

EMPIRE
HIGH

Exposed



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

IVY SMOAK

Exposed

Empire High Book 7



By Ivy Smoak



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IVY SMOAK

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

Want a behind-the-scenes look at my journey as an author? The ups, the downs, the movie deals...I'll share it all!

And as a special thank you for joining, you'll get an exclusive copy of my short story, *Matthew Caldwell - The Untouchable*.

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To time and not wasting it.

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Chapter 1

Saturday

Matt

She's alive. I pushed into the restroom and put my hands on the sink.

She's alive.

She's alive.

I felt the wetness on my cheeks.

Brooklyn's alive and she's married to someone else?

It felt like someone was strangling me.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

This was a dream. A nightmare. *I can't breathe.*

I closed my eyes tight. I'd wake up soon. I'd realize it wasn't real. Just like I did most mornings when I reached out and felt the empty sheets.

She's alive.

I shook my head.

It couldn't be real. Brooklyn had died 16 years ago. I'd gone to her funeral. I sat on her grave and talked to the dead. I'd lost the love of my life. And I'd been drowning ever since.

This isn't real.

The girl I loved wouldn't have married someone else. She wouldn't have. She wouldn't have done that to me. She

wouldn't have disappeared for 16 years to torture me. She wouldn't break her promises.

Breath in. Breathe out.

But I'd just touched her. I'd smelled her. I still smelled her on my skin. And for just a second, I'd felt whole again. I didn't feel alone. I felt loved. I felt needed. I felt like myself.

I opened my eyes and stared at my reflection in the mirror. And I saw myself standing there 16 years ago. The same haunted expression on my face. Right after losing her. I'd stared at my reflection wishing I'd gotten one more chance to do everything differently. To be better for her. To be enough. Just one more chance.

What the fuck am I doing? She's alive!

I ran back out of the bathroom. "Brooklyn!" I shouted in the hall. But I didn't see her. I ran to the auditorium. "Brooklyn!" I yelled as I threw the door open.

She didn't respond.

"Brooklyn?" I hit the lights and looked around. But the auditorium was empty.

I put my hand to my forehead. It felt like I'd lost my mind. Like I really had imagined the whole thing.

But she'd been here. I swear she'd been right here. I ran back out into the hallway, shouting her name. I pushed open the front doors of Empire High and stared down the empty steps. She wasn't in the parking lot. I turned toward the stadium. The homecoming floats were heading back out, blocking my view. But I didn't see her.

I'd regretted my last words to her my whole life.

I'd gotten the second chance I'd dreamed of.

And I'd fucked it all up again. *"I have no idea who the fuck you are. But you're definitely not the girl I knew."*

What the hell had I just done?

I took a deep breath and sat down on the front steps of Empire High.

I hadn't let myself think of the possibility that Brooklyn was alive in years. But when I used to let my mind wander... I'd always pictured her still being mine. Never once had I pictured her having a life with someone else.

She'd promised me forever.

I put my face in my hands. Yes, I'd thought about proposing to Kennedy. And I was in a fake engagement with Poppy. But none of that was the same. Because there was never any question over whether or not I was alive or dead.

Brooklyn disappeared. And married someone else.

She'd purposely let me drown.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

She'd ruined my life.

And I hated my last words to her. I hated the words I just said to her. But it was the truth. Who the fuck was that person?

Because that wasn't my girl. That wasn't Brooklyn.

I can't breathe.

Chapter 2

Saturday

Brooklyn

I'm not the girl he knew? Fuck you.

Of course I wasn't the same girl. My father had ruined my life. I'd been in hiding for years. I'd grown up. Of course I'd changed.

And it was ironic, because Matthew Caldwell was exactly the same as I remembered him. He was hot headed. Immature. And a total asshole.

I stood up off the auditorium floor and tried to compose myself. I cringed as I pulled my pants back up my hips.

God, what was wrong with me?

The other thing that hadn't changed about Matt was his whoreish ways. Apparently he'd slept with half of New York City now instead of just half of Empire High. Tanner said it was Matt's way of grieving. But that didn't seem like grieving to me. It seemed a lot more like he was perfectly fine.

And for the longest time, him being fine meant he was a traitor. A liar. But now? I didn't even fucking care.

What I cared about was that I'd basically just had sex with half of New York too. I needed to be checked for a million STDs now.

One touch from him and I was already compromising who I was. I'd always had a hard time keeping my head around him.

All Matt ever did was take and take and take. And I wasn't giving him anything else. If there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that I didn't belong in this world. In this school. In this cursed auditorium.

I hated that my tears wouldn't stop falling.

All I'd needed was a few minutes to explain to him what had happened to me. How could he just walk away from me after all these years? Like I truly did mean nothing to him? I took a deep breath.

I didn't love Matt anymore. I didn't. So why couldn't I stop crying? Why did it feel like my heart was breaking?

I put my hand on my chest. I knew why it was breaking. Because 15 years ago when I showed up to the lake house, I couldn't promise my firsts to Miller. So I promised to let him be my last everything. And I'd just broken that promise.

I was the traitor. The liar.

My tears streamed down my cheeks faster as I thought about Miller's note. *"I need you to know that I'm okay if you choose him now. Because I never want you to stop smiling."*

"I can't, Miller," I said out loud. "I can't promise you I'll keep living. It hurts too much. Why would you make me promise that of all things?" That one thing felt impossible. I couldn't live without him.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to curl in a ball and cry. I wanted to rewind time. I needed a do-over.

No, I just needed to get out of here. I pushed out the doors of the auditorium and hurried back outside.

The homecoming parade was still going on. *Shit*. How was I going to tell Kennedy what I just did? I was the worst friend in the history of friendship. Seriously...what was wrong with me? It was like I'd stepped into Empire High and turned into a dumb, naïve teenager all over again.

I walked in the opposite direction of the stadium. I just needed a minute alone. I stopped when I reached the front steps of Empire High.

Jacob and Tanner were standing there. Like they knew exactly where I'd been. And by the smile on Tanner's face, it looked like he knew exactly what I'd been doing. He wanted Matt and me to get back together. He wouldn't be smiling so brightly if he knew what Matt had said to me before walking away. Matt didn't want anything to do with me. And I didn't want anything to do with him either.

I ran my fingers through my hair, hoping that no one could actually tell what I'd just done.

"Mommy, Mommy," Jacob said and hurried over to me. "The game is about to..." his voice trailed off. "Why are you crying? Remember, Daddy doesn't like when you cry."

The present tense. God, my heart couldn't take any more pain today. I crouched down in front of Jacob. "Sorry, sweet boy." I wiped my tears away. "How about we get out of here?"

"But the game."

"Jacob..."

"Nooooo," he said in that adorable drawn out way.

I couldn't go back into that stadium. I couldn't sit there and watch Matt and Kennedy on the field. My stomach twisted

with guilt. I'd put on a brave face during the whole first half. But now? I couldn't do it. I couldn't face Matt again. But I also didn't know how to say no to Jacob when he was finally smiling again.

"How about I watch the little man," Tanner said. "Give you a bit of time to yourself, if you'd like. To think things over." He kept smiling at me.

I didn't need to think anything over. I'd made a mistake. And now I needed to unwind this mess. I'd figure out a way to apologize to Kennedy. And then I'd stay far, far away from Matt forever. A little time alone sounded like a good idea though. Because I definitely couldn't watch the rest of the game.

"Are you sure that's okay?" I asked.

"Certainly. We can make a day of it. I'll bring him back after dinner. What say you, Young Jacob?"

"Yessie," Jacob said.

"You want to stay here, Jacob?" I asked.

"Sí. I'll stay with Abuelo." He grabbed Tanner's hand to make his point.

Okay then. I gave him a hug and then stood up. "Thanks, Tanner."

"No need to thank me. I just want you both to be happy."

It seemed like when he said *you both* he meant Matt and me. Not Jacob and me. I was definitely not thanking him for setting up that blast from the past homecoming show. I was

thanking him for watching Jacob so I could take a few hours to try to make my heart stop hurting.

Tanner pulled out his car keys and tossed them at me. “How about you take the car.”

“Oh...um...” I stared at his futuristic car in the parking lot.

“I’m not sure I know how to drive that.”

“It’s just like any other motorcar.”

Motorcar? Is that what that fancy vehicle is called?

“Everything is going to be okay now,” Tanner said and put his hand on my shoulder. “You trust me, don’t you?”

I nodded. I did trust him. He was a really sweet guy. But I didn’t trust his crazy matchmaking skills at all. He was seriously bad at this. Being reminded of homecoming from 16 years ago wasn’t going to make me go running back to Matt. I bit my lip. *But...hadn’t it?* I’d literally ended up in Matt’s arms, probably before the end of that song. Wait, was Tanner actually really good at this?

“Great,” he said. “Go do what you need to. And we’ll have a little chat tonight. After the little one retires to his bedchambers for the evening. Ciao.”

Ciao? He and Jacob walked away. I turned back to the car. I hoped Tanner wouldn’t mind if I got a little dirt on his leather upholstery.

