself. Truth be told, I was excited to surprise him. A sweet melody rang out, and I grabbed my cell.

“Hi Mom, you’re up late. Is everything okay?”

I hailed another taxi and left the hotel.

“I was getting ready to ask you the same thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve called you more than once. What’s it going to take to get a call back?”

“I haven’t gotten any calls since the last time we spoke.”

“Well, you need to switch your service. If I was dying, I’d be dead.”

“Mom, don’t talk like that.”

“What? Death is natural, honey. It happens to the best of us.”

I shook my head. “What’s going on, Mom?”

“My church is taking a trip to New York this fall, and the tickets are two hundred and fifty dollars per person.”

“Should I make a check out to the church?” I asked.

“Um no, you can send it to me.”

“Why don’t you just use the card I gave you, Mom? It doesn’t have a limit.”

“I can’t use a card, I need cash.”

Sometimes my mom acted as if she was born in the eighteenth century. I’d shown her how to do these things before, but nevertheless, she’d always need me to show her again. I chalked it up to old age.

“No problem. I’ll send it when I get back.”

“Oh, where are you, dear?”

“I’m surprising Sebastian in Italy.”

“Unhuh fancy smancy.” She mumbled.

“Okay, well call me back. Love you.”

“I love you, too.”

As soon as I hung up my phone rang. I glanced to the caller I.D. and saw that Alan was calling. I released a heavy breath. My mind needed to stay focus and I couldn’t deal with whatever he had to say. I thought about how much hurt I’d most likely caused him but couldn’t dwell on it. I let the phone go to voicemail but he called again. Eventually I would have to answer. Ignoring his calls was childish but right now was not the time so again, I let the voicemail answer. He didn’t try for a third time.



By the time I left the salon, my hair had been washed and conditioned and my scalp massaged to heaven and back. My tresses flowed like I had Indian in my family and even though I wasn't certain, I couldn't claim that ancestry just yet. I checked my foundation and strolled into the parking lot of the stadium where Sebastian was having his shoot. When I set foot inside, I found a seat out of sight so I could just let him do his thing while I watched. He wore a suit jacket on top of a white button down casual shirt with the last three buttons at the top undone. The camera hanging around his neck from the thin strap sat against the middle of his chest. He had one hand tucked in the pockets of a pair of blue jeans and the other hanging casually at his side. The heaviness in his eyes giving the camera girl fever no doubt. My eyes slid over the frame of his face, and I remembered his teenage image.

His cute and friendly look was now sexy and edgy. He'd developed nicely into his manhood. Different flashes of us together at school, during birthdays and holidays sped through my mind. The camera lady said something to him, and he removed the camera. His fingers played his buttons like a guitar, unfastening each one. A ripple of heat flooded through me; his movements were that of a professional, his chiseled chest displaying just enough to make me squirm. I followed his abs until the oiled toned skin disappeared into his jeans. My legs crossed as I tried to calm down my body that was screaming for a piece of him.

Even if this didn't go the way I hoped, I knew things would never be the same. I couldn't just go back to being good ol' friends with him. The thought of that made me sad. I would always want him. Anybody he was with I'd be jealous of. I couldn't watch him marry someone else. This was bad. I needed to call my sister. I needed someone to calm me down. That was another thing: the person to calm me would usually be Sebastian. Everything was already changing, and he had no clue. It wasn't fair to him. He rose from his spot and handed his cell phone to the camera lady.

“Just a few shots,” he was saying, “for someone special.”

My gut twisted, hoping that someone special was me, but of course it could've very well been the one he was in love with. He crouched down on all fours, his face serious, his eyes piercing. The lady snapped a few shots with her camera and his. He changed his position, laying on his back, arms behind his head with one leg pulled up, his sculpted chest on full display. More snaps then a hand clap. I look toward the applause and found Melanie Travis Scott. She stood next to the camera lady.

“Those shots are great,” she said.

“We're wrapping up for the day,” the camera lady said.

I stood and disappeared before being spotted. Back at the taxi dock, I sailed to Dal Moro's for a fresh pasta dish. My mind swirled with thoughts of him. An hour and a half passed before I made it back to the hotel. My cell phone beeped with an incoming notification. The pictures he'd taken populated on my screen, and a bright smile lifted my face. Once to my floor,

I made a quick stop at my room to brush my teeth and check my appearance.

You're fine, Shelby. I sighed. *This is just you going to see your best friend.* But realistically, I knew this was so much more. I left the room and strolled to his door, giving it three knocks. I waited patiently for about thirty seconds before I decided to knock again. The door flew open and quizzical eyes met mine before recognition set in.

“Shelby Donahue, right?” she said, pointing at me.

“Guilty,” I said, feeling disentangled from the tightness in my belly by her presence.

“Hi, it’s so nice to see you again. Come here!” She pulled me in for a hug, putting a tight squeeze on me like we were long lost friends.

When she released me, I said, “I’m sorry. I must have knocked on the wrong door. I thought this was Sebastian’s room.”

“Oh yes, it is, come on in.”

It hit me harder than I thought knowing they were in his room for obvious reasons. “Oh no, no, I don’t want to be a bother. I’ll come back.” I turned and fled quickly. Dread took over me and I was starting to feel sick. My thoughts ran a million miles a second making me dizzy. I paused to steady myself. But I was determined to make it back to my room in one piece.

Then I heard his voice. “Shelby?” he said.

Chapter Thirteen

Sebastian

There was a knock at my door. Whoever was on the other side tapped in rhythm. I strolled across the room and opened it.

“Mind if I come in for a drink?”

I opened the door wider, allowing Melanie to enter. I closed the door behind her and she turned toward me. “Do you always get the penthouse suite when you travel?”

“I try.”

“I bet you haven’t been turned down much.”

I smirked. “Not really. Have a seat.”

She made her way around the corner to the bar and sat on a stool. I followed her, fixing a glass of Merlot for her and Scotch for me. “I ordered room service a minute ago. Would you like anything?”

“Sure,” she said, getting comfortable. She peeled the back of her heels with her toes and they fell to the plush carpet. “I’ll have whatever you’re having.”

I pulled the phone off the cradle and dialed room service, adding an extra dish with my tray.

“So I see things went well today,” she began.

“They did. I had a lot of fun.”

“Tomorrow will be quicker since you’ll be shooting in the afternoon instead of the late evening. You should get a nice amount of shots in. Do you have other plans afterwards?”

“No, I’m not flying right back if that’s what you mean. I’m in no rush, so I’ll enjoy a couple of days here then head back.” I put my glass to my mouth and sipped the hot liquor.

Her voice dipped. “Do you have any plans tonight?” she asked.

I gave her a once over, noticing the sparkle in her eyes. She crossed her legs and bounced her foot. “This is it, having a drink with an acquaintance.”

She smiled. “In that case,” she emptied her wine glass, “I’d like to get better acquainted with you, Mr. Cartwright.”

She unbuttoned her blouse, pulling her arms out of the silk fabric. It fell in a pool on the floor. I should’ve been turned on, my libido should’ve been pumping, but it wasn’t, and make no mistake about it Melanie was beautiful. Tall, lean and fit with short layered hair. Bright grey eyes and caramel smooth skin. I could just have my way with her. It was past time for me to blow off some steam. But I didn’t want to lead her on. There was another knock at the door. Three light taps. Melanie touched my arm.

“It’s probably room service,” she said. “I’ll get it while you fix us another drink.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She reached down and grabbed her blouse, closing a few buttons as she put it on. I watched her bounce around the corner and disappear. Still nothing. Not even the slightest

spark of excitement. I turned my back and fixed us more drinks while I tried to figure out what was going on with me. Seconds later, I heard female voices. That didn't sound like room service. With our drinks in hand, I strolled to the door. Melanie was in the hallway calling after someone.

“No, it's okay,” she said. “The night's young, please come back. We'd love the company.”

“Truly, I don't want to intrude.”

I stepped into the hallway and caught the back end of curvy hips that shaped into an apple bottom. “Shelby?” I said.

She pivoted, turning to face us, her hair hung to the middle of her back in waves swaying with each movement she made. She was gorgeous.

“Oh, you guys go back in the room seriously,” she said sheepishly.

An abrupt hunger unlike anything I've ever felt before surged, taking root in me. “What are you doing here?”

“I was coming to surprise you.” She clasped her hands together, fidgeting, then held her arms out. “Surprise!” she said.

I smiled, slow and steady as I walked over to her. “What a surprise it is,” I said, close enough to kiss her lips. Instead, I placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

“I didn't know you'd have company, sorry.”

I was trying to get used to the sheepish look she gave; it was new but cute. I chuckled. “You're always welcomed, you know that. Come on.”

I turned back to Melanie and handed her the glass of Merlot. The elevator doors dinged. The room service attendant pulled up short in front of my door. Shelby hadn't moved a foot, so I tossed my arm around her shoulder and led her inside.

We all got comfortable in the living area.

“Are you hungry?” I asked her.

“Um, no, I ate before I got here.”

“How long have you been in Venice?” Melanie asked.

She glanced at a silver watch that adorned her wrist. “Since 9 this morning.”

“I've sent you text messages since then, woman,” I said.

Her melodic laugh caused another stir within me. “I know that, like I said before, I meant to surprise you.”

My eyes traveled over her almond-shaped eyes, perfect nose and full lips. “Would you like something to drink?” I asked.

“I really should be going,” she said, rising.

“Do you have some place to be?”

She returned her bottom to the sofa. “No, I don't, but obviously, I'm the third wheel here, and it's just weird.”

I walked to the bar and fixed her a glass of wine.

“Nonsense,” Melanie said. “I haven't sunk my claws into this gorgeous man yet or you would've known.” She tickled back a laugh. “The last time I saw you, you were being

proposed to. Must be exciting, how's everything going? I'm sure you guys are in relationship bliss right now."

Shelby cleared her throat. "It's not going as great as you would imagine."

"Oh no, why not?" Melanie asked.

"I broke off the engagement."

Melanie gasped, and I turned full circle to face Shelby. The coy expression on her face was one I wanted to dig deeper into. I sauntered over to her and handed her the glass. I reached out and caressed her chin, frowning as I tried to access if she was in despair. "What happened, Buttercup?" To say I was concerned was an understatement, but there was another feeling wrestling me down. Relief. It shouldn't have been there and yet it sat heavy on my shoulders.

She took a sip of her wine. "I wasn't in love with him."

I felt the need to pull her into my arms and hold on to her forever.

"Wow," Melanie said. "I'm so sorry, honey."

"Yeah, me too. I think I broke his heart. I feel like scum, but at the same time, the man that I marry I want to be without a doubt head over heels in love with." Her eyes found me briefly before dropping back down to her wine glass. She took another sip.

"I can feel you on that," Melanie said. "Poor fella."

"Thanks for the wine." Shelby finished the glass and looked to Melanie. "Thank you for being so hospitable. I'm sorry I crashed your night."

When she stood, I asked, “Where are you going?” I wasn’t used to the possessive tone in my voice.

“To my room, sir.” She leaned over, gracing me with a kiss on my chin.

“Where’s your room?”

“It’s the only other room on this floor.”

“You know you don’t have to leave, right?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Enough of this. You know I’m not sticking around here with you guys.”

Melanie chuckled. “Girl, if you want to leave that badly, be my guest.”

“Call me in the morning, or stop by or whatever,” Shelby said before walking to the door. I followed her.

“I know you had a long flight and probably want to call it a night, but if you need me, don’t hesitate to come back.”

She cracked a smile. “Okay.” I watched her walk to her room and disappear inside, knowing I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight without checking on her.

This wasn’t a dilemma. My friend was in need. She’d traveled all this way to see me and without thinking anymore about it, I knew I would go to her.

Chapter Fourteen

Shelby

I closed the door behind me and slid down to the floor. My head fell into my knees, and I wrapped my arms around myself. To say I was disheartened didn't even begin to describe how I was feeling. This is why I shouldn't have been so hopeful. *Pull yourself together, Shelby.* I rubbed my temples, stood, and headed to the bathroom. As I fixed a bubble bath, I thought about Melanie's ruffled appearance when she opened the door. My eyes had wandered down to her bare feet, and it was enough to tell a story. My gut twisted in a knot when I thought about what they would be doing next.

I shed my clothes and sat in the bath trying to rest my spirit. But the fact remained that the man I loved was with someone else. This determined part of me wanted to knock the door down and tell Melanie to beat it. The reasonable part of me held me down, forcing me not to make a fool of myself.

I sat in that tub for what seemed like an hour before standing to drain the water and turn the shower on for a good rinse. I'd made sure to pin my hair up because getting it wet now would defeat the purpose of having it styled by the hands of the best stylist in Venice. After drying and oiling my legs, I slid on a pair of black see-through panties that fit to my curves in a way that screamed custom made.

It was unusual for me to find something so fitting when I shopped randomly. I did a twist and turn in the mirror, checking them out on my hips and butt. I finger combed my hair, leaning my head to the side to ruffle my tresses. My phone rang simultaneously when the knock on the door came. I was caught off guard, and my hands instinctively covered my breasts. Grabbing my cell phone confirmed what I already knew: Alan was calling again. I ignored the call and tiptoed to the door to check the peephole. Seeing Sebastian there made my blood pressure rise. I took a step back and paused, my mind wandering all over the place. There was another knock that snapped me out of my thoughts, and I grabbed my thigh-high length nighty, covering myself with swiftness before opening the door.

“Hey,” I said.

His hooded gaze cloaked me from head to toe in a molten furnace. “Hey Princess, were you sleep?” His heavy voice ruffled me.

“No, I just stepped out of the tub. You didn’t have to come check up on me you know.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’m okay.” He didn’t seem to take that as a reasonable excuse.

“Do you mind if I come in?”

I backed away from the door, but never left the entryway. “Where’s Melanie?”

“She’s gone.” His eyes swept over the room then settled back on me. I folded and unfolded my arms.

“Why are you nervous?” he asked, watching me closely.

Flustered, I said, “I’m not.” He stepped closer to me, one hand in his pocket the other outlining his bottom lip.

“Why did you call off your engagement, Buttercup?” Dark eyes bore into mine. I was so scared to confess. I just knew I’d stutter myself into oblivion if I opened my mouth. I heaved a heavy sigh and stepped away from him, leading a pathway to the other side of the room. There I paced as he watched me from a distance, waiting for me to speak.

“I thought...” I paused; there was just one chance for me to get this right, and I didn’t want to sound like a babbling buffoon once I’d said it. “I thought giving Alan and I a chance was the right thing to do. I tried, I really did. I didn’t want to believe it, but I had to face the facts. I can’t live my life married to someone I’m not in love with.”

I stopped pacing for a moment to glance at him; both hands were in his pockets now. His stance unmoving, his glare piercing. Again, I paced.

Get it together, Shelby, I thought.

“Your letter,” I said. “The one you left on the nightstand.”

“What about it?” His voice was deep and coated with a stimulated thickness.

“You said your feelings for me had evolved. What does that mean?”

One...two...three long strides and he stood before me. My nerves were on edge. I hated the fact that I was this fearful

of being rejected by him a third time. I also felt foolish that I was hopeful.

“Did you come all this way to ask me that?”

I stood my ground with every nerve ready to jump off a cliff. He reached out; a single hand brushed my hair off my shoulder, sweeping it to my back. His fingers sunk into the flesh around my neck.

“Yes.” I hissed, a fire blazing from the spot of his touch.

His jaw clenched like he was fighting against words that wanted to spill but wouldn't. “I don't see you as just my best friend that I grew up with. My love for you has grown deeper, on a level it shouldn't be.”

“On a level it shouldn't be,” I repeated then chuckled, trying to figure out the significance of his words. “Sebastian, I know you said you're in love with someone, and no one could take her place, but I've got a confession to make, and whatever comes after this won't change what I'm about to say.” I swallowed. “I'm in love with you.”

Surprise registered on his beautifully sculpted face.

“I have been in love with you for a long time,” I continued. “It's just taken me awhile to see it and accept it for what it is. I want you to be honest with me, don't try and spare my feelings. Do we have a chance? Are you willing to explore us in ways that go against every friend code ever adapted?”

His eyes smoldered, and my body reacted to his touch in the infused atmosphere that surrounded us. He released the hold on me and turned to walk away. My heart dropped, but I

held steady, refusing to fall apart in front of him. His movements stilled, and it felt like the world stopped.

“Is it her?” I asked, keeping my voice steady. I was doing a good job, considering I was on the verge of a breakdown. His head fell back then he spoke, but I couldn’t quite make out his words. “What?” I asked, my voice emulating collapse.

He faced me. “You are her,” he said.

It was my turn to register disbelief. My voice faltered. “What?” I stepped to him. “What are you saying, Sebastian?”

“I can’t do this, Shelby.”

“But you just said.”

“I know what I said, but it doesn’t make it right.”

“I don’t understand. Why are you fighting this?”

He fell to his knees, lifting his face to me. “You deserve the world, baby girl. You deserve to have an unblemished love, someone you can trust with your heart.”

I cupped his face in my hands. “But I trust you, Sebastian, with everything in me.”

“That’s the problem.”

I was bewildered. “Are you saying you would hurt me?”

“Never,” he growled, “but I can’t be certain of it. I wouldn’t forgive myself if... you deserve a perfect love.”

I sank to my knees. “Nobody’s perfect, Sebastian. I want you, I need you. You’re in the rhythm of my heartbeat.”

He crushed his lips to mine, drawing me in with a raw need that exploded through us both. I moaned against his lips as our mouths meshed together. His hands crawled up then down my body, and my shirt abandoned me underneath his fists. We sunk into the carpet, and I spread my legs for him.

Sebastian hovered above me, and my hands pulled at his shirt, popping buttons as I yearned in desperation to connect with him. His hands discovered parts of me in ways they never had before, sinking deep into my flesh, sparking a trail of flames along the way. I shivered as the heat from them roamed over my breasts, tweaking my areolas. His lips fell to my neck where he placed hot soft kisses down the arch of my throat to my chest. When he sucked in a nipple, it hardened.

He swirled his tongue in circles, and I bucked and moaned with pleasure. He didn't neglect either one as his head moved to give a tongue lashing from one breast to the other. He dipped down my stomach, taking a bite into my inner thighs. They began to shake and I swooned as I felt my den below getting wetter. He scooped my butt into his hands and the thin material that was my panties shredded within his grasps. He was an animal, and I didn't know what I had gotten myself into.

I had to admit that experiencing Sebastian this way was much more intense than I had imagined it to be, and this was just the beginning. I bit down on my lip as heat flooded me from end to end. I was naked, and he was still in his clothes. My hormones were blaring, and I couldn't wait for him any longer. The yearning was too much, I needed him now. I moved to my knees removing his belt and unzipping his pants. He stripped out of his shirt and picked me up from the floor.

Like a magnet, my legs circled his waist. His brawny hands palmed my derriere and I took his mouth into mine in a scorching kiss.

I assumed we were going to the bed, but we ended up against a wall. His mouth found pleasure in tasting my skin, his tongue swept down my jaw, nibbling my earlobe.

“Baby, take your jeans off.” I breathed. Slowly, he pulled away from his assault long enough to focus on me. With his body, he pressed into my abdomen, pinning me to the wall while he brushed his jeans off his waist. He stepped out of them and my hunger ignited.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his eyes combing over me in detailed fashion. “Are you sure about this?”

My hand found his face in a soft caress; he turned toward my fingers, taking them one by one in his mouth. My eyes faltered. “Yes, Sebastian please.” I didn’t see it, but I felt a solid pressure immerse in me. My mouth opened, and I gasped as the pressure spread through my womb opening me with exquisite torture.

My eyes bucked. “Oh dear God,” I said. He buried himself to the hilt, rotating his hips in a slow steady fashion.

His lips went after my chin and he whispered, “Are you okay?”

I didn’t answer right away. Instead, I bit down on my bottom lip and closed my eyes tight. “Oh dear God,” I said again, “I hadn’t expected you to be so...well endowed.”

He smirked. “I can stop, Princess.”

“No,” I said, building up the strength to take on the substantial size of his girth. My chest rose and fell with heated passion, and I rotated my hips against him, tightening my thighs around his waist. His tongue plunged into my mouth as his hands grazed me, lifting my arms over my head. He dug long strokes into my center, grinding against my walls, and I screamed at the intense intrusion. My lips found his earlobe and I nibbled against it.

“Go deeper,” I whispered, aware that I was asking to be murdered.

His movements picked up speed, and I felt him hit a point of no return. Again, I screamed, “Harder.” I marveled in the delicious ache between my thighs. I could tell he was still being gentle while giving me a bit of what I asked for. “Faster, babe, please.” He knocked into my core, our connection powerful. His balls slapped against me, causing an extra flare of stimulation to soar through my core. My head fell back against the wall, my mouth opened sputtering out moans of passion. I was crazed and couldn’t get enough of him as I fell apart in his arms.

His thrusts became dangerous, and my moans turned into whimpers. He folded my arms around his neck and carried me to the bed, the steady vibration of our love making sending shock waves through me. He laid me on my back, and we glided into the same tempo that took over me on the wall. His face was hidden in my neck as he rained kisses down my shoulder. He must’ve felt empowered to give me everything he had because suddenly the force of his thrusts pounded into my femininity and an ocean crashed in waves around him. We

moaned together, and my name fell off his lips like a whispered prayer. “Shelby...”

I pulled his lips back to mine, wanting him to devour me. He was strikingly gorgeous in all his naked glory. My heartbeat raced at the sight of his desire reflecting in his eyes.

“I love you,” I said, the words drowning in his mouth as we continued to kiss. He slammed against my walls as if he meant to knock them down.

I was swept away in a faraway land where only he and I existed. There was no doubt this was what I wanted; I was sure of it.

“Sebastian, I can’t...” I panted.

“You can’t what, Princess?” His rough nocturnal voice sent shivers through my spine.

“I can’t hold on much longer.” He nibbled on my lips, his hips moving at an exceptionally dissolute pace.

“Come with me, sweetheart,” he whispered, and there was no need to tell me twice. With my orgasm in sight, I yelled out his name, my thighs shaking as a series of quakes moved through my entire being.

“Sebastian!” My hands gripped his shoulders for dear life as we rode the waves of love together.

He kissed my chin then lips as I continued to tremble in his arms. I closed my eyes tight, unable to control the wildness settling in my heartbeat. When I opened my eyes, he was looking back at me, a capturing timbre in his eyes. He pulled me to the side, wrapping me so tightly our bodies

became one. I was willing to risk it all, and I could only hope that he was, too.

Chapter Fifteen

Sebastian

I was awakened to soft kisses. On my lips, my eyes, my forehead and face. Soft warm lips kissed down my neck to my shoulders. More kisses down my chest. I was on my back with my hands behind my head. The warm body that was previously attached to my side had vacated the nook and straddled me. With heavy lids, I watched her glide down, only allowing her lips to touch me. But before she made it to the lowest part of me she ran into a roadblock. My erection tapped at the back of her butt, indicating she'd awakened a monster. A subtle moan escaped her lips, and she lifted her bottom, hovering over me. I braced myself for the onslaught of her fountain, but she shifted, dropping down lower to level her face with my erection. She studied the task before her, but only for a split second. Her mouth found my head, and I instinctively licked my lips. The more she took in, the harder I became, and my arousal was rigid.

What amazed me the most was her ability to set a blaze on course with every connection she made. She moved up and down my length slowly at first, but once she found her rhythm, I became a meal for her to feast on.

“Shelby...” I whispered as heat flushed through my veins, causing me to bite down on my lips. With every passing minute, I came closer to my release, but I wanted to be inside her. I reached down, attempting to pull her on top of me, but she resisted, her mouth creating a suction that caused me to moan and curse. My hand gripped the back of her head, and she moaned as I guided her up and down my shaft. She closed her eyes and moaned, the heat from her mouth glazing me, causing a shudder to spiral down my core.

With ease, I pulled her up, and she yelped when I sat her down on top of me. She had caused a tornado to stir within me, and now she'd been caught up in my torrents. I took the plunge, sinking into her womanly seas.

“Sebastian,” she screamed. Her hands braced against the wall of my chest, and I held Shelby sinking into her at submarine levels. Her head fell back, another screech leaving her beautiful mouth and making its way into the atmosphere one after another. I grabbed her backside and moved her up and down, crushing her to me. Her thighs shook and our speed increased, and I could feel my orgasm gaining strength. She buckled, her forearms caving to my chest and I took her lips in my mouth, muffling her screams. We were in the wild, and I'd locked her down in a blissful haze while her body vibrated on top of me. I watched her eyes roll as I continued the assault on her lips and the pummel of her juicy center. I couldn't get enough of her; she was so deliciously edible. She started to mumble unintelligible words, and for a second, I thought she was speaking another language.

“Tell me you love me,” I commanded.

She whimpered, “I...love...you...” she panted.

“I can’t hear you, Princess.” I said, my penetration becoming uncontrolled with deadly force.

“I love you, Sebastian!” she screamed.

An ocean ran down my shaft as she came hard, and I ejaculated, coating her walls.

“Oh my God!” she screamed. Her body trembled as she held on to me for dear life. I rubbed my hands up and down her back, soothing her from the blitz of an orgasm that shot through her. Gently I rolled her to the side and missed her warmth as soon as I exited her cavern. I dashed kisses on her forehead and massaged her thighs, back and shoulders to calm her. She lifted her head to look at me with wonder written on her face.

“Don’t speak,” I said, letting her get her bearings. “I have something I want you to see today.” She went to voice her opinion, and I shushed her. “Relax.” My fingers danced across her skin, and she found the nook of my neck again where she settled. I glanced at the clock on the nightstand and noted the time. 10 a.m. I didn’t have long before I needed to be at the stadium to finalize the shoot, and I needed to settle the last-minute plans I was going to make. Minutes passed then soft snores crept from her. I laid with her for thirty minutes more before moving. Standing over her and watching her sleep was different than it had been before. Emotions of love, protectiveness, tenderness and apprehension were heightened.

I drug on my boxer briefs and jeans, grabbed the rest of my items, and left the room. After I showered and dressed, I left for the stadium, my mind thick with thoughts of Shelby. I

didn't see myself as a playboy. Neither did I see myself as monogamous, mainly because I'd never held a serious relationship. Truth be told, I might have always had these feelings for her. It was possible that knowing this deep down caused my relationships to come and go. But my hesitation to explore us came from a fear that if it all fell apart so would our friendship. Flashes of our childhood fled through my mind. I couldn't imagine a life without her, but now we'd crossed the line. No longer could we just be friends. How difficult would that be?

Watching her date other men, knowing that she's giving them as much as she gave me. I gritted my teeth and tried to shift my thoughts, but it was no use. I glanced at my Rolex just as the limo pulled up to the stadium. I exited and made my way inside.

"Right on time," Jennifer Sanders the photographer said. "I know you're not fond of being in front of the lens, so I promise to get enough shots to make it quick." She beamed.

"I appreciate that, but there's no rush. I know what it's like to be under the timer."

"I'm sure you do, but it's fine. I work to please." She pursed her lips and sashayed to the tripod. Jennifer made no attempt to hide her flirtation, but I was used to it. After changing, we worked the setting for hours before wrapping up.

"I love my job," Jennifer said, swooning.

I chuckled. "I can tell."

"Melanie wants to follow up with you at 3:30. She'll be at Rivera for lunch. The driver will take you over." She

pulled out a business card and offered it to me. “I, on the other hand, would love to work with you, Mr. Cartwright. Surely we can make magic.”

I grinned and accepted her card. “It’s been a pleasure, Miss Sanders.” I placed a kiss on the back of her hand and walked away.

Outside, I made a phone call. “Yes, sir.”

“Allison, did you get my text message?”

“I sure did. I’ve been in contact with Mr. Spreadchire, and he was happy to meet with you.”

“You’re the best,” I said.

“And don’t you forget it.”

“What time?”

“Before five today.” I cursed. “Is there a problem?”

“No, I can work with it.”

“If the time frame isn’t fitting I can always call him back and change it.”

“No, it’s fine. I need this to happen fast, so it’ll have to do.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, thank you, Ashley.”

“You’re most welcome.”

I disconnected the call and climbed in the limo. On the way to Rivera Italian Restaurant, I held mixed emotions. Meeting Melanie hadn’t been in the plans, but she did ask if I

had any last night, and I'd told her no. My notification window lit up with a text message from Shelby.

"Missing you already."

I hit reply: *"Oh yeah, what is it you miss, Princess?"*

A hint of a smile played around my face; Shelby had a way of getting under my skin that no one had ever done. It was foreign yet welcoming. My notifications lit up again and I opened the message.

"The way your fingers sink into me when your slamming Excalibur inside me."

Another text came in behind that one: *"The way you suck my lips and swallow my tongue."*

Another one: *"The excellent stroke of your masterpiece and the cadence of your heartbeat."*

More text messages came in one after another, and I was on the verge of telling the driver to turnaround. I cursed again, I hadn't cursed so much in one day.

I dialed her, and she answered with a soft giggle, "Hey lover."

"You are being a very bad girl," I said.

"What?" she spoke innocently. "You asked so I answered."

"And answer you did. I'll make you pay for that."

"I look forward to it."

"Just when I thought I knew everything about you, you surprise me."

“Well we’ve never explored our friendship farther than the status quo, you know.”

The limo pulled into the restaurant. “Yes, well, I can’t say that I regret it.”

“That’s good to know. Neither do I.”

“I’m meeting Melanie at Rivera’s. She wants to discuss the shoot. Have you eaten?”

“I ordered room service a while ago, but I’ll be ready for dinner when you are.”

“We’re going out. I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“I’ll be waiting.” When the call ended, I got myself together. I skimmed over her text messages. “Excalibur, really Shelby,” I said, grinning. “Calm down,” I told my libido. “The sooner we get this meeting over, the sooner you can see her again.” I shook my head. Shelby had me going crazy. I pulled myself out of the limo and made my way in.

Chapter Sixteen

Shelby

Don't even trip, I scolded myself. You're not a jealous woman.

Knowing that Sebastian was meeting Melanie had my insides churning, and I hated it. Our relationship had progressed. Now we just had to see where it would go, but first the air needed to be cleared. As of right now, we were closer than ever but still just friends. Neither one of us had officially made a commitment to the other, had we? Okay, so he knew how I felt, and all along I'd been the woman he claimed to be in love with, so what would stop us from becoming a couple?

I fell back on the bed and called Denise, my sister and personal assistant. Besides Sebastian, she'd been there since the beginning of my career and she was very good at her job. There was never a day Denise wasn't in the office studio handling business of some sort. So I dialed her business line.

"I was just thinking about you," she answered. "Did you get my voicemail?"

"Not yet. I haven't checked it."

"What have you been doing?"

"I'm glad that you asked." I clear my throat. "I told Sebastian I was in love with him."

“Well it’s about damn time!”

I crinkled my nose. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh girl stop, we all knew you guys were in love with each other.”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t know a thing. You assumed the same thing everyone else assumed, that a man and woman can’t be friends, but they can!”

“Says the woman in love with her man friend.”

“You know what, forget it!” I went to end the call.

“Oh come on, don’t be like that. I’ve got to mess with you. I know your friendship is genuine, but I also knew you loved him.”

“And exactly how did you know that?”

“When you guys were young, romance was an afterthought, but once you started to develop into your young adult years, I would catch the way he’d look at you and you him. You guys admired each other, and I knew before long you’d be in love, married, and having babies.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“You had to find out for yourself. I’m so surprised you finally admitted it. For a minute there, I thought you two would be stubborn enough not to go through with it.”

“Hold your horses okay, we haven’t gone through with anything except, maybe admission and sex.”

A sharp gasp shot through the phone. “You had sex!”

“Close your mouth, Denise. I can literally see it hanging open.”

“Screw that, this is on another level! Details please!”

I sat up on the side of the bed and grinned. “It happened last night. I broke off my engagement with Alan. That’s another story.”

“Whoa, hold on now, you can’t just speed right past that. Now start from the beginning.”

“I did, I’m in love with Sebastian. I’ve been fighting it because, well I don’t want it to ruin our friendship if it doesn’t work out. But I couldn’t take it anymore. Being around him was becoming too intense. So, I broke up with Alan and flew to Venice where Sebastian is having a photo shoot done and I told him.”

“My girl! Catch this high five through the phone.” I heard a hand clap from the other side of the receiver and laughed.

“You are crazy.”

“So what did he say?”

“At first, I thought he was going to reject me. He is also concerned about what this might mean for our friendship. But he said he’s in love with me, too.” I exhaled, reliving the moment.

“I am so here for this! You guys deserve to be together.”

“But we’re not together. That’s just it. We took a step, we confessed, we had mind-blowing sex.” I shivered thinking

about it. “Twice.”

“Ooooouuuu!” Denise yelled. I laughed and fell over to the side of the bed.

“You sound like you’re in high school, girl. You need to cut it.”

“It can only get better from here. Why don’t you sound excited?”

“I don’t know, mainly because I still have the same reservations that I did before. And although he said I’m the woman of his dreams...”

“Girl, did he use those words?”

“Yes, those exact words but he was definitely hesitant about moving forward.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. You can only fight love for so long. You guys are destined to be together.”

“You think so?”

“Of course, it’ll all work out. Oh, and good for you, flying all the way to Venice to get your man. That’s my girl!” I laughed. “What’s next, where’s Sebastian now?”

“Meeting a client for lunch. He’s supposed to pick me up for dinner.”

“Do your thing and you’d better check your voicemail and email. No wonder I haven’t gotten a response. You’re in Venice falling in love!”

“Tell me what the voicemail is about now that you’ve got me on the phone.”

“It’s very detailed, so it’s best to listen to it then go over the email first. We’ll discuss it after that. There’s an important business venture I’m sure you’ll love.”

“Okay, I’ll check it out.”

“Okay, talk to you later.”

“Bye.” Our call ended and I tossed my phone to the side.

My mind was still stuck on Sebastian. Smiling, I went to my suitcase and browsed through the scantily clad dresses I’d packed. We were going to dinner, so I picked a knee-length red dress. Hours later, I stood in the mirror scrutinizing my look. I was feeling overwhelmed. It was kind of funny seeing as Sebastian had seen me at my best and my worst. With that being the case, I should’ve been comfortable with what I was wearing, but truth be told, I was a nervous wreck. It was like dating all over again. The dress I wore fit my curves from my breast down to my waist, down my bodacious bottom, over my thighs to my knees. It appeared to be a tight fit, but it was comfortable and fit nicely. I adorned my neck with a pearl necklace and slipped on earrings and bracelets. Originally, I’d put my hair up, but I rethought that look and allowed my tresses to fall in a cascade of curls to the middle of my back.

I was worried I was doing too much. This could go one or two ways. He would see me and burst out laughing, “Girl, who you dressed up for?” I could hear it now. Or, he would love it. I was rooting for the latter.

I checked the time. It was five minutes to seven. I grabbed my clutch and slid my feet into my white Manolo

Blahniks and decided to wait for him in front of the hotel. I opened the door and ran into strong arms and washboard abs.

“Whoa!” he said. His hands reached out to hold me steady.

“Sebastian!” I said, flabbergasted.

“You should be more careful, Princess.”

I smiled up at him. He was heartthrob gorgeous, dressed in another suit, black jacket and pants, white button down and a red tie. I held my breath for his response to what I was wearing; the impenetrable gleam in his eyes told me he liked what he saw.

“Hey, we’re matching!” I pointed toward his tie.

“So we are,” he drawled. His eyes roamed over me, and I squirmed under his microscopic perusal. “You’re stunning. Hot date tonight?” He struck me with a debonair smile. I threw my head back as a burst of laughter tickled through me.

“Unhuh,” I said, “With a handsome, sexy, audacious man whom I can’t wait to ravish later.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I’m jealous.”

I giggled. “Don’t be, I’m sure he’ll save some scraps for you.” He drew me into his arms, tickling my sides. “Oh yeah,” he whispered in my ear as I continued to giggle. “I’ll kill him. Does he know that?”

A flush of heat saturated my skin, causing goose bumps to populate on my arms. I lifted my mouth and met his in a searing kiss.

“Mmm,” I moaned, sticking out my tongue to lick his lips. His hands slid down my back to grab a handful of my derriere. My arms coiled around his neck, our bodies pressing thinly into one another. I could feel his erection on my belly. His low growl was not his hunger for food. I spoke in between kisses, “If we keep this up, we’ll miss whatever reservations you have planned.

He responded by lifting me slightly off my feet and grinding into my pelvis. I was hot all over; only a freezer could cool me off.

Breathless, I said, “Don’t you...want...to eat...”

His mouth moved down my jaw as we stepped back into the room. “I sure do want to eat.”

I was an inferno, my panties soaked. I’d almost given in when his phone chimed. He struggled with whether to answer, his kisses turning into pecks. He withdrew, answering his phone.

“Sebastian Cartwright,” he said, his dark eyes never leaving mine.

“Yes, park it. It may be awhile. I’ll let you know.” He disconnected the call.

I pursed my lips. “That was?”

“Cedrick, our chauffeur.”

“It may be awhile?”

He looked down at his pants, and I followed his line of sight. The bulge that strained against them was buoyant.

“I may have to take a cold shower first,” he said, his voice gruff.

“Or maybe,” I took steps toward him, “you can take a warm shower.” My words were frank. I reached behind me and unzipped my dress. It fell to my hips, and I shimmied out of it, kicking it off my ankles. I wore no bra, and my thong was barely there. His nostrils flared and he moved quick, snatching me off my feet. I leaned into his mouth with my tongue and loosened his tie. My fingers played his shirt’s buttons like a fiddle, unbuttoning them with lightning speed. I pulled it over his broad shoulders, tossed it on the floor, and started on his pants. Within seconds, we were naked except for my pearls and his tie. I was on my back in the bed, my Manolo Blahniks still attached to my feet.

“Leave them on,” he said.

“You too,” I said, referring to the lone red tie that clung to his masculine neck. He crawled off me and strolled to the door. In our haste, we’d left it wide open. He was beautiful all over, strong edges and a supreme bottom to match. It was amazing what my eyes saw looking at him through a sexual lens. He sauntered back erect at full attention. Excalibur had definitely earned his name. It hung and swayed with his steps, curved slightly upward.

“Jesus,” I said just below a whisper.

The bed groaned under his weight as he crept to me with the grace of a panther. The copious bulk in his arms stretching through toned skin. My areolas were instantaneously hard as he grabbed my thighs, the strength in his palms forcing me down the sheets to meet up with his

shoulders. There was no warning, no formal caution of the onslaught of pleasure he was about to behoove on me. His head dipped down and sucked in a mouthful of my clitoris, causing me to buck and moan immediately. His tongue moved with precision over the soft folds of my flower with pressurized aggression. I yelped, yelled and squealed at the indulgent whip of his tongue. His palette sure to get a welcoming round of sweetness.

“Sebastian...” I moaned, my hand reaching down to rub the top of his head. It was impossible to focus on anything other than the spasms that were shooting through my existence. I cried out, “Oh my God!” It wasn’t long before I felt a wave rippled down my thighs and instinctively my toes curled. I choked out a wail as my orgasm dropped. Convulsions seemed to go on for eternity. I lost all sense of saneness, my fists balled, and I bit down on my lip as my body quaked. Sebastian rose, taking Excalibur in his hands and slapping him against my clitoris, causing more stimulation to shoot through me. He dropped down and kissed from my belly button to the cleft in between my breasts.

I moaned.

His hands roamed up my arms, opening the palms of my hands, his fingers intertwining with mine. He kissed up the side of my cleavage and took in a mouth full of my breasts. Excalibur rested in between my thighs, and my legs were bent back where my knees met my elbows. He had me wide open, and although it was impossible for me to prepare for the execution I knew would come at any second. I tried my luck and let out a plea.

“Sebastian...”

His lips combed up my chest, his teeth sinking down in my neck. I yelped and moaned simultaneously. “Baby...”

“Un hmm,” he growled.

“Have mercy,” I said.

“Buttercup, I want you to come for me again.” His hips moved, and I came undone at his profound immersion. He didn’t show mercy. Instead, he filled me with every inch of him, sending me scurrying away. “Where you going, Princess?” he whispered in my ear, his lips leading down my shoulder. He pummeled into me, causing the headboard to ricochet off the wall. Our bodies sizzled as we came apart then together again. I turned my mouth to his shoulder and bit down, an angry out of my mind love bite. There was a homicide happening, and I didn’t want to be saved. My orgasm was at its peak, and I shouted cries of pain and pleasure. His hands discovered the length of my body as his lips assaulted me wherever they landed.

“What happens when you can’t get rid of me?” he growled in my ear.

“I never want to.” I moaned. He rocked into my core, and I shouted. Another earth-shattering orgasm was taking place as his hands cuddled me. The strength of his release was equally cataclysmic and we held each other. “You’re everything I’ve always wanted,” I said. He responded by kissing my lips and chin. I was spent and sated, and I’d forgotten all about food.

Chapter Seventeen

The next day, we did manage to make it out of the hotel. The sun hung high over the floating city, and there was a light draft in the air. I stepped out in a knee-length dress that flowed from my waist down. Sunglasses sat atop my nose, and this time I'd pinned my hair above my head with a few curly twists falling down the back. The simple diamond studs that ornamented my ears were a last-minute decision, but they accommodated the white gold bracelet I wore. Sebastian grabbed my hand, and we walked down the rustic brick streets.

Venice was a beautiful place; the eighteenth-century buildings held strong on the wooden platforms that kept them afloat. Red, pink and white flowers sat in windowsills, coloring the buildings along the way. At the end of the road, we turned and strolled over a bridge.

"I know you've been here before, but have you experienced the life of Venice?" Sebastian asked.

"Not entirely," I said. "It was mostly for work, so although I did get a glimpse, I didn't get to enjoy."

"I wonder why?" he quirked.

"It's Venice, the city of romance. No one wants to experience that alone."