There was a planter in my new backyard. Nothing like the huge ones Miller handmade for me. But it was still a planter.

And I had no idea why there was a tree in it. Planters were for gardens.

I heaved the small tree to the new stone pot I'd picked up at the hardware store. I would have felt bad for moving things around, but I had every intention of purchasing this home as soon as Tanner told me the listing price. And this planter needed tomatoes. It needed little Henrys.

I wiped a bead of sweat off my forehead as I kneeled in front of the dirt. Nothing soothed my soul as much as this. I'd spent hours every week in my garden back home.

Home.

The word felt like a knife in my chest.

I tried to focus on the neat little rows I was planting. I'd bought tomato plants that were already healthy rather than seeds. It wasn't the right season for tomatoes. But I really needed them here. I covered the last one's roots with soil.

"Hey, Henry." I pulled off my gloves. "I know it's small back here. But it'll have to do, okay?" I sat cross-legged in the grass and stared at my new tomato plant. And I knew full well that I was distracting myself by talking to my Henrys instead of talking to Miller.

My bottom lip started to tremble.

God, when would the tears stop? When would the pain stop?

But I knew that wasn't how it worked. Losing my mom devastated me. Losing my uncle too. But this? There was a hole in my heart. A Miller-sized hole. And I had a feeling it would never heal properly.

I'd spent the past few hours rearranging the backyard to plant Henrys. And they'd just die in a few days because the nights were growing chilly. I didn't want to watch them die too.

"You need a heater," I said. "Don't you, Henry?" Did they make space heaters for plants? *Probably*. But it wasn't too cold out tonight. It could wait until later. I just needed to figure it out before the first frost came. And I still had more to do to transform the small space right now.

I grabbed the string of lights out of my bag. Now I just needed to figure out how to hang these up. This would definitely make the backyard feel like the lake house. I looked up at the sky, my eyes landing on the North Star.

And the tears started all over again.

"Hey," I said.

I knew I looked crazy back here. Talking to my plants and talking to the sky. But I didn't really care.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do here, Miller," I said. I blinked and the star grew blurry. "We had our whole future planned. And I feel so...stuck in the past here."

The star just shone back in silence.

"It was great getting to see Kennedy and Mrs. Alcaraz again. And James. And Rob. And Mason. But I messed up today. And I hurt Kennedy in the process. I don't even recognize myself here."

Silence.

Since when was the city so quiet? "Despite what Tanner thinks, I don't believe that running to Matt is the answer. I

think that Kennedy's happy with him. And I want her to be happy. That's all I ever wanted. Was for everyone to be happy." I looked down at my lap. That was part of the reason I'd stayed away. I thought everyone *was* happy.

"My dad played tricks on me. Everyone was smiling in those pictures. But you saw it, Miller. You told me that you thought Matt looked sad. His eyes looked pained. And for a while, I saw it too. Until suddenly I didn't."

I wiped my tears away. "I don't regret anything. Because it all led me to you." I looked back up at the sky. "And Matt's not the answer. Because I can't tell him that I'm sorry. I can't tell him that I regret my choices back then. Because I don't. Because they gave me you. They gave me Jacob. I can't apologize for any of it. So he'll never forgive me."

I swear the star shined a little brighter.

"He won't. And I don't want him to. I want Kennedy and him to be happy. Besides..." My voice trailed off. "He always wanted lots of kids. I told you once that Matt and I talked about that. Back at the beach house, I think. I told you a lot of things about Matt at the beach house." I'd filled up the silence back then, trying to remind myself to be loyal. I'd wasted so much time on Matt. So much time I could have been with Miller.

But I couldn't regret that either. Because I'd found my way to Miller anyway. And we'd made our own family.

I put my hand on my stomach. And I tried not to think about all the wasted pregnancy tests. "Kennedy and him will be happy together. They'll fill a house with children." I wouldn't

be able to give him that. I'd been trying to get pregnant again for years to no avail.

“Jacob and I are going to just surround ourselves with Henrys.” I smiled to myself. “And I'm going to figure out how to hang these lights. And I'll watch football with him on Sundays. And dance with him every night while we cook dinner. And I'll keep living by keeping the memory of you alive.”

I stood up. “Does that work? Does that fulfill the promise to keep living? It won't be like when I went to California. Back when I decided that happiness was a bonus to your heart beating. I'll be happy with Jacob. Just him. Please just tell me that's okay.”

I waited for the wind to blow. For the leaves on the tree to rustle. For any sign that Miller agreed with my decision. But the night was eerily still.

Chapter 3

Saturday

Matt

“Matt,” Kennedy said again.

I was aware of Kennedy’s presence beside me. I was aware of Nigel yelling weird things to the team. I was aware that there were only a few seconds left on the clock. But it was like I was numb to all of it.

She’s alive.

She’s alive.

She’s alive.

It was good the team didn’t need me. Because I was standing on the sidelines doing nothing. It didn’t even feel like I was here. I was back in that auditorium with Brooklyn. I’d forgotten how good she’d felt in my arms. And I’d forgotten how much it hurt to lose her. Because it felt like I’d just lost her all over again.

“Matt.” Kennedy touched my arm.

I pulled away from her. “Who else?” I asked.

“Who else what?”

I finally looked at her. “Who else knew Brooklyn was alive?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. But I saw her glance up at the stands.

I looked up there too. And Mason, Rob, and James all looked guilty. Tanner was missing. Maybe he couldn't even face me.
“Are you saying they all knew?”

“I don't know. I know Brooklyn ran into Penny and...”

“Penny too?” *What the fuck?*

“Brooklyn said she wanted to tell you herself. She probably told them all the same thing. I was trying to respect her wishes. You know how much I regretted my last words to her. I didn't want to regret something else.”

I just stared at her. “You let me fall for you. Don't you regret that? How was that trying to respect her wishes?”

“Matt...”

“I don't understand how you could do this to me. How you could look me in the eye and lie about everything.”

“I didn't lie about anything. Everything that's happened between us...”

“Don't, Kennedy.”

“I fell for you before she came back. You have no idea how much this has torn me up.”

I didn't respond. I knew. She'd been a mess all week.

“I tried to break it off with you on Saturday as soon as I found out.”

She'd known a whole week. But she'd also tried to push me away. She'd tried to put a wall between us. She'd tried to be a good friend to Brooklyn.

“Brooklyn said it was okay,” Kennedy said. But she didn’t sound like herself. Her voice was small. And hurt.

I knew I was being a dick. And I think it was partially because of what I’d done during halftime in that auditorium. I felt guilty. And angry. I was so fucking angry. “She said what was okay?”

“For us to date. I told her I...I told her I loved you. And she said she was happy for us.”

It felt like a knife in my chest. “Brooklyn said that?”

Kennedy nodded.

Brooklyn definitely wasn’t the same girl I used to know. The Brooklyn I loved wasn’t...heartless. It was like she didn’t care about me at all. Had she ever?

“Victory is ours!” Nigel yelled. “We vanquished the foe!” He ran past us, storming the field with the players.

I turned to see them all celebrating. Jefferson was in the middle of the chaos. I’d done what I’d set out to do. Jefferson fit in. He looked so happy.

And I felt...nothing.

Brooklyn was married to another man. And she didn’t care that I was seeing Kennedy. I looked back up at the stands at my supposed friends.

I wished I was still angry. But I really did feel nothing. I was numb to everything around me. And everyone.

“I’m so sorry,” Kennedy said.

I looked down at her. “I know. Me too.”

She nodded.

I stared at her face. And I thought about what Tanner had asked me. Could I see myself marrying Kennedy? Having children with her? Even though I was still in love with someone else?

For a little while, I thought the answer was yes. But when I saw Brooklyn running down the stands? When for just a few minutes I'd held her in my arms again? I'd remembered what love felt like. Real love. I'd forgotten how all-consuming it was.

I felt a tear run down my cheek.

"Matt," Kennedy said.

I wiped my face. I loved Kennedy. But not like I loved Brooklyn. I'd never be able to give Kennedy my whole heart. Because it was still with someone else.

And the worst part was that I knew what I needed to do. I had to break up with Kennedy. And I knew it meant I'd be alone. Forever. I was still in love with Brooklyn. But she was married to someone else. She didn't want a future with me. I felt more alone than ever.

I pulled Kennedy into a hug and rested my chin on the top of her head. Why couldn't I love her more? Why couldn't I love her most? Why wasn't my heart big enough to move on like Brooklyn had? Why was I the only one that had to be miserable?

Kennedy hugged me back.

"I adore you," I said. "I do love you. I just..."

“I know.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “But you’re not *in* love with me. I tried to tell you.” She laughed, but it sounded forced.

“Yeah, I guess you did.” She really had tried to tell me. While still being loyal to Brooklyn’s wishes.

“It was really nice being loved for a few days there,” she said.

“Kennedy...”

“It’s fine, Matt.” She pulled back. “I knew as soon as Brooklyn got back that the two of you would get back together. It was always meant to be the two of you. Always.” She pressed her lips together like she was trying to force herself not to cry.

Did she not know that Brooklyn was married? There was no me and Brooklyn. I’d slipped up in the auditorium, but only because I didn’t know. If we were always meant to be, she wouldn’t have married someone else. She wouldn’t have disappeared for 16 years. She would have cared about me. But she didn’t. “Well, I don’t know about any of that. But I really am sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Really, Matt. I think maybe you liking me helped heal my heart a little, you know? I haven’t let anyone in since high school. I’ve been so closed off and you...you kind of...fixed me.”

I smiled. I’d wanted to help her. I’d wanted to help her because I couldn’t help Brooklyn all those years ago. Who knew that Brooklyn hadn’t even wanted my help? I’d been torturing myself for so long. And she...she was busy loving someone else.

And I was choosing to be miserable. Brooklyn wasn't mine anymore. And Kennedy deserved so much better than me.

Everyone was still cheering all around me. And I wasn't a part of it. I'd never get to be a part of that happiness.

"Why do you look so sad?" Kennedy asked. "Brooklyn's back. You should go after her."

It didn't feel like Brooklyn was back. The Brooklyn I knew was a ghost. My stomach twisted. But she'd looked the same. She'd smelled the same.

I took a deep breath. No, she wasn't the same. And standing here with Kennedy while our team celebrated was where I needed to be right now. Because no, I wasn't in love with Kennedy. But I still cared about her. And I needed to make sure she was okay.

I cleared my throat. "When you said you had something you needed to tell me after the game...I thought you were going to say you still had feelings for Felix."

"What?" She laughed. "No."

"Really? Because you two were flirting pretty hard the other night at dinner."

"We definitely weren't." But she was smiling again.

"Well, he was definitely flirting with you. I never meant to get in between the two of you in high school. I hadn't realized I was doing that. I think I owe you an apology for that too."

She shook her head. "I wanted to be there for you."

"Right. Because Brooklyn would have wanted that." But I don't think either of us knew Brooklyn as well as we thought

we had. And I was honestly a little surprised that Kennedy wasn't more upset with Brooklyn. I wasn't the only one who'd struggled after Brooklyn's supposed death. Kennedy had too. All my friends had.

"Besides," Kennedy said. "I wasn't ready for a relationship back then anyways."

Yeah. Because of freaking Cupcake. If I ever saw that guy again I was going to punch him square in the nose. And not just for Kennedy, but for Ash too. He really had a way of fucking over good people.

"He said he liked you first."

"What?" Kennedy said.

"Felix. He said he liked you first. You deserve someone who liked you first. Who will always put you first. You deserve the world, Kennedy." She deserved a hell of a lot better than me.

"Thanks, Matt. But Felix and I are just friends. Like you and I are just friends." She lightly punched my bicep.

"That was weird."

She laughed. "Yeah. It was. And I know we were supposed to have dinner with your friends, but I think I'm just going to go congratulate Henry and get going, okay?"

I nodded. "Okay." I didn't think I'd be going to dinner with *my friends* either. I wanted to get out of here just as badly as Kennedy did.

"Okay then." She gave me one last smile and ran out onto the field.

I thought I'd known what I wanted. Her. How could I have been so wrong?

"Matt?" James said.

I turned around to see all my friends standing there. Staring at me with very concerned expressions.

"Congrats on the win," Rob said. "You killed 'em."

Daphne elbowed him in his side.

"Ow. I was just breaking the ice. Look, Matt. We all have a confession."

I put up my hand. "Let me guess. You knew Brooklyn was back and you didn't tell me?" I looked at Penny when I said it.

"Matt," Penny said. "Brooklyn asked us not to. She wanted to speak to you herself. I..."

"And you're not friends with Brooklyn, Penny. You're supposed to be friends with me." I forgave Kennedy for not telling me because she was best friends with Brooklyn. Her loyalties were with her friend like they should be. So why the fuck had *my* friends kept me in the dark? They were supposed to have my back. They were supposed to care.

Especially Penny. I'd just opened up to her about how much losing Brooklyn broke my heart. She'd sat in my art studio and held my hand as I cried. How could she have kept Brooklyn's return from me? How could she?

"I don't think that's really fair," Mason said.

I stared at him. "And you're the worst of all. We're family, man. You're supposed to always have my back."

"We both know that Brooklyn's family too."

Was Mason fucking kidding me right now? Brooklyn wasn't my family. She was married to someone else.

"How about we all go to dinner and cool off," James said. "We can fill you in on everything that happened this week and..."

"I can't do this right now." I knew I'd snap. And right now, I just wanted to be numb for a little longer. "I'm going home." Well, not home. Back to Tanner's place. I turned around to call for Nigel, but he'd already appeared beside me.

"Come on, man," James said. "Just give us a chance to explain."

"Shame!" Nigel said and pointed at James. He trailed his finger through the air pointing at all my friends. "Best friends have each other's backs. Shame! Shame on all of you. Let's go home, Master Matthew."

Damn right, Nigel. At least one person in my life hadn't been sabotaging me behind my back.

"Did Nigel just call him Master Matthew?" Rob asked as Nigel and I walked away.

I didn't even care about Nigel being weird anymore. He had my back more than anyone else. And maybe Tanner. Wait, where was Tanner?

I looked back over my shoulder as Nigel and I walked out of the stadium. That homecoming show hadn't been random. The song. The dance on the float. And based on Brooklyn's reaction, she definitely hadn't planned it. And my friends probably would have said if they'd done it.

I only knew one person who loved grand gestures on an extreme level. The same guy who insisted Kennedy wasn't a

good match for me. The same guy that said he'd find me a more suitable match. *Fucking Tanner.*

“Touchdown!” Tanner’s voice boomed as Nigel and I entered the apartment.

Nigel and I both looked at each other. Tanner rarely watched sports on TV. He preferred to attend “live spectacles” as he put it.

I rounded the corner into the great room. “Tanner we need to talk...” My voice trailed off.

There was a naked little boy holding a football in the middle of the room. Well, the child wasn’t entirely naked. He was wearing a hat that was way too big for his head. It completely covered his eyes.

“What’s going on?” I asked. I remembered earlier this week Tanner had been talking about hanging out with a kid. And sleeping pills. Or something. And I had a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The boy ran behind Tanner to hide.

“It’s okay, little man,” Tanner said and patted the kid’s head. “This is a friend. He’s safe. And nice. You’ll really like him.”

But the boy didn’t run back out.

“Tanner, did you kidnap this child?”

Chapter 4

Saturday

Brooklyn

Miller wasn't answering me tonight. And I was pretty sure I knew what that meant. That he wasn't bargaining with me. That he meant what he said in his letter. But he wasn't the only one I could go to for advice.

I walked through the cemetery and froze when my feet reached my uncle's gravestone. I hadn't gotten to visit it nearly enough before my father took me away.

"Hey, Uncle Jim," I said. "It's been a really long time."

My uncle had liked Matt. They'd gotten along. I could still picture watching a movie with the two of them back at my uncle's small apartment. It had felt so normal. It felt like home.

There were a few wilted flowers lying in front of the tombstone. Probably from Mrs. Alcaraz. Maybe Kennedy. It didn't seem significant enough. Maybe because it wasn't nearly as many flowers as the gravestone beside his. I looked over and frowned. Some of the same flowers were on that grave. Almost like the bouquets had been split.

I walked over and I swear it was like ice went through my veins. I reached out and ran my fingers across my name on the tombstone. *This is my grave?*

I looked down at the flowers. Roses, chrysanthemums, lilies, daffodils, sunflowers. I'd never actually told Matt my favorite. But he'd brought me flowers of every kind after my uncle had passed away. And I knew these were his doing.

Matt hadn't forgotten about me. For years I thought he had. I thought he'd moved on. I thought he was happy.

I shook my head as the tears fell. He never forgot.

But he was with Kennedy now. It felt like I had to let him go all over again. I closed my eyes. For a second today, when I was in his arms, I remembered what we used to have. I'd let myself miss what we had. But there was no going back.

I opened my eyes and stared at my name on the grave. Matt had sat here. Mourning me. Missing me. While I was off living my life.

He never forgot me.

And he'd never forgive me.

Chapter 5

Saturday

Matt

“What on earth?” Tanner laughed. “Kidnap a child? That’s ridiculous. No. What an absurd conclusion to jump to. This is Young Jacob of course.”

I wanted to laugh too. But I had no idea who Young Jacob was. And I was pretty sure Tanner had definitely done something illegal. Like drugged this boy and brought him to his house. “Tanner...”

“Jacob has come with me willingly. Haven’t you, little man?” Tanner looked down at the boy and then back up at me. “Jacob nodded consent. You just couldn’t see it because he’s hiding. So we’re all good.”

Nothing about this was all good. I walked around Tanner and crouched down. “Hey,” I said.

The boy pulled on Tanner’s pant leg as he tried to get away from me.

Tanner picked him up. “Matt, stop scaring the child.”

Me? I tried to get on eye level with the boy, but his hat dipped down again. “Hey, Jacob. Do you know this man?”