His fingers tightened around mine. "Will you experience it with me today, Princess?"

“I’ll do anything with you, Sebastian.”

His steps slowed, and he twirled me around pulling me into his chest, my backside now exposed to his front. His lips grazed my earlobe, sending a shiver coursing down my neck. Without warning, he twirled me back to my original stance, and we proceeded to walk over the bridge.

“Yesterday, I told you I had something I wanted you to see. That was before you tried to step out in that dress.” His eyes grew dark. “Did you learn your lesson?”

I pursed my lips. “No.”

He paused, side eyeing me. “Are you sure?” His voice warned me that I would indeed pay for the way I responded next.

“I may need a reminder.” We cut down a narrow alleyway, and he drew me in, pinning me against the brick wall. A passerby sauntered down the walkway and whistled. My gut flip flopped with his lips mere breaths away from mine.

“One last chance,” he said, his voice dark and brooding.

I stuttered, “I...um...yes.”

“Yes what?”

“I learned my lesson.” His stronghold loosened, and he released me but not before placing a kiss on my forehead, leaving the spot tinged. With his fingers back around mine, he guided me from the alley back to the main walkway. Images of Sebastian’s past lovers scurried through my mindsight. I wondered if he treated them with the same intensity and

extreme passion as he did me. I blinked back the thoughts. I hated them. I didn't want to become the jealous, untrusting, nagging girlfriend. Even though I held no titles with him except friend. But I never imagined he would be so delectably charming.

We entered a small bakery, the bell above the door chiming upon our entrance. Fresh smells of vanilla cupcakes, chocolate chips cookies and sugary vapors filled the air. A petite woman with blended black and white hair greeted us.

“Good afternoon, can I help you make a selection?” she spoke in Italian.

Sebastian glanced from me back to the lady, responding in the woman's native language, “Good afternoon, would you happen to have buttercup cupcakes?”

The lady's head bobbed. “Yes sir, they'll be fresh if you'd wait about five more minutes. There's a batch coming out of the oven.”

I squealed. Sebastian made the purchase and held small talk with the woman until she disappeared into the back. His arm now hung leisurely around my shoulders and mine around his waist. The lady reappeared with a cupcake the size of a self-serving birthday cake.

“Wow,” I said. Sebastian look down at me and winked. He fed me the sweet treat, and we took turns licking icing off each other's lips.

“That was delicious,” I said, rubbing my belly.

“It was and just think, I'd have never tried the flavor if I'd never known you,” he said.

“Aw, maybe you would have, you never know.”

“I’m pretty certain.”

“How are you so certain?”

“No grown man walks into a store and asks for buttercup anything.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Men.”

He shrugged. “It’s the truth. You know it.”

I twisted my lips. “Maybe.”

We strolled five minutes down the street to the glass Calatrava bridge where we met up with a local guide. We loaded a private boat and sailed across the venetian lagoon. It would take us thirty minutes to get to the nearest island, so I sat back and pulled the pins out of my hair that held my mane in place. My curls toppled to my shoulders and down my back. With my hand, I shook up my hair, allowing the wind to flow freely through my tresses. I turned to speak to Sebastian and was caught up in his watchful gaze.

“Have I told you today how beautiful you are?” he asked, his voice deep and thick.

I smiled, lowering my lashes. “I don’t think you have.”

He practically pulled me into his lap. “You are so beautiful, Shelby Nichole Donahue. I can’t seem to get enough of you.”

“Mmm,” I bit my bottom lip, “and I you.”

He kissed my chin, then lips. “Get off my lap, woman, before we give Mr. Jones here a preview of what I’ve been wanting to do since we left the hotel.”

I squirmed. “Hey, you brought me over here.”

“That’s not the point.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Men,” I said, shifting myself.

“I never asked you how your flight from Saint Louis went, but it did cross my mind. You made it all on your own. See, I always knew you could do it.”

“I had Pinot Grigio to keep me company.” He laughed. “I also slept most of the time, and I was on a mission.”

“Missed me, huh?”

“More than I wanted to admit.”

“You and me both.”

“Where do you think our friendship will go from here?” I held my breath for his response. It was something I’d wanted to ask for the last two days, but I didn’t want to push it. He watched me closely and relaxed in his seat, throwing his arm over the top.

“I guess that’s up to the both of us. We obviously have something going here. Do we risk a relationship or remain lovers and friends?”

I already knew how I wanted to answer this question; my apprehension came from whether he would be receptive. Instead of responding, I lay my head on his shoulder and enjoyed the rest of the ride. Neither one of us spoke for the remaining ten minutes it took us to get to Sant’Erasmus. Arrival at the island yielded an array of farms, houses and agricultural landscapes behind a line of strong fences. We passed mud flats

and a few people scattered throughout in search of an evening meal. Before long a vineyard came into view where we were served Veneto white wine and nibbled on cicchetti.

“I know you’re more of a fan of red wines,” Sebastian said. “Would you like to try one?”

“Very much so.”

“For our red wines, I recommend trying Osteria Al Ponte,” our guide said. He handed us a fresh glass, and we sipped the sweet alcohol.

“This is divine,” I said.

“We’ll take a bottle,” Sebastian said.

“We’ll take two,” I countered.

The guide chuckled. “Two bottles it is. I also recommend some of Italy’s top red wines, Amarone, Barolo and Brunello.”

Sebastian gave me an extended considering look. “Can you handle it, Buttercup?”

“Let’s do it.”

We were poured three different samples of the wines, and before long I had a small buzz going. “I know I asked for two bottles earlier, but I’ve changed my mind. I think we should get one bottle of all four.”

Sebastian chuckled and looked to the host. “The lady has spoken.” I leaned into him, sliding my fingers between his. We left the island and Sebastian whispered something in Mr. Jones’ ear.

I peered at him. “What are you up to, Mr. Cartwright?”

“What are you talking about?” he said, feigning ignorance. I slapped him across his arm. He wrapped me in them and placed a kiss on my face. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I poked my lip out, and he chuckled. Our guide took a turn and within fifteen minutes, we were docking again. My cell phone rang and briefly I shut my eyes. I didn’t need to look at the screen to know Alan was calling yet again.

“Do you need to get that? Sebastian asked.

He helped me out of the boat, “No I’m good.” We strolled down the streets until we fell upon an art exhibit. A smile lifted my face, and I cocked my head up at him. “You sure do know how to show a girl a good time.”

He winked. “I do try.” Hand in hand, we walked along the exhibit, stopping to admire a variety of resplendent artwork. We came across paintings from legendary artists like Francis Bacon, Henry Moore and Damien Hurst. I was in love being surrounded by the superlative art. Sebastian had to drag me away from a Steve McQueen piece. I was officially star struck.

“Let’s see what all the fuss is about,” he said.

Reluctantly, I followed him. A group of onlookers were crowded around a piece of art that sat on a leveled platform. We eased our way through to stand front and center.

My eyes popped, and my mouth dropped open. “Oh my God!” I looked to Sebastian and back at the very first canvas I had ever painted. It was of an elderly African American man sitting atop a carriage filled with weaved

baskets of large pineapples, bananas, and corn. The whip attached to his hand was tied to a set of horses that pulled the carriage along. I covered my mouth and was blinded by a haze of tears that clouded my sight. Sebastian held me tight and kissed my forehead. I dropped my hand and blubbered, “How...when...what...”

“You have arrived, Princess,” he whispered in my ear. I tried to stop the surge of tears, but it was no use. My artwork had been a lot of places, and I’d definitely made a mark in this world, but to be exhibited in Venice was top of the line. A middle-aged man moved to the front of the crowd, his hand held out for a shake.

“Miss Donahue, it’s a pleasure,” he said.

I extended my hand accepting his. “Sorry for the tears, thank you.”

“Tears of joy, I hope.”

“Definitely.”

“I’m Mr. Ronald Spreadchire, the owner of this event. I was honored to display a piece of your art today. As you can see, it’s quite a hit.” The crowd grew larger by the second.

“I’m the one who’s honored. Thank you very much.”

“I guess we both have Mr. Cartwright to thank.” He reached for Sebastian’s hand and they shook. “He told me there was an art piece I wouldn’t want to part without and he was correct.” Again, I looked to Sebastian. With his thumb, he wiped the remnants of tears from underneath my eyes.

“What can I say,” his eyes never left mine, “I’ve got a good eye for exquisite art.”

“Indeed you do,” Mr. Spreadchire agreed. “I do hope you two enjoy your stay here in Venice. Please visit us more often.”

“We most certainly will,” I said. My thoughts ran wild as I searched Sebastian’s face. I didn’t think the love I felt for him could get any deeper, but what I was experiencing was on another level. My heart swelled as he brought his lips down to mine. And just like that I was his... anytime, anywhere, for any reason. Friend or otherwise, I would always belong to him.

Chapter Eighteen

I was in another world and very emotional. Sebastian and I visited the remaining pieces before circling back around to mine. Standing to the side of a different crowd that had gathered, I beamed, a feeling of accomplishment and pride swelling my chest. My thoughts swirled. Sebastian was the best person I'd ever had the pleasure of calling my friend. It was surreal to have someone in my corner as important as he. Many don't get the opportunity to share laughter, sorrow, fear, excitement, tenderness, accomplishment, friendship and love all in the same person. He was one of a kind, and I couldn't bear to think of a life without him.

I saw him check his watch. "Do you mind if I drag you away?" he asked.

I breathed in a satisfied sigh. "Sure." We left the exhibit and went back to the dock, getting in the same boat that had guided us all day. We sailed across the lagoon, the bright blue waters glowing as a panoramic sunset settled over the clouds. The bright orange highlighted the sky in a magnificent glow.

"Right on time," Sebastian said.

I turned to him. "I love you."

His eyes lingered on me for a long moment. “I love you, too, Princess.”

I kissed his lips and curled into the warmth of his chest as the boat sailed.

When we made it back to the hotel, I was still in la la land. The day would be one I’d treasure for years to come.

“Mr. Cartwright!” Sebastian paused. Melanie approached us with a tall handsome man at her side. “Let me introduce you to the owner of A Few Good Men Modeling Agency, Julian Alexander Rose.” They shook hands. “Mr. Rose, this is Sebastian Cartwright and his friend Shelby Nichole Donahue.”

Julian took my hand in his and placed a kiss on the back. “A pleasure, Miss Donahue. You wouldn’t happen to be thee Shelby Nichole Donahue, artist of The Long Ride Home?”

“You’re familiar with my work,” I said.

“Very. I saw your piece on display at the International Art Exhibit today. Beautifully done. I would love to have a chance to purchase your work. I have plenty of wall space.”

“Shelby will be honored at The Annual Gala and Art Auction this fall in Saint Louis,” Sebastian offered. “You should come, then you’ll have a chance to have an up-close look at her work over the years.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Excellent!” Melanie chimed in.

“Have either of you had dinner?” Julian asked.

“Not yet,” Sebastian replied.

“I have the chef cooking up something special. Would you like to join us?”

Sebastian looked to me. “Sure.” The four of us cruised over to the dining area and sat at a special VIP table in the rear of the hotel. A server approached us and poured wine before bouncing off.

“Mr. Cartwright, I want to thank you for taking the time to visit us here in Venice,” Julian said. “At A Few Good Men Modeling Agency, we take pride in highlighting successful men who make an impact on the world. It’s our specialty.”

“I appreciate the opportunity. I had a wonderful time. Jennifer is special. Even I couldn’t deny the magnificent angles of the images she caught.”

“Only the best for the best.” Julian smiled. I was sure that smile had swooned many of women out of their panties.

“I wouldn’t quite say the best,” Sebastian said, smirking.

We all chuckled, knowing he was referring to himself.

“So are you two an item?” Julian inquired.

The question threw me for a loop. I looked to Sebastian and answered before he could. “Not quite,” I said. “We’ve been friends for over ten years, so there’s a special bond we have that most people aren’t used to.” I had no idea why I’d said it, but it seemed right considering.

Julian glanced at Sebastian. “You’ve known this gorgeous woman for ten years and haven’t taken her off the market yet?”

I blushed and warmth coated my face. Sebastian looked to me. “It seems that I haven’t,” he said.

“Well in that case, you wouldn’t mind me asking her out.”

Sebastian wavered. “I do vet any man that comes into her life. You would be no exception.” There was a viciousness in his tone.

“I’m an open book,” Julian said, turning back to me. “Do you have a date for your gala event?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer this question. Originally, Alan was supposed to be my date, but now that we were no longer seeing each other that wouldn’t be happening. Sebastian had offered to take me, but he had an important photo shoot at the same time. I looked to Sebastian for help, but he offered none.

“No,” I replied, hesitant. “I don’t.”

“It would give me great pleasure to be the man on your arm. What do you think?”

My pulse spiked. “I’ll give you the details,” I said.

The atmosphere around our table shifted and suddenly I felt uneasy. Was it appropriate for me to allow him to be my date? If I’d have it my way, Sebastian would certainly be accompanying me. I tried to tell myself I was thinking too deeply into it.

The waiter appeared with our food and we ate, made small talk and I sipped as much wine as I could handle without looking like an alcoholic. After we parted ways the ride in the elevator was silent. So much so, that I felt I should say something, anything.

“Hey,” I looked to him with a soft smile, “are we okay?”

He turned to me, his features going from empty to warm. “We’re good.”

I couldn’t read his tone. “Are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t we be?”

Although I knew the answer to this, I allowed myself to believe my reservations weren’t warranted. So I smiled again and shook my head. “No reason.”

The doors opened and I headed to my room, but he stopped at his door. I looked back. “Are we staying here tonight?”

“We should probably get our things ready for check out in the morning, and that’s going to take me a while.”

“Oh,” I said, “you’re right.” It was his own way of telling me we would spend this night apart. I walked to my room and inserted the key. When I looked back, he was watching me. “Good night,” I said.

“Good night,” he murmured.



Arriving back in Saint Louis came much quicker than I’d anticipated. I walked into my art studio and went straight

for my office.

“Well, well, well.”

I whipped my head around to find my sister standing in the doorway. She folded her arms. “You look refreshed.”

I cocked my head to the side. “What did I look like before?”

“You weren’t glowing like you are now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever, are you never at home? I mean, I don’t work you too hard, do I? You’re always in this building.” I dropped my bag on the desk.

“Well you are one of the most prominent artists out there, so someone has to keep things moving and shaking.”

“True, but maybe you should take some time off. Just a few days.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Not at all. I just want you to get some R & R.”

“Trust me, I’m good. If I weren’t, you’d be the first to know.”

“If you say so. I got your voicemail and your email. I’ve already sent an email back to Professor Daniels. Paris, huh?”

“Yes, isn’t that great?”

I nodded. “You know that’s real close to the auction.”

“Which is why I was unable to decide for you. What did you say in the email?”

“I thanked him for reaching out, and he wanted to speak over the phone. So, we did and it’s official. I’ll be going to his school to teach an art seminar. It’s a full day event, so I’ll be in Paris about two days.”

She squealed, and I giggled at her enthusiasm. “I’m so excited for you! The opportunities just keep coming. You’re blessed, honey!”

I smiled. “Right.”

Her face fell. “What’s wrong? I thought you’d be excited.”

“I am.”

She invited herself into the office, pulled out a chair and sat. “Spill it.”

I didn’t even try to hide it from her; she knew me almost as well as Sebastian did.

“I think I messed up.”

“What do you mean?”

I sat down in the chair next to her and sulked. “Yesterday, Sebastian and I had one of the most blissful days. We spent the full day exploring Venice. Oh, that reminds me, I have wine.”

“You brought wine back from Venice?”

“Yes, ma’am. He took me to a vineyard on Sant’Erasmus Island. You know I had to bring back some wine. Afterwards, we went to an art exhibit and I found my first painting on display.”

She gasped. “Oh my God.”

“I know, right? We watched the sun set on a boat floating in the middle of the lagoon. I mean it was magical.”

“So what happened?”

“When we got back to the hotel, we ran into the owner of the modeling agency he did the spread for. He asked if we were an item and I said no. Long story short, he asked me out.”

“And you turned him down, right?”

I fidgeted. “Not exactly.” Her mouth fell. “I know,” I whined. “What am I supposed to do in a situation like that? What should I have said?”

“You should have nicely turned him down. Come on, girl.” She gave me a look of disdain and rolled her eyes. “That’s okay, you’ll just call him and cancel. Tell him you’re not feeling well or whatever you have to, to get out of the date.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Why not?”

“He’s my date for the auction.”

I swear her jaw nearly hit the floor. “Shelby!”

“It happened kind of fast. He asked if I had a date for the event, and I don’t!”

“You know Sebastian would’ve been your date!”

“No I don’t. He has a photo shoot that day for GQ magazine. He won’t be there.”

She opened her mouth to speak and closed it again then exhaled heavily. “What did Sebastian say?” she finally asked.

“Honestly, not much after that. The vibe we had going went completely cold.” My head fell in my hands. “What should I do?”

Denise bit the corner of her lip; her eyes cut at me with worry. “I don’t know. You guys are always honest, so maybe you should try honesty. Ask him if he’s okay with it.”

I bit my thumbnail. “He’s not, I’m telling you. When the dinner was over, we went back to our respective quarters, and we hadn’t slept a night without each other since I’d been there. He came up with an excuse about needing to pack. It was bogus. I could tell he was feeling some type of way.”

“Can you blame the man? He’d just spent the last few days falling in love, and you went and accepted a date. In front of him no less.”

“You’re really doing nothing to make me feel better right now.”

“Good. You should know better. How would you have felt if he’d accepted a date right in front of you?” I pursed my lips in frustration. “Why are you here?” she asked. “You should be wherever he is, making sure you guys are good.”

I tossed my hand in the air. “I need to give him a little space. Besides, I need to clear my head myself. The question of our friendship status did come up. Neither of us decided if we should take the next step.”

“What other steps are there for you guys to take?”

“I know what you’re thinking, we had amazing, mind blowing sex. If I wasn’t still on the pill, we would’ve made a baby. I know it seems logical that we would be together, but we’re not. We’re just...” I thought back to the words Sebastian used. “Lovers and friends.”

Denise twisted her lips, her nose turned up. “You guys are just fooling yourself, but whatever, you’ll figure it out like you did this. In the meantime, don’t accept any more dates. The fact that I have to tell you that is crazy.”

She got up and left me there with my thoughts. I did need to clear my head, but I was hoping my friend would stay honest with me about our situationship. Since I knew he’d never broach the subject, I’d take it upon myself to do it.

Chapter Nineteen

The next few weeks went by at a snail's pace, but I was excited about the upcoming seminar in Paris. Talking to Sebastian had nicely jumped back into its regular routine without all the sexual innuendos I'd grown to love, and it made me wonder if he was trying to stay away from a physical relationship with me. I missed his touch daily and found myself with fingers between my legs some nights when I couldn't be near him. Every time I'd think there was no chance of getting him in my bed, I'd catch him staring at me with heavyset smoldering eyes. My body would react, and I would attempt to get close to him, but just as fast as I would see his desire, it would be gone. It was punishment. I wasn't sure if he was purposefully trying to punish me, but nevertheless, it was torment.

I became accustomed to working in my home studio, but lately I'd been in my office studio. Being away from my personal space helped, albeit it very little, me to not focus on Sebastian and I.

I'd just finished up a piece, washed my hands and dropped down onto my leather sofa when Alan came strolling into the room. I was so tired I did a double take to make sure I wasn't seeing things. It had been over a month since I'd seen

or heard anything from him, so his appearance was shocking. His eyes traveled up and down me, and I stood to my feet.

“Alan, how are you?”

He folded his arms. “Not as good as you are obviously. You haven’t answered my calls. Have I done something so wrong that you can’t answer my calls?”

I didn’t want to fight with him. But I guess this was inevitable. It was too much to think I could end our relationship without any sort of repercussions. “I’ve been extremely busy. I’m sorry you’re not doing well.”

“Are you?”

I sighed. “Yes, Alan, I am. No matter what happened between us, I still love you, and I want nothing but the best for you.”

His face was tight. “If you wanted nothing but the best for me, then why did you break up with me?” Before I could respond, he continued, “I mean, we’ve been dating for what, almost a year? I’ve grown attached to you, I love you, I don’t want to live without you, Shelby.”

His words should have warmed me, but instead, they put me on edge. “I know, Alan, I’m so sorry. I promise I never meant to hurt you.”

“But you did.” His arms fell to his side and he took steps toward me. I wanted to retreat, but there was nowhere to go but my sofa. “Calling off our engagement is one thing, but dumping me like a loser is another.” He was in front of me now.

“Alan...” He grabbed my arm and pulled me firm against his chest. I pulled back from him, but his strength superseded mine. “Please, don’t cause a scene.”

Denise passed my doorway and back peddled, sticking her head in the door. This was one of those times I was happy she was a workaholic or it would’ve just been me and him. She saw the stress on my face and frowned. “Is everything okay?”

He tilted his head back at her. “Please mind your business,” he spat through clenched teeth.

“Excuse me, sir,” Denise said, making her way into the room. “You need to let her go.”

“This is our business, not yours. Find you a man of your own so you can stay out of our business.”

“Alan,” I said, “stop it!”

He turned back to me. “Why, someone needs to tell her to go to hell. As for you and I, we have unfinished business.”

“No, we don’t! Let go of me!” I struggled against him, but it was no use. Denise disappeared from the room, and my nerves kicked up a notch.

“You belong to me, Shelby, you said you would marry me. It’s not fair that you left me the way you did.” His cold stare softened a bit. “Please, sweetheart, give us another chance. I promise I can be the man you want.”

I heaved a deep breath, holding my voice steady. “Alan, I’m sorry that I hurt you,” I pleaded, “but I can’t make myself want you in that way.”

His grip tightened and his jaw ticked. “Why not, because I’m not lover boy? Hmmm? Let me ask you, Shelby, how long did it take before you hopped into his bed?”

I pulled back from him again, and his grip tightened even more. “Alan, please, you’re hurting me!”

“Oh, I’m hurting you? What about how you’re hurting me?” he yelled, slinging me into the sofa. He took steps toward me, and I looked at him in horror. I had no idea what he would do next. I scuffled to the edge of the leather sofa, trying to keep as much distance between us as possible, which wasn’t much.

“How dare you spend a year of my life leading me on. You’re a bitch!”

Tears filled my eyes at his words. When he reached down to grab me, I yelled, “Please Alan!”

“Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” The diabolical voice came from across the room. Alan and I turned simultaneously. Sebastian removed his suit jacket and tossed it to my desk. The sinister glow that sat in his eyes was the deadliest thing I had ever seen on him, or anyone else. He unsnapped his cuff links and rolled up his sleeves.

“Here comes pretty boy to the rescue,” Alan mocked. “Denise must have called you. What does she think you’ll do? Shelby belongs to me, not you, so you should just get over it,” he said through gritted teeth.

As crazy as it might sound, I wanted to save Alan in that moment because the truth was he had no idea that he was seconds from being torn to shreds. Unfortunately, I wasn’t fast

enough. Sebastian's malicious glare lasered in on Alan's hand that still gripped my arm, and when he moved, it was at supersonic speed. One blink and his fist connected with Alan's face.

"Oh my God!" I screamed.

Alan attempted to throw a punch, but he was too slow. Sebastian placed a vice grip on his throat with one hand and punched him three times, releasing him on the third punch. It sent Alan flying into a painting on my wall; both crashed to the floor.

"Sebastian!" I ran to him and with ease he slid me behind his back. "That's enough, please stop!" My cries fell on deaf ears. Sebastian walked over to Alan and knelt in front of him. Punch, after punch, after punch landed on Alan's face. "Sebastian!" I threw myself in front of Alan. Although it was too late to protect him from Sebastian's vicious blows, I could still save his life.

"Please," I begged, looking into the icy glow of his eyes. My hands glanced to his fists that were bruised and bloody with Alan's DNA. He followed my sight and slowly he stood, reaching out to me with his other hand. I took it and he lifted me into his arms.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," he said. "Where's your security?"

"The police are on their way up," Denise answered from the doorway.

He caressed my face and examined my arm, anger rising again at the bruise that was darkening. I placed a hand

on his chest to calm him. "I'm fine." His eyes connected with mine as his mind pondered if I was telling the truth or not. "I promise."

He rubbed my arms and cuddled me under his arms. "Are you done here?" I nodded. "Good. I'll follow you home." I looked behind me; Alan was laid out on the floor. I was sure they'd have to carry him out on a stretcher.

Downstairs in the parking garage, I hit the alarm button shutting off the security on my car. Sebastian didn't leave my side until I opened the door.

"Hey," I said. He watched me quizzically. "Thanks for showing up so quickly."

"I just left a meeting with my publicist." He checked my arm again, the frown on his face deepening. "I'm glad I was close or there's no telling what that bastard would've done."

I shuddered at the thought. "Um, you know I have the seminar this weekend. Are you busy, I would love you to go with me." I sounded like I was begging. And I was. His protectiveness had me feeling hot for him, but I was trying to feel him out.

"This weekend, huh," he said.

"Yes." I swallowed.

"I'm all yours." He leaned in placing a kiss on my cheek. I turned my face to his hoping to feel his lips, but he backed away. "I'll follow you home, Princess." I watched as he walked away to his car.



When it was time for me to go off to Paris, I was delighted Sebastian was with me. I would never get used to flying.

It was the middle of the night when we arrived in Paris. Checking in at the hotel was a breeze, and the complimentary suite was big enough to fit a small reception inside.

I tossed my bags on the bed and went to stand in front the window. Paris was beautiful at night. The exotic buildings stood tall with blankets of light glowing from each high-rise. Even with the late-night hour, cars and transportation bustled on the streets below. Staring at the serene night life, I took a mental snapshot and filed it away. Turning around, I watched Sebastian pull himself out of the crew neck T-shirt he wore.

I'd given up trying to be sexual with him. If he wasn't up to it, then that was fine by me. I rolled my eyes. Who was I kidding? It wasn't fine by me, and I was sexually frustrated. After the display of force he'd shown at my studio, I wanted to believe he reacted as he did because he loved me and not just in a friendship type of way. But I wouldn't throw myself at him. Maybe he thought going back to the friends title was for the best. If it was in our stars, it would happen. For now, I'd be happy with life the way things were.

I strolled to the bathroom and found him inside in the glass shower with his back to me. Instead of speaking, I watched him for a minute, my body reacting to his toned, muscled back and bottom. My eyes faltered, traveling to his feet then back up again. He turned his face up toward the

stream of water spraying from the showerhead. He moved, turning his body toward me, his eyes still closed under the spray. I followed the details of his carved jaw down his strong neck and caught his Adam's apple bobble under his movement.

The temperature under my skin warmed, giving me a tingle between my thighs. I inhaled and exhaled slowly. My fingers circled around my lips like they had a mind of their own. I couldn't stop myself. Before I knew it, my thumb had slid into my mouth, and I sucked it lightly. The heat and wetness from my tongue made me pant. As I continued to watch him, I became less and less in control of my body. His broad shoulders gave insight in to his regular workout regimen. The abs in his chest portraying consistent training. The suction on my finger tightened when I made it to Excalibur.

The water had no effect on the extensive muscle as it was half-erect. A thrill of emotions ran through me, and my unattended arm slid across my belly, my hand reaching down to tap dance below my button. I stood there for longer than I should've, having an out of body experience. Temptation was pushing me forward. I didn't give a damn if I'd be throwing myself at him; I wanted him bad. Any other man would never suffice after I'd gotten a taste of him. Didn't he know this? It would be less than thirty seconds to wiggle out of these clothes and a mere second to slide open the shower door and step in. *Do it, go for it.* I edged myself on. But my feet never moved.

I stood there in a daze, dreaming like a nymphomaniac with no action behind my thoughts. I shifted and lifted my eyes back to his face to find him staring back at me with the

intensity of a moth to a flame. We held each other unmoving, with my heart hammering at a rapid pace. Seconds felt like minutes that we detained each other in an epic showdown of wills. He moved before I did, sliding the glass door open. It was a silent invitation. My arms moved and my shirt was across the room along with my jeans, panties, and bra. His gaze became a torch, and every part of me his eyes fell on was incinerated. I glided across the floor and timidly stepped in, closing the door behind me. The spray of the water massaged my already throbbing bones.

“I’ve missed you,” I whispered. His arms reached for me, circling my back and inching down to cup my butt. His fingers invaded the slick folds of my bottom sinking into the netherlands of my lower region. Lifting me slightly, his hips rotated, causing a stir in my under belly. We turned full circle, my hands sliding up his chiseled chest.

“What did you miss, Princess?” Excalibur circled around my clitoris, and a whimper fell from my mouth.

Without warning, he released me then just as quickly turned me to face the shower wall. His brawny hands slid up my waist, lifting my backside to meet his front. I grinded into him as he grinded into me, but we were still not connected. The anticipation was threatening my sanity. His hands found my breasts as he thumbed my areolas. He brought his mouth to my neck.

“What did you miss, Princess?” he asked again.

I huffed and puffed. “I missed you. All of you. Every single ounce. Please...” I panted.

“Please, what?”

I'd found myself begging and felt no shame. "Whatever it is that I did to make you stop..." I panted more as he continued to grind Excalibur against me, "to make you pull away, I'm sorry..." When he entered me, I just about shot up the wall. The sweet unadulterated torture was fit for a beautiful beat down. He clasped a tight hand around my throat and pulled me back, bending me like a bow and arrow.

"Put your hands around my head," he commanded. He was going to kill me; this time I was sure of it. I did as I was told, leaving myself exposed to suffering a pleasurable yet painful orgasmic fate. His mouth bit down on my neck, his hand sliding down to my waist. He moved in and out of me, and I screamed, my hands releasing his head.

"Un, un, un," he said, ceasing his movements. "Hands."

Obediently, I circled my fingers back around his head. And the rhythm in his hips forged ahead, penetrating me in dangerous plunges that threatened erratic heart palpitations. He dug into me, pounding and plummeting Excalibur like he was in the sword fight of his life. I writhed and thrashed as a violent force of energy struck every part of me.

"Sebastian!" I screamed, wanting him to show mercy but wanting to be slain in the same breath. Our bodies slapped against each other, a curse falling from his lips.

"Is this what you missed?" he questioned.

"Yes...yes...yes..." I panted.

He tunneled into me. "Why?"

When I took longer than he liked, he sped up thrusting and grinding. My hands fell loose, and I buckled, a scream tearing from my throat. His arm caught me as the top part of my body fell forward.

“Tsk, tsk,” he said. “Be careful, Buttercup, you’re going to hurt yourself.”

I didn’t know if he was being facetious, but I was too out of it to care. I bent my arms back to him, circling my hands around his head. “That’s a good girl.” He breathed into my neck. “Now answer my question. Why do you miss me?”

He filled his hands with my breasts while continuing his temerarious descent into my netherlands. “I couldn’t reach you. I tried, I’m not sure if…”

He dipped down, slamming into me and I yelped. “You’re not sure?” he questioned.

I blabbered, forgetting for a second the language I spoke. “I…um..” I bit my lip and whimpered some more. “Yes…” I panted, “I know.”

“What do you know, Princess?” He bit down on my neck, his teeth sinking into my skin. I was going to come. My body vibrated softly, and his movement paused. “Did I tell you, you could come yet?”

More whimpers flowed from me. I shook my head. “No.”

“Tell me what it is you know.” Slowly his movements started again. His intrusion like water that cleansed my soul.

I whispered, “The date.” His fingers slid down to my clitoris, and he tweaked and thumbed her. “Sebastian!”

He stopped, placing a firm hand on top of her. “Not yet,” he said.

“I’m sorry...sorry...sorry...” I cried.

He growled, “Don’t ever, EVER flirt with another man in front of me. Do you understand, Shelby Nichole Donahue?” Using my full name was just as erotic as his endearments, and I could no longer hold on to my climax. “Yes, I promise...I never meant to—” my words were cut off by the stronghold his arms placed on me. He drilled into me, my backside bouncing off Excalibur in long desperate strokes. “Sebastian!”

“Come with me, baby,” he said.

I shattered as soon as the words left his delectable lips. We moaned together, singing sweet praises to one another. His tight hold was everything I needed, locking my eruption down in a way that caused my head to spin. I was out of my mind, and this rollercoaster was a never-ending ride that had me dizzy and lightheaded. My ears popped liked I’d reached an altitude of unnatural heights. We clung to each other for what felt like forever, easing down off our high.

When he removed himself, I thought I would fall, but his stronghold never wavered. With delicacy, he turned me to face him before plunging his sweet tongue into my mouth. I tingled all over and moaned down his throat. My hands held the sides of his face as we took in a thunderous kiss.

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too, Princess.”

“I’m sorry, I truly am, I didn’t know what to say, I...”

“Sssshh, we’ll talk about it later.”

I nodded.

“By the way, I missed you, too,” he said.

Chapter Twenty

Sebastian

Watching her sleep was becoming normal for me. Her face fell innocent and flawless. She nudged herself closer to me, curving her body into mine. I had missed her. We'd been around each other since making it back from Venice, but there was still an emptiness that lingered whenever I was around her. I knew what it was. I'd gotten a piece of heaven, and going back to the way things were had become unreal. I felt indifferent about this. It meant our friendship had changed drastically; it was beautiful but dangerous at the same time. Watching Julian flirt with her and ask her out on a date made me jealous. The possessiveness I felt, alarming but strong in the desire I held for her. She was mine. Belonging to only me forever. That's how I felt, but unfortunately, it wasn't the truth. Seeing her in danger at her studio sent me over the edge. I thought Alan was a smart man, but it was obvious that he wasn't.

I'd went over it in my head on more than one occasion. Make her mine or leave her alone. Turn our already risky relationship into a never-ending one or stay on the safe side and go back to the way things were. I loved her and wanted the best for her, and I knew now I would never put her heart in jeopardy. The only thing there was to do next was tell her. I'd been holding back. Like a stubborn child. But I didn't want to anymore. I'd made up my mind. I wanted to risk it. She'd told

me she was in love with me, and I her. We knew all there was to know about each other and even though this should be a no-brainer, becoming a couple still had its dangers.

Nevertheless, I wanted her. Every piece of her and before we left this city, she would know it.



“Good morning, beautiful.” My eyes were still closed, but I knew she was awake. She kissed my lips and chin.

“I don’t want to get up,” she said.

I smiled. “You’ve been waiting on this day for a while now. Surely you’re excited.”

“I am, but I’d much rather lay up under you.”

“I know the feeling.” I rolled her over to her side and pressed my hardness against her.

She moaned. “That’s not helping.”

I chuckled, bending down to nibble on her earlobe and smack her butt. It bounced off my palm, making my erection strain against her bottom. I cursed.

“Give it to me,” she said, her voice filled with desire. As much as I hated to, I rolled off her and got out of bed.

“Hey!”

“I’m sorry, Buttercup, you’ve got to get a head start. There’s business to be handled.”

“But...but,” she stuttered.

I swung back around to her. “But what?”

Her eyes landed below my waist and settled on my unyielding erection.

“A quickie?” she offered, which insulted me.

I dashed back across the room and crawled in between her legs my face within inches of hers. “Really,” I glowered. “A quickie?”

She panted. “You’re right, that would never work, raincheck?”

I kissed her lips. “Of course.” I moved, but she held on to me, kissing along my jaw, her hands caressing my chest. “There’s only so much resolve I can bestow, Princess. If you don’t let me go, you’ll be telling Mr. Whatshisname your flight was delayed, and you didn’t make it in time.” She squirmed underneath me and released the hold she had on me.

I moved quickly, needing to get as far away from her as possible. It wasn’t easy with both of our bodies still bare and yearning for us to consummate. I strolled to the bathroom and shut the door, locking it. I didn’t need her creeping up on me, especially knowing this time I would let her have her way. It had taken us a couple of hours to get ready. The weather was changing, and the summer heat was turning into a breezy fall. Shelby was dressed in a long thin silver sweater with multicolor leggings underneath. Silver Ballerina shoes adorned her feet, and she wore her hair on top of her head in a tight ponytail, strands hanging down to her neck.

“You are very handsome today, Mr. Cartwright.” She walked up, pulling me in for a kiss.

“And you, Ms. Donahue, are very sexy yourself.”

“Mmm,” she said, her tongue circling my lips.

We set off our day with a succulent kiss. I pulled away from her, grabbed her hand, and we left for the University. Professor Daniels had a complimentary limo bring us to the campus. On the ride over, she sat up under me, her head leaned into my chest. I kissed her full lips several times, my thoughts wondering to ways I wanted to make this Paris trip a memorable one. Once we pulled in front of the building and made our way in, we were introduced to Professor Daniels. He was a middle aged, short, stocky man with a toupee sitting on top of his head that he assumed blended in with his sides.

“I’m thrilled to have you, Ms. Donahue. If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to the classroom you’ll be teaching in today.”

We walked down a lengthy hallway and into a room filled with fresh canvases propped on top of easels; stools and tables were also throughout the room. I saw the gleam in Shelby’s eyes. This was her first love no doubt. She turned to me, a sparkle in her eye, and I winked.

She blushed. “This is perfect,” she said.

“I’m glad you find it fitting,” the professor said. “It’s yours all day. Now you did get the schedule, right?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Everything you need is at your desk or set up around it.” A few people trickled into the room. “I’ll let you get started then.” He reached out to shake her hand, and she accepted. He turned to me. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr.

Cartwright. Congratulations on all of your success.” He held his hand out, and I accepted it.

“Thank you,” I responded. He waddled off and I checked the time. “I’ll be here to take you to lunch.” I bent forward and placed a kiss on her lips.

“I’ll be ready,” she said, still beaming.

We parted, but at the door I turned back to watch her. More students were filing in, finding a station. Shelby went over the items on her desk and turned her canvas and easel toward the class so they would have a clear view of her abstracts. Once the class was filled, she grabbed a brush and strolled around the class with it in hand talking about the basics of art construction. She covered theory and technique, circling back to her canvas to give brief examples. She was in her element, beautiful, brilliant and vibrant, and I never wanted to live another day without her by my side.

The revelation hit me like a ton of bricks. I paused my thoughts for a moment to think about what that meant. Everything I’d been fighting so hard against was what I should’ve been giving into. She was the only woman I wanted, and I had new meaning of what life should be with her. I turned on my heels and left the campus, taking a cab to O’Kari Day Spa. The woman at the front spoke English as she introduced me to the many packages they had to offer.

I picked a three-hour beauty treatment for Shelby, setting the appointment for later that evening. From there, I left for the nearest shopping center. I’d been with her enough times to know what she fancied. I picked out a few pair of shoes that would work in both of our favor. I grinned at the

thought of her elevated in the heels, further propping her butt in the air. I grew hard thinking about the roundness of her ass and the curves of her hips.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” A sales associate approached me.

“I’ll take these,” I said, coming out of my trance.

“Are you shopping for a girlfriend or wife?” she asked.

I smirked. “Yes.”

“We have gorgeous lingerie sets that may be of interest to you.”

“Show me the way,” I said.

I was in that store for an hour. When I left, there were three bags in my hand. I knew she would fuss about the money I spent. She’d been doing that since we were teenagers, and I had to remind her we were no longer those poor little kids with parents who lived from paycheck to paycheck. It was another thing I loved about her. She was frugal when she didn’t have to be because she didn’t forget where she came from. But I would make sure to let her know it was okay to indulge.

On my way out of the mall, a store caught my eye. I read the words on the window: *Diamonds are a girl’s best friend*. Before I knew it, I was standing over a counter of engagement rings. I pointed to one that was attached to a diamond studded band. The clerk pulled it out and I examined it closely.

“That one’s a fourteen-carat gold three-sided diamond engagement ring. Are you looking to pop the question?” the clerk asked.

I didn't answer the question right away, my mind racing with thoughts of happily ever after with Shelby. Was it possible? I glanced from the ring to the clerk.

"I think I am," I said.



Chapter Twenty-One

At 1:30 p.m., I stood outside of Shelby's classroom. She sauntered into the hallway, her purse draped over her shoulder. Her sweater had been altered; it was pulled just at her hips tied into a knot at her side. I ran my eyes over her bodacious hips down to her petite feet. She didn't see me right away, which worked in my favor. I snuck up behind her, wrapping one arm around her while the other presented a bouquet of long-stemmed red roses.

She gasped and squirmed in my grasp. "Sebastian!"

"Did I scare you?"

"Startled is more like it." Her face beamed. "Are these for me?"

"Who else would they be for, Princess?"

"Thank you, baby." She turned full circle in my arms and placed a kiss on my lips. "Let's get out of here." She grabbed my hand and almost ran from the building. We hailed a cab and went to the nearest restaurant.

"You have an hour, right?"

"Yes." She stuck her nose in the flowers and spoke quietly as if she was counting each one.

"What are you doing?"

She gave me a sheepish grin. “He loves me, he loves me not.”

I twisted my lips at her. “You don’t need these roses to answer that question. I love you.”

She blushed as her eyes fell back to the petals. She pulled her feet up on the seat and leaned into me. “I love you, too, Sebastian.”

I held her tightly, “What is that I hear in your voice?”

“I was just thinking...” She adjusted herself. “When Mr. Rose asked to be my date for the auction, I didn’t know how to respond mainly because you and I didn’t get around to hashing out the details of our relationship. Also, because I didn’t want to be rude. He was your boss for the moment.”

I frowned. “I’m my own boss, Buttercup. Don’t ever feel entitled to say or do something because of an opportunity. They come and go. We’ll be good always. And you’re right, we hadn’t discussed the details of our relationship, so that’s no fault of your own, but you know better now, right?”

She cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know. Do I?”

“Girl, I’m starting to think you like yanking my chain.”

She giggled. “I do.”

Hearing those words brought the unmentioned engagement ring I’d purchase to the forefront of my thoughts and the proposal I’d set up on the Eiffel Tower later that day. Would she say I do? Was asking her now too soon? Wondering if we should date for a while wasn’t ridiculous. This was a new thing for us, but did we really need the time? I wanted to

be with her, always. No amount of time would make me feel otherwise.