“Sí.”

Did he only speak Spanish? I didn’t know enough Spanish to ask him what I needed to. “How do you know him?”

He didn't respond.

Maybe I should call Kennedy or Mrs. Alcaraz? “Jacob, do you understand me? Do you know this man?”

“Yessie. Tanner is my abuelo.” He hugged Tanner's side tighter.

I looked back up at Tanner. Um...what? That wasn't possible. Tanner was too young to have a grandchild. Maybe a kid this age. But definitely not a grandson this age. “I don't think that's right.”

“You heard the boy,” Tanner said. “This is my grandson, Jacob. And Jacob, there's no reason to be scared of my friend. Remember the game we were just at? He was the coach. You saw him on the field.”

“Of the football team?” Jacob said up to Tanner.

“Yes, the Empire High football team.”

Jacob turned to me and pushed up his hat. “Hiya, Coach.”

I smiled. Well, that was adorable. “It's nice to meet you, Jacob.”

“Can we play football?”

“Um...sure. I need a word with Tanner real quick, though.”

“My abuelo?”

“Yes. Your abuelo.”

“Down,” Jacob said after he started wiggling and Tanner didn't immediately set him down.

“Sorry, little man. Still getting used to your demands.” Tanner set Jacob down on the ground and turned to me. “Children, am

I right? You needed a sidebar?”

“What is happening right now?”

“I’m hanging out with my grandson.”

“We both know you’re not old enough to have a grandson.”

Tanner laughed. “Sure. Was there anything else? Because I’m really scared he’s going to start crying and I won’t know what to do with him if he cries.”

“Luckily I’m great with kids. If Jacob starts crying, I’ll be able to handle it.”

“I know. It’s all so wonderful, don’t you think?” Tanner clapped me on the back. “You’ve had so much practice with all your friends’ kids. You’ll be great with Jacob too.”

“I don’t want any part of this kidnapping scheme.”

“Get off it, old chap.”

What? I had no idea what was going on with that cute kid. But that could wait. “Tanner, did you plan that homecoming float fiasco?”

“Fiasco? I think that was an A+ grand gesture in my book. Everything is going exactly according to plan, Matt.”

I knew it was you. “What the heck? You knew Brooklyn was alive and didn’t tell me? And then you played that song... for... what purpose?”

“Because grand gestures bring lovers together.”

I shook my head. “Not even a little.”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I saw her come out of the school. If you ask me, it looked like it went very well.

High-five, my man.” He lifted his hand.

I was going to kill him. “Is that why you said Kennedy and I weren’t a good match? Because you knew Brooklyn was back in town?”

“No, I hadn’t run into Brooklyn yet. I knew about your lackluster match because I checked my…” He coughed.

“Thingamagig. Unrelated events. I knew that because you hooked up with Kennedy and I checked thingamagigs.”

“Great. So I fucked Brooklyn in the auditorium. Are we a good match? Spoiler alert, Tanner. We’re not because she’s married.”

“I’m sure it was more of a love-making sort of deal. And honestly, it’s a tricky situation. I can only give you my best advice. No checking anything. Because technically the two of you hooked up in high school. Way before I met her. So I’ll never be certain for sure. But I feel pretty good about this.”

“She’s married, Tanner.”

“Hmm,” Tanner said. “Interesting. Did you not speak with her before you made love? You really should speak with her. It’s been years. But trust me, I have this all sorted out.”

“I don’t trust you at all.”

“Well you should. Whenever you put your love life in the hands of someone, said person needs your undivided trust. And I promise everything is working out according to plan. Nigel and I have it all under control. We’ve been planning it for days, and usually our plans only take a few minutes.”

What? Nigel had just yelled at all my friends about keeping Brooklyn a secret. There was no way. I turned to Nigel.

Nigel pressed his back against the wall like he was trying to blend into it. But his orange lederhosen made that impossible.

“What the hell, Nigel?”

“Enough with the vile language,” Tanner said. “My grandson is very impressionable.”

“Nigel, you knew?”

He stayed pressed against the wall and didn’t even blink.

I walked over to him, grabbed him by his orange leather straps and pulled him off the wall. “Talk.”

“I didn’t want to,” Nigel said. “Master made me. I like Kennedy. Very much so. I think you two are very suitable. But it’s not my specialty. I just like to serve. If you need to punish me, I understand.” He turned around, waiting for me to spank him.

“Stop presenting your butt to me.”

“It might make you feel better,” Nigel said.

Good Lord. I looked up at the ceiling. “Why are you both hellbent on ruining my life?”

“We’re not,” Nigel said. “We’re trying to make it better. The best. Only the best for our best friend.”

Were they really trying to make my life better? Because it didn’t feel that way right now. “Well, Kennedy and I broke up.”

Nigel gasped. “Why?”

I looked at Tanner. “Because I wasn’t in love with her.”

Tanner nodded. “And because you’re still in love with Brooklyn. What are you doing here, Matt? You need to go talk to her.”

“I don’t even know where she is. I…” my voice trailed off. “I said some pretty terrible things to her and walked away.”

“Well, it seems like you both owe each other an apology.”
Tanner pulled out a slip of paper from his pocket. “That’s her number. Go get your girl back. You can thank me later.”

I looked down at Brooklyn’s cell number.

How was she alive?

I’d looked for her for so long.

I’d held out so much hope.

How?

Tanner sighed. “I can see all those questions floating around in your head. *Go to her;*” he said in a very commanding way.

“I’m not sure I’m ready.”

“You’ve had 16 years to get ready.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I had 16 years to mourn her. I never thought I’d see her again.”

“*Go to her;*” he said again.

“Or go to Kennedy,” Nigel said.

“Nigel!” Tanner said. “Seriously, stop it. Go back to the wall.”

Nigel just stared at him.

“To. The. Wall.”

“No,” Nigel said. He stuck his lower lip out.

“What are you doing?” Tanner asked. “Put that away.”

“No.” He stuck his lip out even further.

“Why are you doing that with your face?”

“I’m used to being the most adorable little boy in the room and I’m feeling very threatened right now.” Nigel pointed to Jacob.

“You’re jealous of my grandson?” Tanner asked.

Nigel nodded.

“Well, we can get you a grandson too, I’m sure. If that’ll make you feel better, Nigel.”

“I can have a child too?” Nigel looked so excited.

“No,” I said. “You can’t just get another kid. Where did you even get this first one?”

“He claimed me if anything,” Tanner said. “He asked for it.”

“That’s not how that works. Who are his parents?”

“Ah, I’m so glad you asked. I figured you might, so I asked him that exact question earlier. And his response is very cute. You’ll enjoy it. Young Jacob!” Tanner called.

The naked little boy ran back over. “Yessie?”

“Who’s your mom?”

“Mommy.”

“But what’s her name?”

“My mommy’s name is Mommy.”

“Precisely.” Tanner smiled at me. “There you go.”

I had no idea what that proved.

“Don’t let me and my grandson distract you. You have things you need to go do. Romantic things. *Go to her.*”

“While I order myself a grandson,” Nigel said.

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I was so lost. But there was no way Nigel could order a child. He barely knew how to use the internet. And I was pretty sure it seemed more like he wanted to be the child? He said he was jealous of Young Jacob. *I mean Jacob.*

I needed to get out of this house and clear my head. I put Brooklyn’s number in my pocket. I just needed a second alone to figure out what to do.

And I knew where I always did my best thinking. Talking to her. The old her. The one I knew.

Chapter 6

Saturday

Brooklyn

I'd seen the pictures of Matt being happy. And then I'd seen him with my own eyes in his pool with James' sister. He was happy. I knew he was happy.

So what was this? I picked up a beautiful yellow rose that was only just starting to brown on the edges.

He was supposed to find someone who loved him. He was supposed to move on. He was supposed to get married and have four kids, just like we'd planned. He wasn't supposed to waste time.

He wasn't supposed to be leaving yellow flowers on my grave. He wasn't supposed to visit this spot all the time.

He never forgot me.

But I'd forced myself to forget about him.

No. I hadn't forgotten. Not completely. If I had, it wouldn't have hurt to see him with Kennedy. It wouldn't have hurt for him to walk away from me again without waiting for me to explain.

Matt hadn't forgotten about me. But he had moved on. He no longer loved me. And even if a piece of him did? He'd never forgive me. I wasn't sorry for the love I had with Miller. I wasn't sorry for breaking my promise to Matt and getting married. Or for having a child. I wasn't sorry for any of it.

Tears started streaming down my cheeks.

No, that wasn't true. I was sorry. I was sorry I hurt Matt.

Because I never meant to.

I took a step back from my grave. I wasn't sure why, but I kept the rose. I'd never gotten a chance to tell Matt what my favorite flower was. But he'd guessed it anyway. Matt had left the rose for a ghost. But I wasn't a ghost. I was standing here, still breathing. Somehow.

I was never supposed to view my own gravestone. My father once told me that a funeral for the living was a nice way to see how loved you were. He said mine was well attended. I pictured the Untouchables back then, in their expensive suits. That's how I pictured them best. The way they looked in high school.