The taxi pulled in front of the hotel, I paid, and we went into the restaurant with the heavy thoughts still on my mind.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, getting comfortable in her chair.

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

“You seemed to get quiet for a minute.”

“I’ve got something planned for you today.”

She perked up and rubbed her hands together, her tongue curving out to touch the corner of her lips. “What is it?”

“You’ll find out when your seminar is over.”

“Can’t wait.”

“How’s it going anyway?”

“I love it. I never thought expressing myself through teaching art would be satisfactory.”

“Better than when you’re working on your own?”

“Mmm, I wouldn’t go that far but pretty close.”

“I’m happy for you. Whatever you want in life you should go for.”

“Whatever I want?” She poked her lips out.

I chuckled. “Yes Buttercup, that includes all things.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

While we ate, she spoke about her event coming up within a matter of weeks. She was exuberant when she spoke. Her eyes lit up with the details of the paintings she'd worked on and the classic she'd share. Attentively I listened, speaking only when I'd been prompted with a question. It amazed me how listening to her was enjoyable for me. But when I thought about it, it always had been. I felt an imaginary slap in the face. I'd been afforded the chance to find and be with the love of my life since my younger years, and it had taken me all this time to figure it out.

After our lunch, we walked back to her class. It was only five minutes away in the taxi, so walking off the Italian food suited us. I draped my arm across her shoulder, and she held on to my waist. The breeze in the fall afternoon lifted the curly strands that hung from her ponytail. The warmth in my chest came from a certainty I knew to be love. My fears of her response to an engagement were justifiable but unnecessary. Regardless of her answer, she would always be here. That she had assured me of, and I knew it to be true.

Watching her get back to business turned on a fire that began in the pit of my abdomen. Everything she did now stirred me in one way or another. I had it bad for her, and she didn't know the extent of my insanity. I left the school with a promise to be here at the end of her seminar. I found a small flower shop and placed an order for four thousand red and white roses.

“That’s the biggest order we’ve gotten at one time. It may take some time,” the owner said.

“When’s the soonest you can have it ready?”

She twisted her lips, thinking about it. “About three hours give or take.” The worried expression on her face told me she was hopeful I would still want to do business with her.

“That’s perfect,” I said. She seemed to perk up. “Can you have them delivered?”

“Of course.”

I gave her an address and told her I’d be there when the delivery came. She talked rapidly, handing me a sheet to fill out. I made the purchase and went back to the hotel.

When the delivery came, I opened the door, allowing the four men to tote in the beautiful roses. Even though a tip wasn’t necessary, I was big on helping the up and coming entrepreneur and hourly wage workers. I closed the door behind them and went to work on spreading rose petals in various places. I smiled as I handled the task, knowing how much Shelby would appreciate the gesture.

Champagne was on ice, gift bags decorated the table, in the fireplace I set a spark that rose softly like our love, and I wondered if it was an extension of me when the flame expanded. I wanted to do something extravagant for the proposal. I would’ve included my mother’s help because she would feel slighted if I didn’t ask. I knew when I told her what I was preparing to do she would be excited and probably tell me she told me so. But I didn’t want to wait; I thought it best to go with my heart. The Eiffel Tower seemed worthy of the cause, so I was going with it. I stood back and glanced around the room. I walked to the stereo and found a rhythm and blues station.

I checked the time and grabbed my wallet. I had fifteen minutes to get to her and I couldn't be late. I pulled the black box out of my pocket and flipped it open. A sparkle threaded around it, and my heart skipped a beat. I replaced the jewel and turned toward the window, my thoughts lost with Shelby.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Shelby

“Ms. Donahue,” Professor Daniels approached me, “I want to thank you for coming to Paris to do this seminar. It was truly a pleasure.”

I shook his hand. “The opportunity was great. I loved it more than I realized I would.”

“That’s good to hear. Would you be open to doing something like this again?”

“Very much so.”

He smiled. “Wonderful, just wonderful.”

I caught wind of Sebastian traipsing down the hallway. How he’d snuck up on me before was beyond me since whenever he came around I felt a magnetic pull toward him. I looked back to Professor Daniels and said, “I’ll be here until tomorrow evening, if there’s anything at all you need from me. Don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Consider it a promise,” he said.

I sauntered away from him, closing in on Sebastian. When I was steps in front of him, I reached for his hand, enclosing it around mine. I would never get used to the deep chemistry we had.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said, placing a kiss on my forehead.

“You’re not late.”

He smirked. “I meant to be waiting for you outside your class.” With a swipe of his fingers across my chin, he pulled me in for a tight hug. A soft kiss on my cheek warmed me. I turned my face into the nook of his neck and kissed up his jaw.

“Grrrr, woman, don’t make me have my way with you in this hallway.”

I laughed at his fake growl and turned in his arms. We walked out with his arms around me, in sync, not missing or tripping over a step.

When we made it back to the hotel, he lingered outside our room door. I cocked my head up at him, trying to read his thoughts. “What is it?” I asked.

“Close your eyes.”

I smiled. “Oookay.” I did as he instructed, and he opened the door, guiding me through the room. I smelled fresh flowers and could hear music playing. Moments later, I was antsy.

“Can I open them now?”

“One second.” He turned and moved me a few more steps. “Now.”

When I opened my eyes, I was inside the massive bathroom, a bubble bath brewing in the gigantic claw foot tub. Roses led a trail to the marble steps and floated on top of the

bubbles. An aphrodisiac fragrance made my gut twist, and I immediately began to undress.

I turned to him, and his eyes darkened at my striptease. “When you’re done,” he said, his voice gruff, “come and find me.”

I arched an eyebrow and smiled. “Aye, aye, captain.”

He disappeared and I continued to remove my clothes. Bending over the tub, I tested the water, sticking a hand inside. It was perfect. I climbed in, getting comfortable. Although I’d been at the campus most of the day, I wasn’t beat. It just confirmed what I already knew; I was made to do this.

I smiled as my thoughts shifted to Sebastian; he had done a complete one-eighty. Before coming to Paris, I hadn’t been able to figure out if he was holding back on me on purpose. Now I was sure of it. I was glad we had the chance to talk about it albeit briefly. I laid my head back on the stopper and turned just slightly. How I’d missed this glass of champagne sitting here before I didn’t know. I picked it up and pulled it to my lips to take a leisurely sip.

The sweet alcohol sent a tingle down my throat. I sat up quickly, sneezed then giggled. That was weird. I knew I was supposed to be bathing, but I was soaking. The warm water felt so good, but I didn’t want to leave Sebastian waiting too long. I found it interesting how quickly I missed him when he wasn’t around. I grabbed the bath sponge and downed the rest of my champagne. The porous material caused me to shiver as I rubbed it over my skin. The sponge and the scent of the incense aroused me. I didn’t know what type of incense Sebastian was using, but if it was meant to get me excited, it

was doing its job. I stood, stepped out of the tub, and made my way to the shower to rinse. The floor would be soaked, but it was nothing a little cleaning wouldn't solve.

Inside I reached for the shower head, bringing it off the wall. My hand lowered, letting the spray of water massage between my thighs. When I got home, I was ordering a new showerhead pronto because this thing was magical. I pulled it to my neck and calmed my rising libido. There was no telling what Sebastian had in store, and there were only so many orgasms I could have without going completely off my rockers.

After rinsing, I stood for a moment longer, letting the spray hose me down. I was surprised Sebastian hadn't come through the door and ravished me where I stood. Just went to show he had more patience than me. I stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel, flinging it around me. With my hand, I wiped the steam from the mirror and brushed my teeth. I didn't see any candles burning, so for the life of me, I couldn't garner where that scent was coming from.

When I opened the bathroom door, I noticed rose petals on the floor. Still wrapped in my towel, I followed the petals down the hallway and into the bedroom where R&B music played. Water continued to drip from my body to the petals around my feet. I cracked a smile when I saw the huge red heart that sat in the middle of the bed. Before the heart lay a note standing on top of a thin black silk blindfold. My interest was piqued, and my arousal held firm. I flipped the silky material back and forth in the palm of my hand as I opened the note with the other.

Put your blindfold on and relax.

I didn't think the smile on my face could get any brighter, but it did. I let the note fall to the ground and lifted my thickness onto the bed. After tying the blindfold around my head, I laid back. Okay, the note said to relax, but I was on edge.

I felt him before he touched me. There wasn't a sound coming from him, but his presence made my body react. My heartbeat sped up, and I swallowed. My legs had a mind of their own as they shifted in anticipation.

I folded and unfolded my arms. My goodness, I was acting as if I'd never touched the man before. But this was different. Last night's episode was proof that our relationship was out of the friend zone. Then he touched me, grabbed me actually. His brawny masculine hand gripped my thigh, and every nerve ending in my body flew to that spot, jolting me like a stroke of lightning.

I gasped and propped myself up on my elbows. His hands began to tango around my thighs. They moved up with ease, his palms glazed with the remnants of water that still soaked me. When his fingers made it to my vagina, he paused and tap danced around her. Just knowing he was so close warmed me like no towel could. I spread my chestnut brown bodacious thighs so he could get a full look at my bare necessities.

His movements paused, and I wanted to connect with him so badly I could hardly stand it. At last he moved again, more like retreated. I missed him for a split second then his hands were on my feet, massaging them in steady rotation.

Heat covered a toe as his mouth settled over my sensitive skin. The moistness from his tongue was my undoing. I moaned, twisting and turning. I couldn't take it anymore, and I didn't need eyes to go after what I wanted. Swiftly, I moved to my knees and grabbed him.

In a desperate fashion, I helped him out of his pants and boxer briefs. His chest was bare, which was all right with me. The less clothes the better. I grabbed his arms and pulled him on top of me. I drew his mouth to mine; he tasted sweet like brown sugar. His lips and tongue filled my mouth as he crushed his body against me, giving me a chance to feel his massive growth. I gasped, my imagination remembering Excalibur wasn't to be toyed with.

“Sebastian?” I said.

“Un huh,” he responded but continued his assault on my lips and center. I could barely focus long enough to put up a fight and ask my question. With little resolve, I weakened and instead, I was begging again, “Please.”

He dipped his head to my earlobe and nibbled while continuing to grind. “Please.” I begged again.

“Please what?” he whispered.

“I need you, now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” I slapped his shoulders with my palms. He kissed down my jaw, his manhood at my opening.

I inhaled at the same time he entered me and my breath was instantly snatched away. His lips moved to mine, our tongues dancing in a sexy salsa. His groove was intense,

moving in and out of me with the tenacity of a skilled leader. Our bodies slapped off each other, and I felt my eyes fill with tears. Being intimate with him on such powerful levels was much more than my body had ever experienced.

“I love you,” I whispered. It wasn’t just pillow talk. My love for him had tripled if that was even possible.

“How much?” he said.

“More than anything in this world.” His grip tightened, and without my sight, everything I felt intensified times one thousand. Every kiss, touch, bite, and thrust took me to another world. I was in the galaxy jumping from planet to planet. This everlasting pleasure was unheard of before in my adult life. Could I hold on to this? Was I only fooling myself? I needed to know. No more waiting, I had to know now.

“Do you love me?” I asked. My legs quivered with pre-quakes, extending a warning of orgasmic eruption.

“More than anything in this world, Princess.”

The tears that I held fell from my eyes and were caught in the blindfold I still wore. His mouth found my breasts, and I bucked and moaned, my body in a constant vibration. We made love for what seemed like hours. When I no longer had the strength to hold back, I warned him.

“Sebastian...”

“Come with me, baby,” he said.

He removed my blindfold, and I had the honor of capturing his soul as we soared to our final destination. It was an erotic flow of waterfalls that soaked us in a slippery fountain.

He tightened his hold on me as we lay there spent, trying to catch our breath.

I rolled into his chest, placing my head in my favorite place. “Being with you is everything,” I said.

He lifted my chin and kissed my plump, sore lips. “Did you mean what you said?”

I blinked rapidly. “Of course. I would never say something I didn’t mean even during sex. I’m not that kind of lover.”

A sexy smile trotted across his face. “That’s good to know.”

“Did you mean what you said?” I asked.

“Hell yes. I have something for you.”

“I thought that was it,” I said.

He filled my ears with his baritone laugh. “No silly goose,” he said. “Come with me.”

I whined. “I just want to lay here with you.”

“Ms. Donahue, have I spoiled you?”

“Yes, you have and now I just want to cuddle.”

“We will do all the cuddling you want, but first I need you to come with me.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me into the next room. My eyes popped; I’d never seen this number of flowers in my life. In the middle of them sat several gift bags. I went to pull one open, and he snatched me away from them, pulling me into the bathroom where he sat me on the counter and washed me with a warm soapy cloth. He was gentle, and the cloth was soothing and relaxing to my spirit.

We took turns with me squatting down in front of him to give Excalibur the same tenderness and care that he'd given me. We left the bathroom just in time to escape what was turning into another love session.

Returning to the gift bags, I peeked inside them, and a throaty laugh escaped me. I pulled out the lingerie sets that were scandalous by nature and felt my hormones yearn. Having this constant sexual appetite would surely ruin me. Other bags contained shoes I about died for.

“Sebastian, all this is beautiful but how much did you pay for it?” He actually rolled his eyes and guffawed. I put my hands on my hips. “What is so funny?”

“You're so cute,” he said, taking his finger across my chin. He disappeared for a minute. When he came back, his arms covered me from behind and a strawberry with whip cream entered my mouth. “Mmm,” I said, eating the sweet fruit.

“What did I do to deserve all of this?” He fed me another strawberry.

“I just wanted to do something special for you. Can I do that?”

He was giving me vibes that I loved. “I want to be with you,” I said.

He turned me to face him. “You are with me.”

“No, I mean with you, with you. Don't you want to be more than friends?”

“Sweetheart, we are more than friends.”

“I want to make it official. I don’t want to be lovers and friends. I want more.”

He watched me silently for a moment then pulled me to the couch. I lay across his lap, and he pressed play on the movie “Love and Basketball.” Looking into his eyes, I could tell he was in deep thought. I couldn’t understand why it was such a hard choice for him.

“Sebastian,” he looked down at my face, “be honest with me. Is there someone else?”

“I would never be with someone else and be with you,” he looked offended.

“Am I asking for too much? You know if you don’t want to go there with me, tell me. I can’t stand not knowing the nature of our relationship.”

“I love you, more than anything. Are you really ready to risk years of our friendship for a relationship?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

He smiled. “Me too.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sebastian

We made love through the night, whispers of praise and endearments crashing around us. I'd never felt this way about anyone. Not even close. The next morning, we showered and dressed. Shelby wanted to lay around, but I wasn't done showering her with surprises. I'd set her spa time for the day before, but after realizing we'd never make it back out of the hotel, I arranged to have it today. When we got to the spa, she signed in and turned to me.

“What else have you done?”

I cracked a smile. “I guess you'll see, huh?”

“You should've gotten one for yourself. We could've experienced this together.”

“I'm good. This is all for you, Princess. I'll be waiting for you when you're done.”

She kissed my lips, and I sucked hers into my mouth. I couldn't help myself, every time we touched I wanted to get my fill of her. She turned, disappearing into the back. I sat down and waited for the owner to come back to get me. When she reappeared, she nodded. My plans so far were good. I'd given the owner a donation to make Shelby's spa day extra special. I was thrilled to find her sitting in the steam room with the sheer blindfold.

She had no clue I'd be watching her every step of the way. I went behind the scenes and pressed a button that would release the same stimulating fragrance I left brewing back at the hotel. Seconds passed before I saw her squirm. Her nose lifted and she rubbed her arms. I couldn't help but laugh. I'd found this nice scent the day before while she was busy at the seminar.

Her chest rose and fell, the heavy steam and aphrodisiac making her sweat. I anticipated the next phase of her treatment.

Watching her was making it hard to resist going in there and interrupting her therapy. I bit down on my jaw and calmed myself. I needed to get a grip. After thirty minutes, the owner walked into the steam room and used black soap all over her skin. She led her to the communal spa area, which was vacant due to the special services, to be exfoliated. A face mask was placed around her eyes, and a second lady came in adding a natural treatment to her hair. After a few minutes, she was dipped in a warm rinse and sent back to the steam room where she was offered a glass of sweet tea. Instead of sitting, she laid back, one hand lifted over her head and one foot propped up. I could tell she was more relaxed than she'd been in a long time. Another twenty minutes passed before she moved on to the next room.

When she was situated, the owner came and got me. When I walked into the room, Shelby was lying face down on top of the massage table. The only material she wore was a pair of disposable panties outlining her apple bottom. A table sat next to her with scented oils and towels. I grabbed the first bottle and oiled her back. From the top of her neck, I used my

thumbs to massage between her shoulder blades and around her spine while my other four fingers massaged the sides of her.

A soft moan left her lips, and I continued the massage down her back. When I reached her butt, I took a firm hand over the top and she yelped. I grinned, trying hard not to laugh, but she was making it hard from me.

“If you don’t mind,” she said, “let’s skip my bottom please, thank you.”

I almost died laughing. I moved my hands from her butt to her thighs, giving a deep massage, my hands deathly close to her flower. Her breathing picked up, and she squirmed. I moved down to her feet, rotating a penetrating rub down to her toes. As I moved back up, I just barely skipped her butt to massage her sides, pulling toward her spine on all sides. Soft moans and mutters floated from her as she was in ecstasy.

My hands moved up her arms, sliding around her shoulders and elbows, sending a deep threading in the palms of her hands. Her posture was limp now as she indulged in the sensual assault my hands gave her. For another twenty minutes, I rubbed and caressed her soft brown skin. Taking as much pleasure in giving as she did receiving. After I finished, I decided to mess with her further by rubbing my palms down her back to her butt again where my fingers sunk between her thighs and I gave her bottom a slight slap. She jumped, pulling herself from her position to rear a neck roll in my direction. She was ready to curse me out when she saw the amused look on my face.

“Sebastian!”

Finally, I laughed. A heavy deep chortle bellowed from me. She swatted me, and I took the battle swings with love. Pulling her into my chest, I kissed the sides of her face and neck.

“You’re crazy. I thought I was being molested for a minute.” I laughed harder. She swatted me some more, and it was all I could do not to fall out on the floor. “You play too much!” she said.

With tears in my eyes, I said, “Aw, don’t be like that. You know you liked it.” I chuckled.

“That’s what was more alarming,” she said. “I was thinking whose hands were on my body. They didn’t seem small and petite like the women I’d encountered.”

I howled with laughter.

“Shut up!” she said, a demure smile on her face.

“I’m not sorry,” I said, smirking.

“Me neither.”

I chuckled. “Would you like more, Princess?”

“No, not here anyway. Got me all discombobulated.”

We laughed. “I’ll let you get dressed but aye, don’t ever let another human being touch you like that.” I winked and she blushed.

“Okay.”

I sauntered out of the room, making my way through the spa to the front.

“I assume everything went well,” the owner said.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for your hospitable services.”

“You’re more than welcome. Whenever you’re visiting Paris, return to see us.”

“We will.”

Shelby sashayed from the back. “Thank you,” she said to the owner. Reaching me, she intertwined her arm into mine and we exited the establishment and hailed a taxi.

“My hair is so soft and light,” she said.

“Your hair is always soft.”

“No, I mean it’s so fluffy but not puffy, you know. I should’ve asked what it is she used.” Her cell phone rang, and she pulled it out and answered.

“This is Shelby.”

She listened for a moment, “Yes, okay, sure no problem. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Okay, see you in a minute, bye.”

She turned to me. “Professor Daniels again, he wants to have a meeting with me before we leave.” She shrugged. “Maybe another opportunity to do a seminar?”

“I don’t blame him for wanting the best,” I said.

She smiled and we rerouted the taxi to the University.



We settled at the conference table across from Professor Daniels when the office door opened and another

man strutted into the room. He reached to shake our hands.

“Hello, I’m Nathan Santeria, the Dean at this school.”

“Mr. Santeria, I’m Shelby Nichole Donahue, and this is my close friend Sebastian Cartwright.”

“Mr. Cartwright,” Nathan said, “I’ve had the pleasure of purchasing your work. I have *The Night on the Marandin* on my wall at home. The wife loves it.”

“I appreciate your business,” I said.

He took his seat. “We know this is last minute, Shelby,” Nathan Santeria said, “but I wasn’t available when your seminar ended yesterday.” He sat back in the chair. “When we offered you the opportunity to teach, we had longer implications in mind, but we wanted to see how you felt in the environment first.”

“What the dean is trying to say is we want to extend to you an offer we hope you won’t refuse,” Professor Daniels said. Nathan slid a set of papers across the table to her. She glanced at the paper, her eyes roaming over the words. Her expression seemed to change, her eyes lifting in exasperation.

“This is a contract,” she said.

“Yes, we want to offer students who graduate in fine arts the chance to learn from a professional on how to craft their ideas. This is a full-time, five-year contract where your seminar classes would take place spring and fall.”