And I couldn't help but think that coming back to New York was a mistake. Maybe they were always supposed to remain stuck in high school in my mind. Frozen in time. But they were all better off now. Just like my father had said.

James was happy.

Rob was happy.

Mason was happy.

And Matt was happy with Kennedy.

I took another step back from my grave as my tears started to fall faster. But if Matt was happy, why wasn't this rose wilted and sad? If he was happy, why had he pulled me into his arms during halftime? Why had he kissed me back? Why had we had sex in the middle of the auditorium like he couldn't keep his hands off me?

What if he was still as broken as me?

I heard the snap of a twig. I turned around and all the air left my lungs. Matt was standing there, with his hands stuffed in his sweatpants pockets, staring at me.

And he did look broken. He looked as broken as I felt.

Chapter 7

Saturday

Matt

I needed to talk to the Brooklyn I knew. The one I talked to more often than I liked to admit. A few days ago, I'd said goodbye to her. I thought I was ready to move on. But I was as stuck as ever. Stuck on her. Stuck in a relationship with the dead.

I walked up toward her grave and froze.

Brooklyn was standing there, staring at her own tombstone. Her hair blew in the wind. But otherwise she was completely still. I watched her as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. And I realized she wasn't staring at her grave at all. She was staring down at a rose in her hand. One of the last flowers I'd left.

The way the moonlight was hitting her, she still looked like a ghost. But I'd rather spend a lifetime staring at a living, breathing Brooklyn than talking to a dead Brooklyn. Even if this Brooklyn wasn't mine.

My chest ached as I watched her.

Why had she left?

Why had she come back?

Where the fuck had she been for 16 years?

But I wasn't even sure those were the questions that mattered. As I stared at her, I could tell she was crying. And I just really

wanted to know if she was okay. Because I wasn't. I really fucking wasn't okay.

She used to come to me when she cried. I used to be the one that comforted her. It wasn't my place now. But I couldn't just stand here as she cried. I took a step forward, my foot crunching on a twig.

She spun around and her tear stained eyes locked with mine.

"Brooklyn." I said her name like I always did. Like she was mine, and I was hers.

"Matt." Her voice cracked.

I wasn't sure who moved first. But suddenly she was running toward me. She jumped into my arms, straddling my waist. She let her head fall to my shoulder and I felt the wetness of her tears through my shirt. But I didn't move. I just held her.

God, it felt so good to have her back in my arms. It was like we were opposite ends of a magnet. And we couldn't stay away. But we both knew that wasn't true. Yes, she was clinging to me now. But she'd stayed away pretty damn well for half a lifetime.

I didn't say a word as I breathed her in. For a second I let myself not care that she was married to someone else.

Maybe her husband didn't make her happy.

Maybe he was a monster.

Maybe she wanted out.

But I didn't want to ask. I didn't want to say anything. The silence had always been comfortable for us. Even more so now. Because all I cared about was that she was breathing.

I wanted that to be enough. And maybe it was. My chest didn't hurt as much when she was in my arms. I was pretty sure I was just scared to break the silence though. Because as soon as I did...she'd pull away from me. She'd remember that we were no longer an us.

I think she was scared to break the silence too.

And I needed to get this off my chest, just in case I didn't get another chance. "I didn't mean it," I said.

She lifted her head off my shoulder to stare at me.

I smiled. I could finally remember the hue of her eyes.

"You were right, Matt. I'm not the girl you knew."

I shook my head. "I wasn't talking about what I said earlier today. But I didn't mean that either." Well...I wasn't sure. She was wearing a wedding ring. But she was in my arms. I didn't know what the hell was going on. "I was talking about what I said on Thanksgiving 16 years ago. I've regretted my last words to you every day since then. You're not a liar, Brooklyn. I know you were just trying to get my friends and me to make up. And you're nothing like Isabella. You're the love of my life. I thought you died thinking that I hated you. And it killed me. It felt like I was drowning every day without you. And Brooklyn...it couldn't have been further from the truth. I've only ever loved you."

She tried to blink away her tears. "But Kennedy..."

"Kennedy and I broke up."

"What?"

“I’ll say this as many times as it takes for you to hear. You’re the love of my life. And I’ve only ever loved you.”

“Matt...”

“I don’t care that you’re married. It doesn’t change how I feel. I don’t know where you’ve been for 16 years. I don’t know why you’re here now. Maybe it was just so I could tell you that. That I’m sorry. That I tried my best to keep my promises to you. And I know that this moment is fleeting. I know you have to go back to him. But can we please just stay like this for another few minutes?” I didn’t want to let her go. I didn’t want to go back to remembering a ghost. I couldn’t go back.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “I’m not married.”

I just stared at her. “You’re not?”

“No. Not...not anymore.”

She wasn’t married. It hurt that she’d gotten married to someone else at all. But my chest already ached a little less just knowing she wasn’t with someone else right now. She was back in New York. She’d run into my arms. She’d cried on my shoulder. She was still mine. I leaned forward to kiss her.

But she turned her lips away from me.

I kissed her tearstained cheek anyway.

She closed her eyes like it pained her.

“Brooklyn, look at me.” I kissed the side of her neck. “Look at me.”

She didn’t turn her head. If anything she closed her eyes tighter.

“Brooklyn?”

“We need to talk. About everything.” She unwrapped her legs from around my waist and put her feet back on the ground.

“Can we maybe...” her voice trailed off as she looked back at her own grave. “Not here.”

I grabbed her hand. We walked in silence down to my car. I opened the passenger side door for her and she climbed in. I sat down in the driver’s seat, but I didn’t put my keys in the ignition. When I thought of Brooklyn I thought of Central Park. I thought of Empire High. But those were good memories. And I had a feeling that whatever she was about to say wasn’t good. I didn’t know where to drive. If this was goodbye, I didn’t want to taint the places that made me feel close to her. I still needed somewhere to go when it felt like my heart needed her. *Please don’t say goodbye to me.*

She turned in her seat and stared at me. I think she felt it too. That this conversation was meant to be buried here with the dead.

“Did you leave all those flowers on my grave?” She was still holding the yellow rose.

I nodded. “Kennedy may have left a few too. But...yeah. I visit you all the time.”

She pressed her lips together. “I don’t understand.”

“Why I visited? I think you just like hearing me say this... You’re the love of my life. And I’ve only ever loved you.”

She shook her head like she didn’t believe it. “Just let...let me get this out, okay?”

I reached out and grabbed her hand. I didn’t know how to not touch her.

She squeezed my hand back. “My father stole my kidney,” she said. “Apparently I signed something giving him permission to do it. I don’t know. I never read that stupid contract. But I was feeling so low when it happened. Kennedy and I were fighting. And you...you said...”

“I know.” She didn’t have to say it again. I’d called her a liar. I’d told her she was like Isabella. I was a fucking asshole.

“Everyone hated me. I thought my dad was the last person who still loved me and then...he just used me. For spare parts. When I woke up after the surgery, I was freaking out. I told him I wanted out of his house. And he thought that meant I wanted to leave the city. I didn’t. I still loved you, Matt.”

Loved. Past tense. I kept my hand in hers, hoping she wouldn’t let go.

“But he...he made me go anyway. He locked me in this weird white room for a while. And then he sent me to live at a beach house. He said that everyone thought I was dead. That there was a funeral and everything. A ploy to keep me safe from Isabella. He said Isabella was planning on killing me. And I was scared of that. But I was also scared of my dad. And I was scared because my dad also made it very clear that if I somehow got away, he’d kill my bodyguard.”

Matt shook his head. “Your bodyguard? But I saw him that Friday. He answered the door and he was crying. He...”

“That must have been Donnelley. Miller was the one with me.” Her bottom lip trembled when she said his name. “You came for me on Friday?”

“Brooklyn, I never should have left you that night. I never should have said what I said. But I needed time to cool off. I tried to call you the next morning and you didn’t answer. I came over to your dad’s house right away and he said you’d... he said you died in surgery.”

She looked down at our intertwined hands. “Is that when you asked for it back?”

“Asked for what back?”

“Your aunt’s ring.”

“What?” I shook my head. “I didn’t ask for the ring back.”

She stared at me. “My dad said that you asked for it back right away. That you still wanted to get married one day.”

“No.” Was this a sick joke? “Your father broke the news to me and forced the ring into my hand. He told me that you would have wanted me to have it back. And after your funeral, I came here and buried it next to your tombstone. So that it would be with you.”

There were tears in her eyes again. “Really?”

“Really.” I’d dug up the ring recently. Hoping it would somehow feel like getting my heart back. But it felt more like fate tonight. Like the universe somehow knew I’d need it again soon. That Brooklyn was coming back to me. That she was coming home. The ring was still getting cleaned at the jewelry store. But I’d have it back soon. It belonged with Brooklyn. It always had. And she wasn’t married to someone else. Which meant we still had a future. We had to.

“My dad said you didn’t speak at my funeral either. That you said everything you needed to the last time you saw me.”

Now I was the one with tears in my eyes. “Not a chance in hell, Brooklyn. I regretted what I said. And I...” I felt like I was choking on my words. “I read my wedding vows to you at your funeral.”

“Oh, Matt.” She started sobbing now.

I pulled her across the center console and onto my lap. I cradled her face in my hands. “I’d never felt so broken. I still feel broken.”

She nodded. “Me too. I missed you so much. I was so lost. But my father convinced me that everyone was happier without me.”

“Brooklyn that wasn’t...”

“He told me those lies about the ring. About you not speaking at my funeral. And he showed me pictures. Of you with other girls. Of all the Untouchables as friends again. Of Kennedy and Felix laughing. I thought...I thought you all forgot about me.” She was barely getting the words out. “That you were all happier that I was gone. I thought you were glad I was dead.”

I wiped away her tears with my thumbs. “Your death killed me, Brooklyn. It felt like I’d died too. For 16 years, I’ve felt like as much of a ghost as you.”

She shook her head. “Then why didn’t you answer my dad’s texts? I’d convinced him to tell you the truth. I...” her voice trailed off. “I don’t understand.”

I winced. *Fuck*. Was that really what Mr. Pruitt had been texting me about all these years? “I was furious with your father. I knew you didn’t agree to give him your kidney. I thought he’d murdered you. When you died...it felt like I’d

lost everything. You. Our future that we dreamed of. The life I wanted. And I didn't want anything to do with him. I came here every day to mourn you and I never once saw him. It was like he didn't care that you died at all." Which made sense now. Because she wasn't dead. "And I hated him. I still fucking hate him. He stole you from me..."

She leaned down and kissed me. And it felt like coming home. Her father had kept her locked up. Or she would have come back to me. She'd never forgotten. She'd never stopped loving me.

I buried my fingers in her hair. I had no idea how I'd coped with the pain of losing her. This was the only way I felt better. With her on top of me. It was like she alone could take away my pain.

Chapter 8

Saturday

Brooklyn

Matthew Caldwell still loves me.

He brought flowers to my grave all the time.

He regretted his last words to me.

He didn't ask for the engagement ring back.

He spoke at my funeral.

He always wanted me to come home. And that's what it felt like when I kissed him. Like coming home.

We were both haunted by ghosts. But it was so much easier to breathe when his hands were on me. His lips were salty from my tears. But he still tasted like cinnamon. He still tasted like my Matt. He was still mine.

I pulled back. That wasn't true. I hadn't told him everything yet. "That wasn't the end of my story," I said. "I..."

"I want to hear all of it," Matt said. "But for so long it felt like I wasn't living. And I can finally breathe again." He kissed me again. "You came back to me. You came back. That's all that matters. Really, Brooklyn. All that matters is you're here with me now."

Miller had said almost the exact same thing to me when I arrived at the lake house. That I came back to him. I knew Matt didn't want to break the spell. But that was all it was.

Because he only knew half of the truth. Yes, I was devastated when I thought he'd moved on. But I'd moved on too. And he needed to know the truth.

It seemed like Matt thought I'd only just escaped from my dad's prison. But that wasn't it at all. I'd been crying so much over the past few weeks though. And Matt took away that pain. It was selfish, but I kissed him back. I let him make my heart feel better for just a few more moments.

I remembered when just staring at him in the halls of Empire High made it easier to breathe after my mom had died. And he'd held me while I cried when my uncle passed away. Matt had pieced me back together before. He could do it again. If I let him. If he wanted to after he heard the whole truth.

I stopped kissing him, but I didn't pull away. I rested my forehead against his. "That fall. And winter. And spring. And summer. Despite what my dad told me. Despite the pictures. I was loyal to you, Matt."

He reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"And I prayed that you'd find me. That somehow, you'd show up and rescue me."

"I tried," Matt said. "I hired so many private investigators. I tried until my mom grew so worried that she forced me to stop. Because you were dead. And I had to accept that." He shook his head.

"Kennedy told me that you tried." I hadn't believed it. But... Matt had never stopped loving me. He was still staring at me like he loved me. But he wouldn't be soon.

"I wish I'd tried harder."

I shook my head. I didn't need him to apologize. I was the one that believed my dad's lies. I'd given up on him too. And he needed to know that. "Sometimes my dad would visit, but it was mostly just Miller and me at the beach house. We were kind of...playing house. We were both taking online courses. We cooked all our meals together. We hung out. We got really close. It was just us...locked in a cage."

"Okay."

This wasn't coming out right. Being with Miller had never felt like I was in a cage. He'd made sure of it. If anything, even back then, it felt like...home.

And how could I sit in Matt's lap feeling like home too? It didn't make any sense. But I also didn't move away.

"He really helped me," I said. "And he...he defended you. I need you to know that. He tried to show me that you looked sad in all the pictures. He said it wasn't fair to be mad at you because you thought I was dead. But it was really hard not to be upset."

"Okay," he said again.

But it wasn't okay. And we both knew it. "I was a mess. But I was loyal to you. I never once kissed him. But I was falling for him. I was trying to tell myself I wasn't. I was trying to find a way back to you. And then that summer...I did."

He didn't say anything at all as he stared at me.

"I know people grieve in different ways. I know we're different." I believed Tanner when he said Matt grieved differently than me. I did. But there was one thing I didn't know how to let go of. "But I came home. To you." This

wasn't coming out right. "I drove to your parents' house. And I saw you. Out back. Having sex with some girl in your pool..."

"What?"

"You looked so happy."

"I wasn't happy, Brooklyn. I was barely holding on."

"But you were laughing. Smiling. You were...you were having sex with her. You were happy."

"I wasn't happy. I was slowly dying without you. I was just trying to feel something, anything."

"All I know is that you promised me forever. And it didn't look like that anymore. For months, I wanted to believe that you were loyal to me too. But you..."

"It was just sex. I don't even remember who it was with. It was nothing."

"It was James' sister."

Realization crossed his eyes. "Right. Yeah. I remember. And like I just said, it didn't mean anything. We were just fooling around. I've never dated anyone but you." He shook his head. "Until Kennedy. Before that, I only ever flirted. I hooked up. That was it. And the only reason I dated Kennedy was because I sat on your grave and begged you for a sign. I begged you to help me. And then Kennedy showed back up in my life. I thought you were telling me to be with her. I thought..." He shook his head. "Fuck, Brooklyn. Why didn't you say anything when you saw me in that pool?"

“Because my father told me you were happier that I was dead. And it looked like that was true.”

“So you just...left? Without saying anything to me?”

I nodded. “You have to understand, I was living in isolation. In fear. My dad was whispering lies in my ears. And you looked happy in that pool. And I remembered making you really unhappy on Thanksgiving. God, it was so easy to remember that moment because it was our last. It’s still seared into my brain. You hated me...”

“I didn’t hate you. It was just a fight. A stupid argument.” He was blinking away tears. “And Jen meant nothing. I was so empty.”

My heart ached for him. But I wasn’t sorry. Because I’d gotten Miller. I’d gotten happiness. And sitting here on Matt’s lap, I felt so selfish. So foolish. So wrong about the boy I once promised forever. He’d meant what he promised. He’d meant it. I was the only one who had broken our promises.

“I just wanted you to be happy,” I said. “Even if it was without me.”

“I could never be happy without you,” he said. “And I haven’t been. I’ve been fucking miserable.”

I blinked away my tears. But he’d been laughing. Having sex. He hadn’t needed me. But I believed his words now as he stared into my eyes. I believed him and it killed me. Because I’d found happiness without him. I’d had a whole life without him. And I regretted none of it.

I just needed to get this out. “That’s not how it looked to me. It looked like you were happier that I was no longer in your life.

So yeah, I left. And I went to California for a while. To try to get over you.”

“Did it work?” His voice was icy.

I didn’t know how to answer that. “Yes. No. Kind of. I mourned you like I mourned my mom. And my uncle.”

“But I wasn’t dead, Brooklyn.”

“I know that. But you thought I was and I thought that it was best...”

“You don’t get to decide what’s best for me! You don’t get to walk away without saying anything for 16 years and dictate my whole life. Not when you promised not to run away from conversations with me. You looked me in the fucking eye on the steps of Empire High and promised me we’d always talk everything out.”

Each word twisted my stomach more and more. “But, Matt... you walked away from me on Thanksgiving. You walked out the door and left me with my father. So you don’t get to lecture me on walking away.” I moved to climb off his lap.

But he gripped my waist, keeping me in place.

Chapter 9

Saturday

Matt

What the fuck?

She thought it was for the best that I believed she was actually dead? So it was her decision to stay away from me? She wasn't locked up? She could have been with me this whole time?

But she believed her dad's lies. And she saw me screwing Jen. So, what? I'd thought she was dead. I hadn't broken a single promise to her. And me walking away for a few hours wasn't the same as her walking away for half a lifetime.

Seriously, what the fuck?

"We both walked away," she said. "We both broke our promise..."

"No, Brooklyn. No, it's not the same. I called you the very next day after our fight. You ran away from me for 16 fucking years!"