She sat back. “This is a massive opportunity,” she began, “but that would mean I would need to relocate to Paris. Commuting back and forth is unrealistic.”

“Yes, we know,” Nathan Santeria said. The men looked at each other. “We realize this would be asking you to uproot your life, and we’re willing to compensate you for your troubles. Seventy-five million dollars over the course of the contract years.”

It was my turn to look bewildered. Shelby looked from them to me, a dazed glaze on her face.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“We wouldn’t play a game like this, Ms. Donahue. You don’t have to respond right away, but if you do accept, you’ll need to move rather quickly as we want to start spring classes next year,” the professor said.

“So, it would be better for you to have already established yourself here in Paris. My wife and I know some great neighborhoods,” Nathan Santeria presented.

Shelby’s hand slid across her mouth. Her thoughts processing at rapid speed I was sure. Her hand fell, and her head shook. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

I interrupted her, “She’ll give it some thought. Right now, she’s so taken by the offer, there’s no way she can give a definite answer.”

She frowned at me. “Actually, I think I can,” she started.

“You couldn’t possibly,” I stated matter of factly.

“Please, give it some thought, Ms. Donahue. Mr. Cartwright here is right. We’ll look to hear from you within the next two weeks.”



In the taxi, there was no conversation. Our bags had been previously packed, and we were headed to the airport. The flight was the longest of my life as my thoughts plagued me.

Shelby moving to Paris would cancel out any relationship we could maintain. A long-distance love was possible but not what she deserved. The box that contained the engagement ring was in my pocket where I'd left it. My plans to propose to her on the Eiffel Tower stunted. I couldn't very well offer her forever if she decided to make the move. I rubbed my temples and sat back feeling as if the wind had just been knocked out of me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Shelby

I had to get outside my head. We'd been back in Saint Louis for two days, and I'd spent them locked inside my home studio. The canvases I'd been working on were complete. I could finally pull myself together. I'd lived like a caveman these last forty-eight hours, eating only turkey sandwiches, drinking water, and throwing water on my face long enough to step back into my studio and take my frustrations out on my art.

I dragged myself to the bathroom and took a shower. Afterwards, I skipped my usual oil down and crawled underneath my sheets, pulling my headphones over my ears. I didn't remember falling asleep, but when I woke up, Sebastian was standing over me. My heart skipped a beat at the unannounced presence of him and my hand instinctively covered my chest.

I exhaled a deep breath and spoke in a soft whisper, "Sebastian, what are you doing here?"

He sat at the end of my bed. "I called you, more than three times, and you didn't answer."

He kept his voice neutral as he leaned to rest his elbows on his thighs, his hands rubbing together as he looked down at them. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I sat up, still wrapped in my now damp towel. I shut my eyes and collected my words. “How can I be, Sebastian?”

“Tell me what’s wrong. I’m sure it’s fixable.”

I arched a brow at him. “I’m having a hard time trying to figure you out. You’re so hot and cold these days. Since we’ve become physical, it’s been harder for me to read you.”

“Stop trying to read me and say what it is you want to know,” he said bluntly.

“I thought we were moving our friendship into a relationship. Remember the conversation we had a few nights ago?”

He heaved a deep sigh. “I do.”

“Okay, so why would you suggest to the Dean and Professor Daniels that I would think about their request?”

“Shelby, it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Why wouldn’t you take it?”

I crawled over to him and straddled his lap, my hands cupping his handsome face. “Sebastian, I need you to understand, when I said I love you more than anything in this world that even included whatever dollar figure someone could throw at me.” His arms circled my waist, his forehead falling onto mine. “I will always choose you. No matter the circumstance.”

He pulled back, the warmth in his face going cold. “I can’t let you do that.” He grabbed my arms and removed my hands.

I scrunched my face up. “Who’s going to stop me?”

He tried moving me to the side, but I fought him.
“Shelby, stop it. You’re being ridiculous.”

“No, you are!” Tupac’s “Dear Mama” sounded from his pockets. I paused my fight long enough to let him answer his mom’s call.

“Hey Mom, can I call you right back? I’m trying to...”
He stopped speaking. “When?” he said, alarmed. My heart constricted at the sudden panic in his voice. I removed myself from his lap and he stood. “I’ll be there in a few hours.” He hung up, his brows furrowed. He cursed then looked to me. “I’ve got to go.” He moved to the door.

“Wait!” I went into my closet and threw on some jeans, my Hello Kitty T-shirt and stepped into my Reeboks. “I’m coming with you.” I dashed back out the closet, grabbing a light jacket. We left my apartment and jumped in his Audi.

“Put your seatbelt on,” he said.

We buckled down, and he hit the gas, leaving my neighborhood and jumping on the highway.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice high.

He swallowed. “My father had a stroke.”

I gasped. “Oh my God, where is he?”

“They’re at the cabin,” he said, bringing on childhood memories of fun summers at his parents’ lake house cabin. He accelerated the speed, sending the Audi shooting down the freeway.

“Why isn’t he at a hospital?”

“My mom called their personal doctor. She was afraid to move him.”

I sat back and pulled my feet into my seat, folding my legs. “I’m so sorry, Sebastian.”

He gritted his teeth, his eyesight checking all mirrors for any signs of law enforcement. At the speed he was going, they would surely take him to jail.

“Is there anything I can do?”

He glanced my way. “No, you’re fine.”

I still wished I could do something. The rest of the ride was silent. I reached for the radio and found a jazz station. It always soothed him when nothing else would. I felt him glance my way. I reached out to him and rubbed the back of his head and neck. When we turned into the entrance of the lake house, he’d barely put the car in park before we jumped out. His mom opened the door as we approached.

“Sweetheart, I told you everything was fine now,” she said. “There was no need for you to drive all this way.”

“I need to see for myself,” he said.

She opened the door wider, allowing us entrance, and he moved past her in search of his father.

I stopped in front of her, and we hugged. “How are you, Mrs. Cartwright?” I asked.

“I’m fine, dear, how are you?”

“Never better.” I rubbed her arms up and down.

“It’s good to see you. I wish you’d come around more often. Since you and my son became famous, I barely see you

two.”

“You’re right, I’ll make sure to talk to him about it.”
We left the door, going to the kitchen. “Is there anything I can do for you right now?”

“If you want to help me with dinner, that would be great. James doesn’t want me to be bothered, but he won’t eat if I don’t cook.” I smiled. Mrs. Cartwright was just as sublime in her elder years as she was in her younger ones. No wrinkles, smooth skin, her hair done up in a layered bob. The speckles in her light brown eyes left traces in Sebastian’s.

“Is Father Cartwright going to be okay?” I asked, moving to the counter to finish constructing the deviled eggs she’d already started.

“Thankfully, yes. It was a mild stroke. He’ll be immobile for a few days to give him time to rest. If I leave it up to him, he’d be up and moving right now.” She shook her head.

“When did this first happen?”

“A few days ago. I tried calling Sebastian, but I kept getting his voicemail.”

“That’s my fault. We were in Paris, I had a seminar to teach. I’m so sorry. He probably turned his phone off.”

“There’s no need for apologies, honey. That’s dirt up under the rug. Like I said, James will be fine and congratulations on your seminar.”

“Oh, thank you, but I don’t want to talk about that right now.” She paused her movements and looked to me.

“Would you rather talk about when you and my son are going to stop fooling yourselves and get married? James and I are more than ready for grandchildren. I swear you two are the most stubborn. You’ll wait till we’re dead and gone to realize how much you love each other.”

I had no words. What was I supposed to say? Everyone but us seemed to know we should be together. “Well what do you say, cat go your tongue?” she continued.

“I um...”

“Mom, please don’t harass Shelby.” I turned to Sebastian leaning against the doorjamb with his arms folded.

Mrs. Cartwright shrugged. “You know I’m telling the truth.”

“How long are you going to keep this up?” he asked.

“Until I get my grandchildren.”

“Why don’t you bug Angela about grandkids?”

She turned to him, the cutting knife lifted in her hand as she spoke. “I have, thank you very much, but at least Angela is married and trying. You two on the other hand,” she rolled her eyes, “need to get it together. We’re not getting any younger, you know.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” he said. The words were sharp, and I made a notion not to flinch.

“What are you saying? Are you with someone else?”

He sighed. “No, Mom.”

“Are you?” she said, turning to me.

“Um, not anymore.”

“Oh okay, you guys would rather be with someone other than yourselves though?” Neither one of us spoke.

“Unhuh, that’s what I thought.”

“Mom, Shelby’s been offered a lifetime opportunity. She’ll have no time for relationships. She’s the hardest working person I know. It’s important for her to remain focused.”

“More important than spending a lifetime with you?” Mrs. Cartwright asked.

“Yes—”

“No—” we said simultaneously.

She looked from me to him. “Humph, sounds like you two have something to talk about.”

Sebastian and I stared each other down. “There’s nothing to talk about,” he said with finality. “And this is not what we came here to talk about.”

“Might as well, I told you not to come here in the first place.”

He left the door, going back to his father’s room.

“Stubborn,” Mrs. Cartwright said, shaking her head.

That was one thing we could both agree on. Sebastian was being stubborn, and I was running out of ideas that would get him to understand I didn’t want to live without him. But it was becoming increasingly apparent that he would do anything to keep me at arm’s length. Why should I have to continue pressing him?

There was a dreaded knot twisting inside me. Maybe we weren't meant to be. But I was not one for giving up. Especially knowing that without him, I wouldn't be whole.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The front door of the lake house opened, and Angela walked into the kitchen. “Shelby?”

I smiled, putting the utensils down and holding my arms out for a hug. “Hi Angela. How’s married life?”

“So far so good,” she said.

“Your mom says you’re working on kids.”

She slapped her hands to her hips. “Mom, are you bugging them again about grandkids?” she asked.

Mrs. Cartwright shrugged. “I’ll bug them about whatever I want.”

“Pay her no mind,” Angela said. “She’s got baby fever.”

“Unhuh and I still want my grandchildren, from the both of you.”

Angela sat the bags on the counter. “I had to go to three different stores to find all the ingredients for your secret recipe. You’d think these places would grow with the times, but everything is just as old school as it was when we were kids.”

I was grateful for the change in subject. I’d had my own difficulty understanding Sebastian without having to be reprimanded for something that seemed out of my control.

We finished cooking and set the table. Just as I finished with the last plate, Sebastian entered, rolling his father in his wheelchair.

I went to him. "Father Cartwright," I said, slinging my arms around his neck.

"Hey Shelby, how's my favorite daughter-in-law?" he quipped.

"Dad, she's your only daughter-in-law," Angela said.

I didn't bother to correct them and neither did Sebastian, which was refreshing. We took our seats at the table.

"Where's Mike?" Sebastian questioned.

"Outside under the hood," Angela replied. "You know there's always something to fix when it comes to him."

"Let me go get my brother-in-law," he said, putting the brake on his father's wheelchair before leaving.

I filled everyone's glasses with ice cold water and took my seat just as Sebastian and Michael returned. Sebastian stood over the sink washing his hands, and Michael sat down.

"Aren't you going to wash your hands?" Angela asked. He stuck a greasy finger in her plate and lifted a piece of meatloaf to his mouth, chewing with his mouth open. Angela shook her head. "I married a child, I tell you." He moved to the sink and washed his hands, and Sebastian settled in the seat next to me.

"Dad, how are you feeling?" Angela asked.

“I’m fine. I told your mother not to make a big fuss about it.”

“Dad, you had a stroke. You didn’t lose a game of golf.”

He waved her off. “If it was serious, okay, but considering I’m still able to use my limbs, all of the fuss is unnecessary. Having you kids drive out your way for nothing don’t make sense.”

“We didn’t drive out here for nothing. Our visit was long overdue,” I said, reaching for his hand. He patted it and smiled up at me.

“I won’t argue with you there.”

Everyone chuckled.

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, who did win the golf tournament?” I asked.

“Oh God, don’t get him started,” Mrs. Cartwright said.

“David and Bernie cheated. They think I don’t know it, but they did,” Father Cartwright said.

“How do you cheat at golf, Daddy?” Angela asked.

“The way they did, that’s how you cheat.” We chuckled again and continued to have lighthearted banter. When dinner was over, I rose and began to clear the table.

“Thank you, sweetheart, you’ve always been a blessing to our family.”

I bent down and kissed Father Cartwright on his cheek.

“It’s been a blessing to be a part of your family.” I moved with plates in my hand to the sink. Angela pulled up beside me.

“You wash, I’ll rinse,” she said.

“Deal.”

“You know after this my parents will be off to bed. We should catch up.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked.

“Going to the Cavern for a few drinks.”

At the mention of the lounge I’d spent my twenty-first birthday, all sorts of memories flooded me. “Um, I don’t know, I’ll see what Sebastian wants to do.”

He walked up behind me. “What Sebastian wants to do about what?”

We turned to him. “I suggest we catch up and get a few drinks at the Cavern.”

“I’m in,” Michael said.

Sebastian looked to me. “After I get dad into bed,” he said.

“Duh,” Angela quipped. He slung a hand towel at her. “Gone now, I’m trying to finish these dishes.” We turned back to our task.

Once Father Cartwright was all tucked in, we kissed Mrs. Cartwright and snuck out the door.

“She wants to know if we’ll stay the night,” Sebastian said to me. We jumped into the car.

“Of course, I’m where you are.”

His eyes lingered on me and he grabbed my hand. “Shelby, I only want what is best for you.” His finger slid across my chin. “Sign the contract.”

I folded my arms. “What makes you think that’s what’s best for me?” He turned into the parking lot of the Cavern. “Aren’t you the one who says don’t ever feel entitled to say or do something because of an opportunity. They come and go?”

He smirked. “Don’t try and throw my words in my face.”

“Oh yeah, I’m doing it. I don’t get why you want to push me away so bad.”

He put the car in park. “Don’t ever think that. That’s not my intent, and you know it.”

“No, I don’t know it. Since the beginning of this thing we’ve got going, you’ve been hot and cold.”

“My reasons have always been good.”

“Says you.”

Angela tapped on our door. “You guys coming?”

I opened my door, and he followed suit, making our way inside the karaoke bar.

Angela grabbed my arm. “We’ll find a table while you guys get us some drinks.”

We moved through the crowd and sat at a round table.

“I’ve been dying to ask you this since we were at the cabin.” Angela said. “Are you and my brother a couple?”

I gave a small smile. “Not exactly.”

“I’m getting this feeling from you guys. Do tell.”

I gave her insight on our emotional rollercoaster. “Now he’s pushing me to sign the contract. It’s almost like he’s trying everything to keep us apart. I swear I don’t know how to take him.”

“Let me give you a hint. In Sebastian’s mind, he’s always been your protector even if that means protecting you from himself. No one and nothing is good enough for you, and he’ll go through extraordinary lengths to make sure you have anything you need.”

I sighed. Sebastian was too good to me, and he didn’t even know that he was everything I wanted and more even though I’d told him so. The men approached the table with drinks in hand.

“Cosmos for you ladies,” Michael said.

I sipped the liquor, my eyes never leaving Sebastian’s. He turned the chair around and sat down on it backwards. “Let’s play a game of pool,” Angela said. “Loser has to sing karaoke.”

I cut my eyes at her. “You are not winning a game of pool against me,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Michael said. “She’s had a good teacher.”

I peered at her. “You are so on.” We went to the nearest pool table and gathered the balls.

“This should be interesting,” Sebastian said.

The guys sat back and watched us. I was whooping Angela's butt then out of nowhere my game tanked.

"Aw, come on!" I yelled, throwing my hands up.

"You know what this is," she said, tooting her butt into the air as she aimed to strike the final blow. Everyone watched in anticipation to see if she could hit the last ball without putting in the eight. She reared back and tapped the ball. It skated across the table, scratching the eight ball, and flew into the center hole.

"Oh my God!" I screamed.

She cheesed at me. "Checkmate."

"You played me," I said.

She held her arms up. "My hubby tried to tell you. Now get those vocals together and sing us a song, baby!"

"Ugh! This is not over!"

Everyone was laughing but me. I strutted to the DJ and whispered in his ear.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the DJ began, "it looks like we have a volunteer for Karaoke. Shelby, what would you like to sing, darling?"

I looked into the crowd. Sebastian, Michael and Angela along with a few others crowded around me, hooting and whistling. I needed Sebastian to know he was my lifeline, the very person I needed no matter what. I needed it to reach him in a way that would keep him from ever questioning our relationship. He stood with his hands in his pockets sending a wink my way that warmed my heart.

I smiled briefly and looked to the DJ. “Do you have Sade?”

“I sure do, which song?”

I looked back to Sebastian. “By Your Side.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sebastian

When Sade's R&B soul wafted through the speakers, the hold Shelby extended in her beautiful eyes never faded. Her mouth opened, revealing a soft seductive voice that garnered more whistles and claps from other men around the bar: *"You think I'd leave your side baby... you know me better than that..."*

I knew immediately it wasn't by coincidence that she'd picked this song to sing. Maybe because the flip in my chest was more apparent by the words that so graciously bellowed from her beautiful lips. *"Think I'd leave you down when you down on your knees... I wouldn't do that..."*

Her hips swayed from side to side, the lids on her eyes lowering as she stepped deeper into the message of the song. *"I'll do you right when you're wrong.... I-I...."* She took steps toward me, *"If only you could see in to me..."*

I held my ground, fighting against myself not to pull her into me and crash my mouth into her succulent lips. She reached out to me, her hand floating in midair. I pulled my lips down, giving her soft skin a kiss. More whistles and applauses were directed at her performance. She'd pulled me in; we were together and everyone else had disappeared. My gaze held her in a spotlight only she could fill. I was crazy. I was willing to give up loving her for eternity to make sure she had everything

she wanted and more. No matter how hard I fought this thing between us, she fought back. I knew she loved me, for real. No games had been played since she'd first told me she was in love with me.

I'd given her love and a cold shoulder all at the same time, and it was time I told her why. Shelby deserved everything honest and good in this world. That would start with the conversation that needed to be had.

The song came to an end, and the microphone dropped from her lips. Still we stood locked on each other while everyone around us showed their appreciation for her talent. She handed the mic to the DJ.

"Beautiful!" he said. "Girl, you need to be on somebody's stage, but we will be more than happy to take up your time here at the Cavern." More applause. She gave two thumbs up to the DJ and sauntered to me. I pulled her in, and she rested her face in my chest. My hands moved up her shoulders, stopping to flick her ears. She shuddered.

"It's been a longtime, Buttercup. I almost forgot how good you sounded when you sang."

She looked up to me. "Well you know it's not my first love."

"Of course," I said. "That I can never forget."

"You don't know me as well as you think you do, Mr. Cartwright."

I furrowed my brows. "Yeah, okay."

"Okay, since you think you do, tell me, what's my first love?"

I twisted my lips. “Really?” I said.

She shrugged. “Yes, really.”

“I’m your first love, girl,” I joked, pulling her back into me with a chuckle.

“Hmmm, it seems you do know me after all.”

My movements slowed, and I pulled her face back to mine. “I was only joking. I

know your first love is art.”

She pushed slightly off my chest. “Then I take that back, you don’t know me at

all.”

We watched each other, thoughts of everything our lives could be no doubt going through the both of us. I kissed her forehead and stepped to the side, throwing my arm across her shoulders as we walked back to the table.



Later that night after we’d made it back to the cabin and everyone was tucked away in their respective quarters, I found myself lying awake on my back with no sleep in sight. I sat up, throwing my legs over the side of the bed and stretched. I went to the closet and took a T-shirt from the hanger and pulling it over my head. I slipped my feet into my shoes and headed for the front door, opening then closing it gently behind me so I wouldn’t wake anyone.

I rounded the house and strolled down the wooden walkway to the edge of the lake. The moon sat full in a sky

empty of clouds, but stars set heavy in the skyline. Nightlife was awake as I could hear crickets, frogs, and howls in the wind. I folded my arms across my chest, feeling weighed down by my emotions. Shelby had always been a part of my life, and I'd never felt so strained about the nature of our relationship.

The question of whether to let her go or keep her close felt like a ton of bricks. My mind moved to the engagement ring. It was still tucked away in my safe at the penthouse. I gritted my teeth. I had a feeling she would be happy if I presented it to her. But I also had a feeling she might feel forced to accept it and resent me for the missed opportunity later. I rubbed my chin. I'd told her not to try and figure me out to straight out ask. I should take my own advice. But with all the strength in my bones, I somehow knew that Shelby was the stronger person emotionally.

I was starting to regret falling in love with her. Our relationship had been perfect before I'd given in to my passions.

A sudden warmth fell over me as a set of arms circled my waist. I closed my eyes, never moving. Her face laid against my back. I reached for her hands, bringing them up to my lips for a kiss.

"Whatever it is," she said, "it's fixable." I smirked, having no doubt she listened to my every word as she had a habit of referring to them. I breathed in a deep sigh and pulled her around to me, taking a step back to keep her off the edge of the platform.

“I love you,” I said. I could see the warmth in her chestnut brown cheeks flush throughout her face.

“Should I be worried about the nature of that sentiment?”