She tried to move off my lap again, but I dug my fingers into her hips.

"No," I said. "You don't get to run away from this conversation too."

"That's not fair. You don't understand what it was like holding out hope that you still loved me."

“Yes I do, Brooklyn. Because I still loved you even though you were dead. And you were in California fucking other men to get over me? How does that make what I did any different?”

“I wasn’t whoring around California. I didn’t hook up with anyone. I’m not you.”

I pressed my lips together. How could she sit here judging me?

“You thought I stopped loving you. But you were wrong. And I was drowning, Brooklyn. I was actually mourning you. Not pretending to mourn like you were doing in California.

Because you were actually dead as far as I knew. You were pretending I was. You were mourning the living. Getting over me when I was still loving you. Missing you.” I shook my head.

She just stared at me.

And I recognized that look. That was the look she gave when she was lying about something. Like when she’d lied to me about talking to the Hunters behind my back, trying to get us to be friends again. What had she done?

I looked out the window for a moment. I already knew what she’d done. She’d married someone else. “So you met someone in California?” I asked, staring at her grave in the distance.

“No.”

I turned back to her.

“I took the time I needed to mourn losing you.”

I just stared at her. She already knew my feelings on that.

“And it made me realize that I shouldn’t have kept Miller at arm’s length. That I’d fallen for him, but had been fighting off my feelings.”

She fell for her bodyguard? A guy on her dad’s payroll? Hired muscle? The guy was probably a murderer. Just like her father.

“You can’t quit my dad’s business. And Miller wanted out. I got him out. I set him up at a lake house. And months later when I realized I wanted to be with him, I drove to his lake house. And we...”

“You got married?” I tried not to spit the words out. I tried to keep my voice even. But I was pretty sure I failed at all of it.

“Not right away. Not for a while actually. But yes, I married him.”

Not right away? Not for a while? Yes, I’d screwed around after her death. But marriage? She’d promised me. She’d fucking promised me the rest of her firsts.

“I tried to keep my promises to you. It tore me up inside. Sometimes, in the silence, I could hear your voice in my head. Calling me a liar.”

Because you are one, Brooklyn. You’re a fucking liar! I bit the inside of my cheek so the hateful words wouldn’t spew out of my mouth. But none of that mattered. “So you’re happy? You’re in love with another man? So what are you doing here?”

“You didn’t let me finish my story...”

“What are you doing here, Brooklyn? What are you doing on my lap? Why are you crying in my arms instead of your husband’s? Are you just torturing me? Because you’ve done

enough of that for the past 16 years.” Each sentence made my chest hurt more.

She wiped the tears off her cheeks. “I’m not cruel, Matt. I never meant to hurt you. I can’t apologize for falling in love with Miller. I won’t. I refuse to apologize for being happy because you know I don’t believe in wasting time. But I’m sorry that I hurt you. I’m sorry that you’re still hurting.”

She was acting like I was treating her like a punching bag. But I was holding her in my arms as I listened to her tell me she was in love with another man. I was trying to talk it out. I was trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

But how was I supposed to handle her stabbing me in the heart over and over again? And blaming it on me. She saw me doing one dumb thing and it ruined our lives. No, just mine. She was off living happily with someone that wasn’t me.

“I don’t know what you want from me, Brooklyn. I told you that I’m still in love with you. And you’re sitting here telling me you’re in love with someone else. You said you weren’t married anymore. I’m just trying to understand.”

She shook her head. “He’s dead, Matt.”

I could see it on her face. How broken she was.

Fuck. The rest could wait.

I pulled her face back to my shoulder and let her cry. Just like I had when she’d told me about her mother. Just like I had after her uncle passed away.

And I knew why she was here. In my car. In my arms. Because she needed me.

I closed my eyes tight.

I'd told her I loved her.

She hadn't once said it back.

Brooklyn didn't love me anymore. She was in love with someone else. She was mourning him like I'd mourned her.

It had been 16 years and I still wasn't over her.

I held her tighter as she cried. Knowing that her heart belonged to someone else. And it might never belong to me again.

But I could do this. If this was how she needed me, I could be there. I'd take her any way I could get her.

I wasn't sure how long we sat like that, intertwined. But she eventually lifted her head off my shoulder.

"I really do need to go," she said.

I would have reached out to brush away her tears, but they were already dried on my shirt. She didn't move even though she'd just said she needed to go. I wanted to ask her where we were supposed to go from here. But it was like when she'd run up to me in the graveyard. I didn't want to break the silence. And I was a little scared of the answer.

"There's a lot more we need to talk about," she said. "Can we maybe...I don't know..."

I took a deep breath. "Just name a time and place and I'll be there, okay?"

She nodded. "I have your number. I'll text you."

I wanted to ask her how long she'd had my number. And how long she'd make me wait before she texted me. I still had so many questions, but I swallowed them all down.

This time when she climbed off my lap, I let her. She got out of my car and walked over to a pick-up truck.

What the fuck am I doing?

I grabbed the rose she'd left on the seat, climbed out of my car, and ran up to her.

"I meant what I said, Brooklyn. I'm still in love with you. I've been in love with you for 16 years. And I know you're in love with someone else. But I'm not going anywhere."

"I really thought you were happy." There were tears in her eyes again.

No 'I never stopped loving you either.' Nothing I wanted to hear. I just stood there like an idiot, swallowing my pride. And I handed her the yellow rose that had been meant for her grave.

She looked down at the rose and then back up at me. "You finally guessed my favorite."

I smiled. "I thought you might like the yellow. Because of your mom."

"I can't believe you remembered."

"I remember everything, Brooklyn." I took a step closer.

"Where are you staying? I'll bring you breakfast tomorrow."

She shook her head. "I can't tomorrow morning. I'll text you, though. I promise."

I wanted to believe she wouldn't break this one. "Okay."

“Goodnight, Matt.” She stood up on her tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss against my cheek.

And then I watched her drive away.

I felt like a fool. Pining over a girl who’d long forgotten about me. But had she though? She didn’t say she loved me back.

But she stared at me the way she used to. Like I was the only one who could take away her pain. Like she needed me.

I’d gotten her to fall for me once before. I could do it again.

And this time it would be forever.

Chapter 10

Saturday

Brooklyn

I'd run out of reasons to hate Matt. And that was how I'd gotten over him the first time. By hating him. And I wasn't sure what was left without that hate.

He said he loved me. He held me while I cried. Just like he always had.

But...I loved someone else. I'd always love someone else. I'd never be ready to move on. Matt was supposed to be happy without me. He wasn't supposed to waste time. And I wasn't strong enough to carry his grief from the past 16 years. I was barely standing.

And now I didn't hear Matt's voice in my head calling me a liar. I heard him now: *"Are you just torturing me? Because you've done enough of that for the past 16 years."*

I'd never meant to hurt him. Matt said he loved me. But I was pretty sure he hated me too. Like I used to hate him.

I opened up my front door and was greeted by the sound of laughter. My frown immediately turned to a smile as Jacob ran up to me.

"Mommy, Mommy! Abuelo has a castle!"

"A castle, huh?" I picked him up, waiting for him to point to one made out of Lego or something. "Where?"

"He lives in one!"

Tanner walked over and laughed. “It’s just an apartment. A penthouse. The little man is confused.”

“But...” Jacob scrunched his mouth to the side as he stared up at Tanner. “But I saw it, Abuelo.”

“It’s a big apartment,” Tanner said with a wink. “Shall we head to bed, Young Jacob?”

“Nooooo.”

“It’s late, sweet boy,” I said.

“Nooooooo.”

I peppered his face in kisses until he laughed. And his laughter quickly turned to a yawn. He rested his head against my shoulder. “I’ll be right back,” I whispered to Tanner.

Jacob yawned again as I laid him down in his bed. I pulled his covers up and was just about to tiptoe out of the room when he opened his eyes again.

“I saaaaaw it,” he said. “Abuelo lives in a castle.”

“I believe you.” I believed that a penthouse apartment could certainly be decorated like a castle. The apartments in New York looked one way on the outside but could be completely different on the inside. Felix’s place and my father’s looked the same on the outside. But they couldn’t be more different on the inside.

Jacob nodded and closed his eyes again.

I leaned down and kissed his forehead. I waited until his light snores started before I tiptoed out and closed the door behind me.

Tanner was waiting downstairs with a roaring fire and a glass of wine for me again.

“I feel like I’m going to need to see this castle apartment of yours,” I said.

He smiled. “Brooklyn, are you propositioning yourself to me?”

I almost spit out my wine.

“I only jest. I know you’re in love with my best friend.”

I knew he was going to want to talk about this. But I didn’t really know what to say. I couldn’t love Matt. I couldn’t because I still loved Miller.

“Please tell me that the two of you talked?”

“We did.” I took another big sip of wine.

“So he knows about Jacob? How did he seem when you told him? Was he upset? I kind of thought the both of you might come back here together. Did he say where he was going?” He checked his phone like he was expecting Matt to be calling him.