I rubbed her chin and ignored her question. “You can go far with the offer on the table, Princess. I know you think I’m wrong, but when have I ever been?”

She huffed. “I’m twenty-nine years old, Sebastian, you’re not my daddy. I don’t need you to tell me what to do. I am well aware of making my own decisions. If you don’t remember I make millions off of one art piece. I think I’ll be okay.” Her eyes glared at me. I’d pissed her off. It was cute, and it made me smirk. It was safe to say I loved her feistiness.

“This is so not funny,” she said.

“Buttercup—”

“No! I’m tired of this. Can you just be real with me, why are you running from us?”

I sighed, hanging my head back then looking back to her. “I’m not running, Buttercup, I just...” I sucked my bottom lip through my teeth. “I can’t express to you enough how much I want you to win in life.”

“But don’t you get it?” She grabbed my shirt. “For me, being with you is winning!”

I slid my hand around her neck, placing a firm hold on her as I pulled her to me. “I could never forgive myself if I let you miss out on something you might live to regret.”

“I won’t!”

“You don’t know that. You said yourself how exhilarating it was to teach that class. Do you really want to miss out on a full-time opportunity?”

She exhaled and shut her eyes tight, taking a step away from me. Her fingers massaged her temples, and she folded her arms and looked out over the lake. After all the times I’d convinced myself that letting her go would be the right thing to do, to see her pull away like she was considering it twisted my gut. I let her mill it over and for a while the silence grew around us.

Finally, she spoke, “Sebastian, I don’t want to fight you on this anymore. I want what you want, and if you truly think it’s best for me to leave,” her voice broke, “then I’ll go.” She side-stepped me and walked away.

“Shelby,” I took long strides to catch her, “I don’t want you to go away. Please don’t make it seem like I don’t want to be with you.” I tugged at her arm, but she refused to give in to my attention. Instead, she kept her back to me, snatched her arm back, and continued to walk away.

“Shelby!” I was desperate to make her understand. “Don’t leave like this.” I matched her step for step, pulling and tugging at her, trying to get her to face me. Her arms dropped, and she turned to me, pushing off my chest. I caught a glimmer on her face and realized she was silently crying. She turned back to walk away, but I threw my arms around her from behind and held her still, my lips dropping to her ear. “Don’t leave like this, please.”

She tried to gather herself, but the vibrations in her chest told me it wasn’t doing much good. “Please Princess,

stop crying. I don't want to be without you. I just need you to understand. Please, please..." I begged. "Ssssh, sssh, I love you. This is not goodbye."

"You don't know what love is," she said, pushing through my barrier and forging forward down the walkway.

"Shelby!" She didn't stop, her steps took her out of my reach as she disappeared around the cabin. The heaviness weighing on me let me know I'd made a mistake. Most likely the worst mistake of my life. For the first time ever, I was out of ideas. I didn't know what my next step should be. I mulled over our life of friendship and wondered if my quest to keep our bond intact by avoiding a relationship had indeed ruined the friendship I so desperately tried to hold on to.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Shelby

I cried my eyes out. It was the saddest I'd experienced since my daddy died. When I ran back in the cabin, I locked myself in the guest room and flung myself over the bed. All my efforts were of no use. I was convinced he just didn't want me the way I wanted him. Every fiber in my being thirsted for him, and anything that meant to destroy it I would quickly do away with. But he was not willing to do the same. He was actually letting me go.

I grabbed a pillow and put it over my face to muffle my sorrow. The next day, I would move on. The day after, I would be better. Love came and went, I tried to tell myself. But for now, I'd cry until I could no longer produce any tears. This was the worst. I was regretting falling in love with him. This was what I'd always feared. But I was willing to risk it. I mean, if love wasn't worth the risk, nothing would be.

When I woke up the next morning, I was still in the same spot I'd drifted off to sleep in, with the pillow covering my face. There was a tap at the door, and my head banged. Great, I had a headache on top of the heartache I was pacifying. I tossed the pillow to the side. I laid there in silence, staring at the ceiling.

"Shelby?" It was Angela's voice. I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” I said flatly. I couldn’t even pretend to be okay.

“I made us breakfast. Are you okay?”

I just wanted her to go away. I knew she meant well, but I wasn’t in the mood. That’s when I knew the sooner I got home the better. “I’ll be out in just a minute.” I could feel her hesitation at the door then her footsteps departed.

I closed my eyes and rolled my face into the sheets. I lied. I told myself today would be a better day, but I felt worse. My heart ached just as much as it did the night before if not more without all the tears. My sorrow had been replaced with anger, and a multitude of emotions fluttered through me. I wanted to stomp out of the door and curse him out. I wanted to fight, slap him across the face and punch him in the gut. I wanted to demand he love me. I was crazed and out of my mind.

Calm yourself, Shelby. I placed my hand over my beating heart and counted down, “10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...”

I pulled myself upright and trotted to the guest bathroom. I was thankful there was one inside the room. I ran warm water and splashed the soothing liquid on my face. Inside the medicine cabinet, I grabbed a disposable toothbrush and cleaned myself up. Afterwards I looked myself over in the mirror. I could tell I’d slept in my clothes, so I was sure they would be able to also.

Then I didn’t care. I just needed to get home. I went to the door, placing my hand on the knob. My eyes faltered and my heart rate picked up. I couldn’t face him. I wasn’t sure how

I'd respond. This angered me even more. How I'd managed to let him have so much control over me was my fault. I swung the door open, determined to take that power back. I stepped one foot into the hallway and came face to face with him leaning his back against the wall, his sight focused on the ceiling. I almost retreated.

For a moment, I thought I did but really, I was glaring at him. He stood upright, somberness in his eyes. "Can we talk?"

I wanted to run back into the room and slam the door in his face. I couldn't believe I was having this emotional breakdown, at his parents' cabin no less. I couldn't very well explode with them around. I was forced to face him, but I didn't know how long I could keep it together. So instead of responding, I just stared at him, my mouth tight as I bit down on my jaw.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

I offered him nothing, just an ominous stare. He rubbed his hand over his face. "Shelby," he whispered, "I need you to say something."

No, he didn't, he wanted me to say something, but I was giving him nothing. He stepped forward, closer than I needed him to be. I was a statue and hard as a rock until he touched me. I pushed him back. "Don't." I moved around him and went to the kitchen. Questionable eyes raised to mine. "Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," they all said in unison.

"Angela, could I trouble you for a ride?"

“Um, sure,” she said, standing. Father Cartwright covered her hand.

“Why don’t you come in and eat breakfast with us. We’d all love you to at least stay and eat.”

Everyone nodded. They had no idea how bad I needed to leave. They didn’t understand the breakdown that threatened to leave my soul. I suppressed a cry and smiled politely. “Any other time, I would love to, but I really need to go. I’m sorry, Father Cartwright.” Abruptly, I turned on my heels and fled past Sebastian, running through the front door. Tears flooded my eyes, and my vision blurred, but my legs kept moving, taking me down the graveled dirt walkway.

I didn’t know the last time I’d moved that fast. I wiped my eyes and saw the hidden path Sebastian and I used to take when we were kids. I ducked, stepping down the rocks, causing me to slide. I almost fell but caught myself and kept along the trail. I passed the tall oak tree that had our initials carved into it and made it to the cliff that was famous for diving off into the lake. The stream had a smooth flow, the river calmer than I was.

A breeze whipped through the trees, and I fell to my knees, sinking my hands into the dirt.

It felt like I’d lost a life. Like someone I held near to my heart had died. My shoulders jerked as I cried even more. I couldn’t go back. There was no way I could ever face him. Not now, maybe one day but not anytime soon. Knowing that Sebastian could easily find me, I moved back to my feet and took a different route back to the road. I folded my arms, hugging them around myself. A mile down the road a car

pulled up beside me. I was almost afraid to look. The passenger side window powered down.

“Shelby, please get in. I’ll take you home,” Angela said. I breathed a sigh of relief. I needed it to be anyone but him. I opened the door, grateful to get a ride home. She pulled off as I put my seat belt on and wiped my eyes.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Oh honey,” she said, “You don’t have to thank me. I don’t know what my brother did to you, but you can rest assured that he’s getting a good tongue lashing from our parents.”

I smirked at her, but kept my eyes focused on the road. She tried a few more times to converse with me, but I’d kept my answers short and to the point. When we pulled into my garage she turned to me. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

I shook my head. “No, giving me this ride was more than you know.” She reached out and pulled me in for a hug. It was tight and I felt tears spring forth. “Thanks again,” I said, rushing to flee the enclosed space.



Over the next few days, I’d kept my attention focused on The Annual Gala and Art Auction. It was coming up in the next few weeks, and I wanted to be more than ready. I hadn’t heard from Sebastian, and it was for the best. Life was full of mystery. When you thought you knew what direction you’d go, it would do a full one-eighty and you’d be going

somewhere else. My phone rang, and knowing the ringtone, I didn't need to check the Caller ID.

"Hey sis," I answered.

"Shelby, I got a confirmation email from Professor Daniels at the Paris university about a scheduled meeting. I have no clue what it's about. Do you?"

"Yes, I'm meeting with him to accept their offer."

She was quiet for a moment. "Wow, that is big news. When were you going to tell me?"

"The next time we spoke."

"I guess I need to find another job. It's going to be surreal having you gone."

"I know, but I still need you part-time. I couldn't find a better assistant if I tried. But I also wrote you a letter of recommendation, so you'll be good."

"Do you think Sebastian could use a part-time assistant?"

I pursed my lips. "He has an assistant, but you never know. Give it a shot."

"Is it okay with you? I promise not to steal him." She snickered.

I huffed. "There's nothing to be stolen, go for it. Maybe you'll have more luck than I did."

"What?"

"I don't want to get into it. Anyway, I'll call you back. I'm on my way to the grocery store."

"I can go for you. Since when do you shop on your own?"

“Since I realized my face is not as famous as I thought. I’ll be okay. Nothing a ball cap, sunglasses and sweatpants can’t hide.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, let me know if you need anything else.”

We hung up. I’d missed a few of my mother’s phone calls so I redialed her, and she answered on the second ring.

“Hey baby girl, it’s nice to hear from you.”

“How are you, Mom?”

“Oh, I’m fine, was on my way to play bingo with Sharon and Teresa.” I smiled, thinking about the energetic older women and their gift for laying hands on someone to pray for a spiritual or physical healing.

“You all are still at it.”

“I hit last week for two hundred dollars.” I giggled. “I plan to hit for the big five thousand tonight.”

“Sounds exciting, go ahead and have a good time.”

“Love you!” she said.

“I love you, too.”

We disconnected the call and I felt like a part of me was missing. I contemplated texting Sebastian but why should I? I couldn’t answer that question so I sat my phone down and went back into my studio.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Being in Paris was more invigorating than it should have been. The plane ride over was the normal hyperventilating experience, but I would have to get used to it. Although I'd chose to move, I would still have to fly back occasionally, but I hoped not to make it too consistent. I chose to save myself the panic for as long as I could. I hadn't even told my mother I was moving, but we didn't see each other much, so I knew she would be all right.

I stepped into the university and greeted the lady at the front desk and signed in.

I was seated for ten minutes before Professor Daniels came out to greet me.

"It's so good to see you again, Ms. Donahue, follow me." We walked down a hallway past a few offices before making it to his. "Have a seat. We've got everything squared away, and all I need you to do is sign right here." He pushed papers forward. I read over them, making sure they were the same papers I'd seen before. With the pen in my hand, I sent my signature flying across the contract.

He lifted the papers and pointed. "Place your initials here, here, and there."

I did it quickly so I wouldn't change my mind. He chirped up and clapped twice. "You're officially on the

school's course list. Congratulations!"

"Thank you." I smiled warmly. My eyes fluttered to the clock on the wall. "I'm meeting with Miranda the dean's wife today. She's showing me some houses around their neighborhood."

"Ah, that sounds like fun," he said.

I reached out and shook his hand. "Thank you for your time, Professor."

"The thanks is all mine."



Miranda Santeria had the bubbliest personality; I had never met anyone like her, and it took a large amount of focus to keep up with her.

"My husband tells me I need to slow down, that I talk entirely too fast."

You definitely do, I was thinking.

"Let me know if I'm babbling too much and I mean that. Don't be polite." She grabbed my hand and gave it a light squeeze. The first house we saw was huge. I'd need a family to stay here. I mean a husband, three kids maybe even four and then who would clean this place?

The next house was a two-bedroom brick style colonial home. It reminded me of America. The ten-thousand square foot layout was exactly what I was looking for. I'm sure I had a twinkle in my eye.

"I think this may be the one."

Miranda turned to me. “Really, you like it?”

“I think I love it,” I said.

She squealed. “That’s fantastic, see my husband thought we’d be at this for the next few days, but he’d be pleased to know you found something you love so quick.”

“I’m happy about it, too.”

“I know this is all overwhelming for you, but look at it this way, you already have your first friend!” She smiled.

“Thank you, Miranda, let’s let the realtor know I want to make an offer.”

After another week, I received a call from the realtor. The seller took the offer, and I was the proud owner of my own home in Paris. There was a moment of tranquility that fell over me. All week I’d been taking a taxi here and there. Today, not only had I just signed papers to my home, but I was also purchasing a car.

Getting acquainted with Paris had went smoothly so far, but I still had a lot to do. I stood in what would become the living room of my new place in front of the fireplace, a glass of wine that I’d gotten from Venice in my hand. I thought about Sebastian and the time we had while visiting together. I was trying to hold on to this hard exterior, but inside I was still crying.

As if he knew I was allowing my mind to briefly think of him, Sebastian’s familiar ringtone filled the air. He was calling after all this time. I decided not to answer, and as soon as the called ended, I silently chastised myself for it. The phone lit up again with his picture displayed across the screen.

If he was going for the three-call scenario, he wouldn't have much luck seeking me out. When the call ended, seconds passed before it rang again.

"Hello." I tried to keep my voice as regular as regular could be.

"I miss you."

I didn't respond. Instead, the quietness took over our call, and I shut my eyes tight. I sank down to the floor of the empty room.

"Where are you? I need to see you," he said.

I pulled my knees up and hung my head. "Why?" It was a simple question, no attitude was given, just serious inquiry.

"I can't take another second of this separation."

It was odd that he wanted to say that when he'd been pushing me to take an offer that would separate us for good.

"You're going to have to get used to it." I said.

"I can't."

"Well it's not up to you, is it?" I almost snapped, but at the last second, I held it together. "What do you want, Sebastian?"

"I told you, I need to see you, now. I'm not taking no for an answer, so tell me where you are."

I sighed and took a sip of my wine. "Paris." He was silent. "I'll be back next week for the auction, but after that, I'll be gone. That's what you wanted, right?"

“No, that’s not what I wanted. You still don’t understand.”

“Here’s what I do understand. I was willing to trade it all for us. One opportunity don’t stop no show. But you wouldn’t hear it, being with me wasn’t strong enough for you to go down this new road, but it’s okay. It’s just not meant to be.” I took another sip.

“Shelby.”

“I’ve got to go, Sebastian.” I hung up and finished off my wine. Pulling myself from the floor, I trudged into the kitchen and removed the bottle from the counter, refilling my glass. This was going to be a long night, and I was sure when it was over I’d be drunk.



The week past by with me planning to fly my sister out so she could see where I’d be giving my seminars, and she could set up her office slash guest room in my new home. We’d made plans to fly back together for the auction and the jitters I once had about the event were back.

“Girl, this place is beautiful,” she said. “This is a real jewel. How’d you manage to find it in the middle of Paris?”

I chuckled. “Miranda Santeria. She’s the dean’s wife and the only person I know here.”

“She came all the way through with this place.”

I nodded. “It was the second place she showed me, too. God is good.”

“All the time!” She slapped my hand. “What did Sebastian think about the place?”

I was over her asking about Sebastian; it was like I knew she was trying to be nosy without actually coming right out and asking what was going on with us. But I knew that she knew something was up.

“He hasn’t seen it yet, and he probably won’t.” She opened her mouth to speak, but I stopped her, holding a finger out to her. “We’re not getting along these days, and I don’t want to hear it from you.”

“You said that like I still wasn’t going to give you a piece of my mind.”

“I’m going to put you out. It’s not beneath me.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Try it.”

“Save it, okay.”

“No, it’s not okay! Even if you guys don’t step into a relationship together, are you going to let your friendship go, too? I mean what’s the deal?”

I sunk into the new sofa I’d purchased during my hunting that week. “No, okay, but it’s hard you know. I love him so much to be around him and be “just friends” feels impossible. But I do miss him.” I bit my bottom lip. She shook her head at me and sipped from her wine glass. “Girl, you better stop acting so stubborn.”

I gawked at her. “How am I acting stubborn?”

“Have you tried to look at things from his point of view?”

I folded my arms. “Since you know, why don’t you tell me?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” she said, plopping down next to me.

“Sebastian wants you to fulfill all your dreams, honey. He wants to make sure you get your hands on anything that comes your way. His fear is that if you don’t you’ll one day regret it, and to him that’s worse than you being mad at him for,” she held her hands up, “however long you plan to be mad at him.”

I sighed. She was right. I always knew Sebastian was my guardian angel. Ever since my dad died, the only thing that had been consistent in my life was him.

I handed her my glass. “I need more wine.”

“You also know where the kitchen is. I work for your business not your personal. I’m just here to make you feel bad for being stubborn.”

I peered my eyes at her. “Really, I’m going through it over here, I can’t get a refill?” I wiggled my glass at her, and she smirked. “You were willing to go to the grocery store.” I reminded her.

“I guess, just this once. Don’t make it a habit.” She grabbed my glass and turned toward the kitchen.

“And how do you know how Sebastian feels anyway?” I asked. “What are you, his therapist?”

“These days,” she replied, shrugging, “I might as well be. It turns out he could use a part-time assistant, and that’s now me. But every time he sees me, he’s talking about you.

Sometimes I feel like he hired me so he could vent. You know he's very private. He wouldn't say the sort of things to Allison as he would say to me."

"What else have you guys been talking about?"

"If you'll ever come around. He's worried that he's lost you."

I hung my head and she continued to the kitchen. I couldn't let years of friendship go to waste, but I didn't know how to begin to start over with him. This was harder than anything I'd ever done in my life.

"You know, I should never come around." I rolled my eyes, giving Denise attitude although she couldn't see me.

She strolled back into the room and held out the glass of wine, but when I reached for it, she pulled it back, "Who are you trying to convince, me or yourself?"

I pursed my lips. "Did you try to get him to understand my side of things, while you over here playing Doctor Phil?"

She giggled. "Actually I did and trust me when I say he's learned his lesson. Now all you need to do the next time he calls is answer your phone."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Our limo came to a stop in front of The Contemporary Arts Museum. My date Julian Alexander Rose looked to me. “Are you ready?”

I gave him a warm smile. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“I’m sure you’re a natural, and stunning I might add. It’ll be a breath of fresh air to have the attention taken off me for a chance.” He smirked.

My eyes roamed over his gorgeous face to the Italian Brioni Vanquish suit that I was almost certain I’d seen 007 wear on the big screen.

“Don’t be so sure,” I said. The door opened to a flash of lights as paparazzi snapped away, trying to get the first picture of us. Julian stepped out, turning to hold his hand out for me. I took it, graciously sliding across the leather seat into the forefront of the ambush of photographers. We strolled the red carpet, questions thrown our way.

We stopped at one of the reporters; she smiled and held the mic to her lips. “Hello, Ms. Donahue and congratulations!”

“Thank you very much.”

She looked to Julian. “Mr. Rose, what a pleasure it is to see you here today supporting your...” she hesitated, waiting on him to complete the sentence.

“Ms. Donahue and I are newly acquainted,” he turned to me with a warm smile, “and I am grateful for the opportunity to share such an important event as this with her.”

He pulled my hand to his lips and placed a gentle kiss there. I smirked.

The reporter looked to me. “I envy you.” We laughed.

Julian was being a gentleman, and as attractive as he was, I wanted my handsome, whimsical, best friend. I didn’t want to get over him no matter how many times I’d told myself to do so.

“You guys enjoy the event.”

“Thank you,” I said. We were one reporter away from the entrance.

“Ms. Shelby Nichole Donahue, congratulations. I see you have new pieces today. Do you mind telling us what your inspiration behind the paintings is?”

“Thank you very much, each one of my new pieces comes from different moments of my life. In them you get a glimpse of what I see in a flash. Whatever the time of day, whatever the emotion, it all comes from that depiction and time.”

“Well, we do enjoy them and what fantastic depictions they are.” She held her hand out and shook Julian’s hand. “Mr. Rose, you are everywhere these days. What’s a twenty-four-hour day with you like?”

Her smile was flirtatious, and he was charming in his response, “I’m where I’m needed, Mrs?”

“Actually, it’s Ms. Bells.”

“Yes, Ms. Bells, and a twenty-four-hour day with me requires a mass amount of energy and dedication.” He looked to me. “What do you think?”

“I’m sure I could keep up.” I smiled to the reporter.

“I just love you guys. Do enjoy the event. Hopefully we can get a word with you after.”

“Thank you.” We continued to the entrance. Inside, people roamed about. The ballroom was filled with large round Lucite tables and chairs that could seat at least seven to eight people at a time. Crystal chandeliers, rose gold flower arrangements, and silver drapery hung about. A lineup of my art pieces sat along the east and west halls. Conversation was heavy among attendees with light music playing. Food and refreshments sat atop silver platters that floated throughout the room on the hands of servers. We were greeted by several people before having a moment to ourselves.

“Would you like something to eat or drink, milady?” Julian asked.

“I would love a glass of wine.” I watched him stroll off before turning my attention back to the painting in front of me. It was one of my most recent depictions of a masked man stealing a woman’s heart. The woman sat in the window seat of her bedroom, her hand outstretched toward the masked man making a getaway down a fire escape. In his hands was a

burlap bag with the glow of her heart outlining the contours of the sack.

“This is so obviously you.”

I turned to my side and smiled. “You think you know everything, but you don’t, dear sister.”

“Unhuh, I know you brought that fine man with you to make Sebastian jealous.” She peered at me. “Didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. How many times do I have to tell you Sebastian is not going to be here. He has a thing!” I tried to wave her off.

“Is that right?” She smirked. “Then who is that gorgeous creation of God that just walked into the room?”

My eyes flew across the sea of people, landing on a pair of suckable lips that I’d daydreamed about more often than I was willing to admit. They were moving; he was talking to someone that I couldn’t see without taking my eyes off him. His lips spread as he laughed, showing a perfect set of pearly white teeth. The stubble that sat underneath his bottom lip spread into the clean-cut beard that I’d grown to love. From across the room, I knew his suit was tailored as if it fit every cut in his beautifully molded frame. I cursed and Denise laughed.

“Scrumptious honey and all male.” Her shoulders did a little jig. “I swear if you weren’t my sister...” She shook her head in dismay.

I rolled my eyes. “Well, he’s not mine, so like I said before, go for it.” Yeah, I didn’t believe those words any more than she did. But that didn’t stop me from pretending.

Julian reappeared with two glasses of wine. “I see you have company,” he said, handing a glass to me and one to Denise. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing an extra glass for your friend.”

“No, she doesn’t mind,” Denise said, taking the glass off him. He chuckled and I smirked. My attention went briefly back across the room to find Sebastian’s unrelenting gaze leveled on me. A ripple of heat poured over my bones, and it was all I could do not to squirm. I had to hold myself together. Our unyielding chemistry was not going to let things go back to the way they were. I was hopeful, especially since it was obvious that anything else was highly unlikely. But trying to sever this tenacious energy source that held us both whenever we were in the presence of one another was futile at best. A hand slid down his shoulder, and he glanced to his side. Melanie Travis Scott leaned in, whispering something to him. She gave a cheesy smile, and he offered her a grin.

“You’re staring...” Denise whispered. I whipped my head toward her then to Julian. Thankfully, someone had pulled him to the side, engaging him in a deep conversation about the painting we stood in front of. When I looked back to Sebastian, he was gone. I turned my glass up and twirled to face my painting.

“It’s okay.” Denise gave my back a slight rub. “You’re allowed to be taken by him. After all, everyone else in the room is.”

“Shush girl!”

She held her stomach and laughed. “What?”

“Excuse me,” a woman at the podium spoke into a microphone. Curious eyes turned to her. “Welcome, welcome. It is an honor to be in the presence of such prestigious company tonight. I want to thank you for coming to help us honor Shelby Nichole Donahue with a decade of her works. Her art has touch many in one way or another, and it’s exciting to share in her vision. Let’s give her a round of applause.”

She pointed in my direction, and all eyes turned to me as a thunderous applause vibrated the room. Some whistles and chants of Shelby floated around. I blushed and dipped into a slight curtsy. A hand covered my shoulder, and I glanced to my side.

“Mom!” I said, startled. “What are you doing here?”

She beamed. “I came to be a part of this momentous occasion with my baby girl.”

With shocked still registered on my face, I said, “I thought you didn’t like to fly.”

“I don’t, but it wasn’t so bad since I was in great company.”

“How...who? I stuttered.

She pointed toward the stage where the woman at the mic smiled and turned to one side of the stage.

“Let’s welcome Ms. Donahue’s longtime friend and confidante, Sebastian Cartwright,” the woman said.

More applause bellowed. With strong bravado strides, Sebastian strolled to stand in front of the microphone, having to adjust it to match his heightened length. His eyes wandered to me, his tongue sliding across his bottom lip. My gut flip

flopped, and the insurmountable flame that consumed me every time he was near bore a chokehold on me. My mom squeezed my hand, and it calmed my heart rate. Lord have mercy, how I would survive the night I didn't know, but I'd put in great effort. I drank the rest of my wine and was handed a fresh glass.

“Thank you,” he said to the presenter and the crowd that had given him such a warm response.

“My friendship with Shelby goes back to elementary school days, when sticking out my foot to trip her was the highlight of my day.” A few snickers went around the room, and his beautiful mouth opened into a smile. “She hated it and for the next hour or so she would chase me around in circles, trying to beat me up.” More snickers ensued. “As feisty as she was, I knew she had a heart of gold. When she saw other girls being bullied, she always interceded, even if it was a grouchy little boy. But then, in that circumstance of course I'd intercede, too.” More laughter and whoops. “She was big on helping others, teacher's assistant by day, dragging her father and I to the local homeless shelter to hand out bags of deodorant, socks, toothpaste and toothbrushes by night.”

His smile turned serious, and his eyes connected with mine. “Then when she was sixteen years old, her father passed.” The crowd grew silent. “It was one of the hardest times in my life to see her in so much pain. Throughout our early years, I'd see her with markers and crayons constantly drawing.

“So, in an effort to lift the pain of her father's passing, I gifted her first canvas with all of the necessities she would

need to draw whatever she wanted.” He lifted his hand to the painting on the far right of the room. “That painting turned into the masterpiece you see here today.” Everyone shifted to the painting, and whispers and gasps echoed about the room.

“To make a long story short, every painting in this room comes from an era of time in Shelby’s life that meant a great deal to her.” His eyes came back to me. “As we got older, I witnessed Shelby grow from a tomboyish little girl to a brilliant beautiful woman.”

There was more flip flopping in my gut.

“And before I’d knew what happened, I’d fallen in love with her.” A shriek of shocked cries went about, even I had stopped breathing.

“But I was afraid that being with me could possibly ruin a lifetime of friendship that we’d built. That missing out on opportunities would make her resent me, and I couldn’t live with that. So instead, I rejected the notion of a relationship with her.”

He removed the microphone from the stand and stepped off the stage, one hand in his pocket as he strolled toward me. “It had taken me to receive the silent treatment from her for a weeks for me to realize I couldn’t live one more second without her.”

His steps drew closer as he maneuvered through the crowd that held smiles and adoration at his astonishing confession. “And no matter where life takes her, I want to be by her side, through good times and bad. Through sickness and health.” He stopped mere inches in front of me, his eyes blazing a ferocious fire that kept me contained in his gaze.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. He shifted, going down to one knee as he pulled out a box that was already open. “As long as we both shall live.”

“Oh my God!” My hands flew to my mouth, and tears sprang from my eyes.

“Princess, will you make me the happiest man on earth and become my wife?”

I threw my arms around his neck, tears streaming steady down my face. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

A roaring ovation came from onlookers with some people crying and others still in shock.

Sebastian rose, lifting me off my feet. His arms coated me in the tightest embrace. He ran his fingers through my hair, and I pulled back to kiss his lips. We just about swallowed each other standing in that spot. Cheers of congratulations were thrown our way. When we pulled apart, I was dizzy in an uncontrolled euphoria. That’s when I saw his mother, sister, brother-in-law and Father Cartwright. They were all there. He sat me back down on my feet and slid the ring on my finger. My head fell into his chest, and I cried the most joyous tears.

“I love you so much,” I said.

He lifted my chin. “I love you even more, Buttercup.” He placed another kiss on my lips, and I squealed in splendid happiness.

Epilogue

I had set a record. It wasn't on my bucket list to be proposed to twice in one year, but nevertheless, it had happened.

And the second time was going to stick. All the way through to a wedding and a happily ever after.

It had been six blissful months since Sebastian proposed to me, and I couldn't have been happier. We'd settled into Paris nicely, him moving into the house I'd previously purchased. It was a good thing he loved the place because there was no going back on the sale. In the bedroom closet, I retrieved a floral blouse and pulled it over my head, making sure to straighten the edges. Today was the first week of spring and my first official class at the university. Today I'd be teaching basics, so there was no need for me to worry about ruining a perfectly good blouse.

To say that I was excited was an understatement. I mean, how often do we get everything we want? Not often. But God was looking down on me because I couldn't complain. Warm arms nestled me, and soft lips hovered above my ear.

“Good morning, Princess. I see you're ready. Did you think you'd sneak out without me ravishing you this morning?” The fine hairs on my neck stood at attention. It was

amazing how the man of my dreams had been in front of me all this time, and I had no clue.

“It wasn’t my intention to sneak out, lover. I just didn’t want to wake you.”

“Mmm hmm,” he said, dropping his hand to my belly, giving it a slight rub.

Okay, so I hadn’t been very honest about my excitement. We were having a baby, and it was unfair how happy I really was.

“You can’t have your way with me anytime you want, you know. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you just wanted to keep me locked up in this house as your sex slave.” I turned my head slightly, catching the smize in his eyes.

“I can, and I will.”

I gasped. “Sebastian!”

He chuckled. “Okay, I guess I’ll let you outside, but no further than the porch.”

I gasped again and swatted him as he guffawed. “Unhand me, crazy man!”

He turned me in his arms and placed a kiss on my lips. My eyes closed as a moan escaped my lips. He moved, placing a kiss on my closed lids, my forehead and kneeling to place sweet kisses all around my belly. I was only four months along, but I had a barely-there cute bump already.

“I love you so much,” Sebastian spoke to my belly. “Daddy can’t wait to meet you. Your mother’s going to look so

beautiful waddling down the aisle. It'll be a day I'll never forget."

I pursed my lips. "Well, you didn't give me much a choice, did you?"

He lifted an eyebrow at me. "It takes two to tango."

I crossed my arms. "Yeah, but what's a girl to do when you flush my birth control pills?"

"Do you regret it?" he asked, rising back up to his full height.

I dropped my arms. "Of course not."

"Well quit complaining then, woman."

I swatted him again, and he laughed, fleeing the closet. "I'm picking your mom up at the airport at two," he yelled back at me. "She came with her whole entourage, and they want me to give them a tour around the city."

I slid my feet into my shoes and left the closet, pulling up next to him in the bathroom mirror. He grabbed his toothbrush and applied toothpaste. "Good, that'll keep you busy while I'm at work today."

"It's fine, I don't mind. Besides, this will be my chance to help out with the wedding planning like you wanted, right?"

"How will you do that when we're having the wedding back in the states?"

"Yeah, well, we're bringing Paris to the states." He wiggled his eyebrows. "You'll see, your man got this!"

I grabbed his chin, turning his full lips to me so that I could lock us in a sensual kiss. "I love you, baby."

“And I, you Princess.”

The End

Get a free e-book when you
subscribe to Stephanie’s newsletter!

<http://bit.ly/2kd30eA>

Also by Stephanie Nicole Norris

Mistaken Identity



The only thing Briana and Tiana have in common is their identical looks. For

Tiana, life is one challenge after another, but her greatest struggle is sharing a face with

the sister she despises. Tired of living in the shadows, she comes up with a plan to finally

have everything she ever wanted. Everything seems to come easy for Briana, including

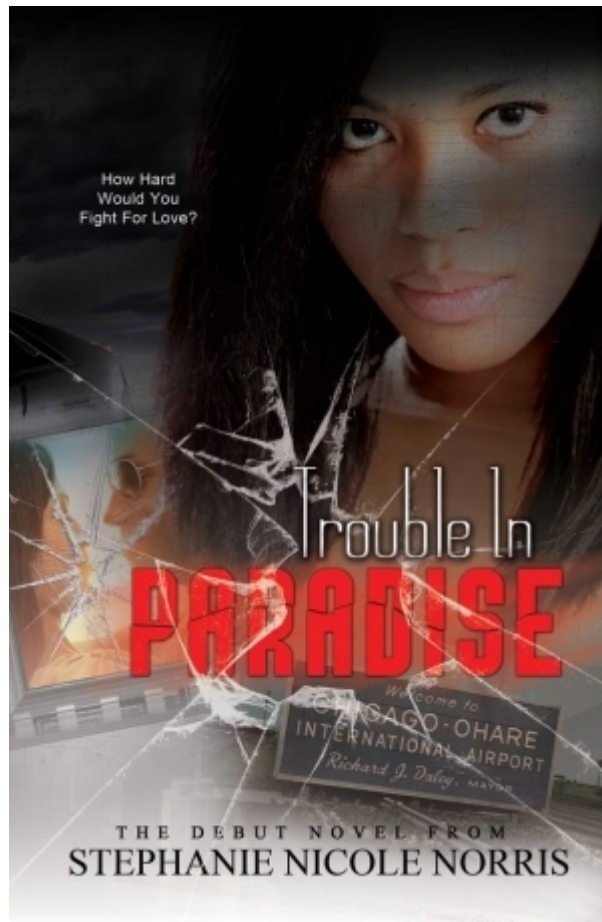
her beautiful children, loving husband and dynamic career. Briana's charmed life is

ripped apart when she wakes up in the hospital with no idea who she is and no memory

of her former life. With the help of the handsome stranger who saved her, Briana builds

a new life and finds new love, while Tiana won't rest until Briana has no life at all.

Trouble In Paradise

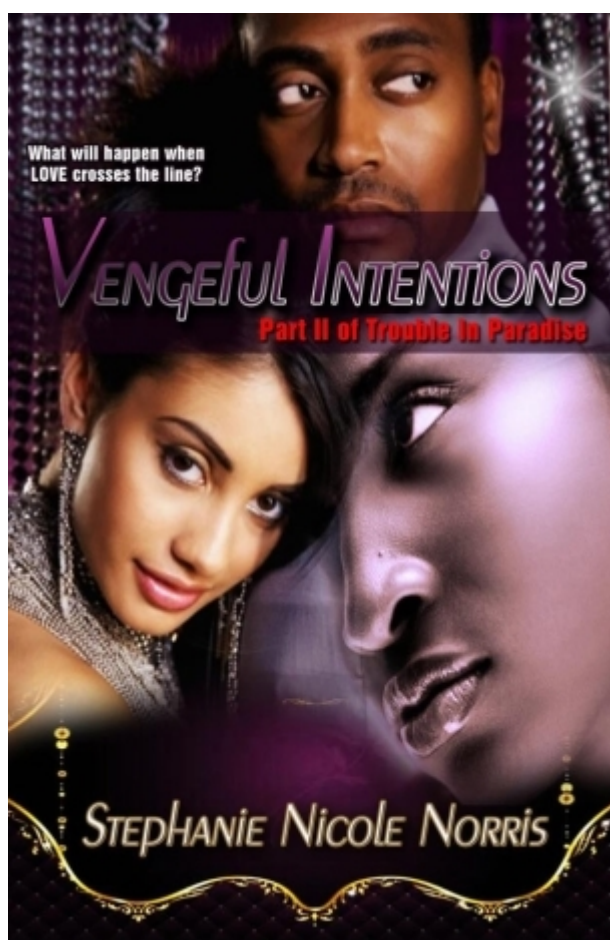


Victoria is thankful for a lot of things- Joshua, the love of her life; a career change that starts a new chapter; and a condo in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Her jaw drops when she opens the garage and finds a brand-new Cadillac wrapped in a huge bow. She is ecstatic and ready for the next steps toward her future. This is Victoria's fresh beginning.

When Victoria and Joshua start their journey, things take a turn for the worse. Victoria finds out that her nemesis and Joshua's ex, Danielle Shumaker has flown to Chicago to try to get Joshua back. Victoria is determined to win this fight. When she finds out Joshua has secrets of his own, Victoria is left distraught and confused, and feeling the sting of betrayal, she falls into the arms of another. As emotions run high and desire digs deep, Victoria finds herself caught up in Trouble.

Vengeful Intentions

(Trouble In Paradise Book 2)



After serving eight months in jail and becoming obsessed with the woman who put her there, Danielle Shumaker is released when the evidence held against her comes up missing. With thoughts of seeking revenge on Victoria, Danielle is caught off guard when someone wants to make her pay for past transgressions.

Not needing the added drama, Victoria is still torn between her feelings toward Greg and her undying love for Joshua. With new knowledge that Danielle has been released from jail, Victoria is stunned knowing Joshua has not been honest with her. Things get

hotter when Joshua catches wind of Victoria's affair and Caroline wants her husband back by any means necessary. Will this love story end in tragedy, or will these couples learn to forgive and forget? Find out in part II of Trouble In Paradise.

For Better and Worse (Trouble In Paradise Book 3)



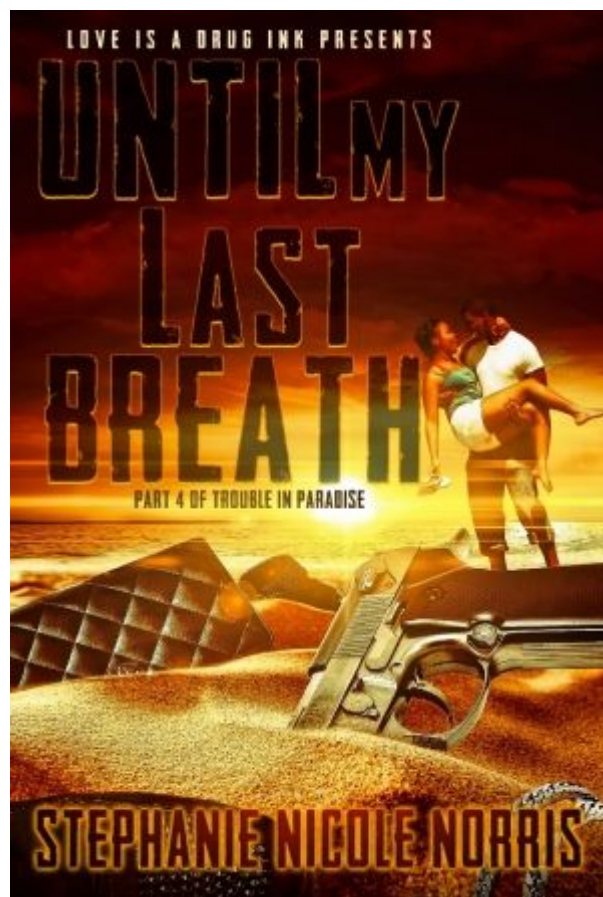
Coming out of hibernation, Danielle Shumaker has put behind her the pain and misery she's caused Victoria and Joshua. Blinded by her selfishness, her ultimate goal is still her main one. As far as Danielle's concerned, Joshua belongs to her, always has and always will. No amount of therapy can cure her love addiction, and no matter what anyone says, she will fight for him, even if she must kill someone AGAIN.

Wedding bells are in Victoria and Joshua's future, and Victoria is excited to be Mrs. Eubanks. However, when she closes her eyes at

night, Greg invades her dreams. The passion and love leave her wanting more and waking with doubt about her upcoming marriage. How will she get over this man, or does she even want to?

Until My Last Breath

(Trouble In Paradise Book 4)



In the finale of the Trouble in Paradise series, Victoria finds herself in the worst position of all, hanging by her wrists in the basement of Caroline's three-story house. She knew that her own actions had sealed her fate and landed her in this position, but how will she survive it? After seeking help to get past his many infidelities, Joshua goes on the hunt for Victoria when he receives a cryptic telephone call from her. Instantly, he rushes to her rescue, but will he be too late?

Danielle's misery becomes unbearable when her efforts to reach out to Joshua fail. Instead of going after him with vengeance, she falls into a deep depression. Her best friend January tries to pull her out of her funk when a person from January's past resurfaces, determined to steal her heart again. Have these couples finally hit rock bottom, or will they fight for love until their last breath?

About the Author

Stephanie Nicole Norris is an author from Chattanooga, Tennessee, with a humble beginning. She was raised with six siblings by her mother Jessica Ward. Always being a lover of reading, during Stephanie's teenage years her joy was running to the book mobile to read stories by R. L. Stine.

After becoming a young adult, her love for romance sparked, leaving her captivated by heroes and heroines alike. With a big imagination and a creative heart, Stephanie penned her first novel *Trouble In Paradise* and self-published it in 2012. Her debut novel turned into a four-book series full of romance, drama, and suspense. To date, Stephanie has self-published seven books, which includes five full novels and two short stories. They can be found on most retailers' sites. Stephanie is inspired by the likes of Donna Hill, Gwynne Forster, and more. She currently resides in

Chattanooga with her husband and 1-year-old son.

On her blog, Stephanie features authors of romance. If you're an author and would like to be featured on her blog, email her today at stephaniennorris@gmail.com.

Find out what's coming soon!
<http://bit.ly/2jA0nze>