“I didn’t get to mention Jacob. Matt knows I went to the lake house to be with Miller. But he cut off my story. He just wanted to know why I was back. He knows I married Miller. And that Miller...died. But that’s it. I didn’t get to mention my father’s possible involvement in Miller’s death. And Matt doesn’t know about anything else in between. But he...he won’t...”

Tanner reached out and grabbed my hand.

“He’s never going to forgive me, Tanner. He was mad enough about me getting married. He doesn’t want to hear about any of it. And those years with Miller are all I want to think about.”

“I know.”

“Matt says he still loves me.”

“He does.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. I think he hates me. And even if he says he doesn’t, how could he not?”

“Do you feel like he should hate you?”

I sniffed. “Yeah. I’d hate me. If I had just stayed and talked to him after I escaped from my father...” I let my voice trail off. I refused to think about that.

“You feel guilty for the happiness you had with Miller,” he said. It wasn’t a question. He said it like he knew it was true.

I shook my head. “I don’t...I...I don’t regret anything. Except for hurting Matt. I never meant to hurt him.”

“Then I don’t understand why you look so sad. You said it yourself...he still loves you. If he loves you, he forgives you. It’s time to move on from the past.”

“It’s not that simple, Tanner.”

“Well, when are you seeing him next?”

“Tomorrow... Wait. How did you even know that Matt and I spoke tonight?”

“Besides the dried tears on your cheeks? I told him to go to you.”

The way he said ‘go to you’ made me smile. “So you planned the homecoming float thing. And then pressured him to come speak to me at my grave? It sounds like you’re more invested in this than he is.”

“Your grave?”

“Yeah. I was visiting my uncle and Matt showed up.”

“I didn’t tell him to go to your grave. I told him to call you.”

“Oh.” I pressed my lips together. I hadn’t had time to think about why Matt had shown up. But there was nothing more enlightening than that. “He prefers the dead me over the alive me.”

“No. He just doesn’t know the new you yet. You need to give him a chance. And honestly? It sounds like the only thing holding you back is yourself. Whether you want to call it guilt or not. Guilt for what you did all those years ago. Or the guilt you feel for wanting to love again. Of betraying what you had with Miller.”

I found myself nodding. I did feel guilty. Maybe a little for being so happy while Matt had been so sad. And definitely for even thinking about a future with Matt, when my heart was still with Miller.

“I’ll give you the same advice Miller did. The same advice your mom gave you. Don’t waste time, Brooklyn.”

I heard Miller’s voice in my head: “*Don’t waste another second of your time on this earth. Will you promise me that? Do this one last thing for me?*”

“I know everything feels hopeless right now,” Tanner said. “I know you’re hurting. But I’m sitting here telling you that you

can have happiness again. With Matt. Because if there's one thing I know for sure, it's that Matt still loves you."

Matt had told me he loved me several times. That he never stopped loving me.

I could have said it back. But Tanner was right, guilt had wrapped around my chest. I thought I had stopped loving Matt. I'd tried to stop. I'd fallen in love with someone else.

But even if I had stopped, it didn't change how I felt now. I loved Matthew Caldwell. I did. Part of me wished it wasn't true. But the other part? The bigger one? I felt hopeful.

That maybe my life wasn't over.

Because it had felt over.

"You love him right?" Tanner asked.

I nodded. "I'm worried that I never stopped." I wiped the stupid tears off my cheeks.

"Then *go to him.*"

I laughed. "It's late, Tanner."

He grabbed a tissue and handed it to me. "Brooklyn, it's never too late."

I got what he was saying. But it was literally almost midnight.

"I think he needs some time to process everything I told him.

I'll text him tomorrow."

"He goes to James' house every Sunday for the game. You need to talk to him before then or someone else might tell him about your son."

I nodded. "I'll tell him." I sighed. "He's going to be mad at you for not telling him I was alive. He's going to be mad at all his friends. God, and Kennedy..."

"It's okay. I have it all under control."

"How?"

"You told me yourself that Kennedy used to like Felix. I'm going to get them together. And Matt's already forgiven me." He waved his hand through the air like his meddling wasn't chaotic. "He'll forgive his other lesser friends too."

I laughed. "Other lesser friends?"

"So, you agree? Splendid. I really should go check on the lad, though. He's going to be a little upset. But I'll remind him that he can't be mad at you for getting married. Because he's publicly engaged to Poppy. And he almost proposed to Kennedy. Could you imagine how awful that would have been?"

I'd forgotten all about Poppy. But I was a little stuck on that other tid bit of information. "He almost proposed to Kennedy?"

Tanner cringed. "You didn't know that?"

"No. I didn't."

"Well, no reason to be upset over could-have-beens. I prevented that from happening. Just pretend I never said anything..."

"I need to call her."

"No, put that away." He slapped the cellphone out of my hand. "Stop feeling guilty for loving Matt. Just...stop it right now,"

he said, like he was reprimanding Jacob instead of me.

I laughed. "I can't just turn off the way I feel."

He put his hands on my shoulders and stared at me. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes?"

"You sound uncertain. Say it with gumption."

I laughed. "Tanner, I do trust you. But you gotta stop it with the big surprises. Matt and I just need time." I realized the irony of my words. I didn't want to waste time.

Tanner raised his eyebrow at me. He seemed to realize the irony too. "You love him. He's already your fiancé. End of story."

"He's not my fiancé anymore, Tanner."

"So you want him to propose again? Okay, I'll make it happen." He stood up like he was going to go make it happen right now.

"Tanner. I don't want you to interfere anymore. If *Matt* wants to propose, he should. If *Matt* wants to come talk to me, he should. I don't want you to force him into anything."

"I'm not forcing him. I'm opening his eyes. Like I'm opening your eyes."

"Can't we just keep everything we talk about between us?" I asked.

"But...I like fixing things."

I wanted to tell him I wasn't something that needed to be fixed. But it was a lie. My heart hurt all the time. I wanted it to

heal.

“So I’m not allowed to tell Matt that you’re still in love with him?”

“No,” I said. “That should come from me, don’t you think? When I’m ready. Which doesn’t necessarily mean tomorrow. Or the next day. I need...” my voice trailed off. I didn’t want to say I needed time again. What the hell was I doing?

Tanner sighed. “Very well. I’ll give you two days then. I should be off. Matt is probably fretting.”

When I said not tomorrow or the next day, I wasn’t saying two days. But I’d talk to him about that later. “Tanner?”

“Yes?”

“Could you maybe watch Jacob tomorrow morning while I talk to Matt? Jacob really likes you and Mrs. Alcaraz is working...”

“Of course, Brooklyn. And if you’re worried about breaking the news to Matt, you shouldn’t be. He’s great with kids. You should see him with his other lesser friends’ children.”

I’d heard the way Scarlett talked about Matt. He was a great uncle. I’d always thought he’d be a good father too. But that wasn’t why I was worried. “I made promises to him. All my firsts. He knows I married someone else, and he’s upset. I don’t know how he’ll react when I tell him that I had a child too.” And that I was pretty sure I couldn’t have any more children. But I didn’t say that last part. Because I wasn’t entirely sure Tanner would keep our conversations just between us.

“I think Matt’s wanted a family with you ever since he met you. In whatever shape that takes. And Jacob is part you. How could he not love him?”

I felt tears in my eyes again. I hoped Tanner was right. Because I felt something else in my stomach besides the twisting guilt. I felt hope.

Chapter 11

Saturday

Matt

“Matt?” Tanner called. “Where are you? Nigel? Nigel! Where is everyone?”

My eyelids felt heavy. I tried to call for Tanner, but my lips felt weird.

“We’re in here!” Nigel called.

A blurry Tanner walked into the bathroom and stared at me.

“What is this?” Tanner asked.

“He was acting hysterical,” Nigel said. “So I put him down.”

I laughed from the bubble bath.

“Nigel, did you drug him?”

“He was acting hysterical,” Nigel said again.

Tanner sighed. “How many times do I have to tell you to not drug our house guests?”

“But he was mad at me. He said I didn’t blend into the wall. And I like attention, but not negative attention.”

“You don’t blend into the wall when you’re wearing that. It’s bright orange and my walls are not orange.”

I laughed again.

“Hey, buddy,” Tanner said and clapped in front of my face.

“Wake up. You need to be on your A-game tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes again.

“Damn it, Nigel!” Tanner yelled. “Undo whatever you did.”

“But he looks so happy.”

“He’ll be even happier if he’s lucid enough to hear Brooklyn tell him she loves him tomorrow.”

Brooklyn loves me? I felt myself sinking into the bubbles. That was a lie. She didn’t say it back.

“Matt,” someone said. “Matt!”

I opened my eyes to see Tanner shaking my shoulder. I yawned and sat up. “What’s going on?”

“Finally, you’re up. You have a text.” He thrust my phone in my face and then went to my closet.

The screen looked all blurry. I rubbed my eyes but it didn’t help.

Tanner threw a pair of jeans at my head.

But my reflexes were too slow to catch them.

“No wait, you need a more appropriate pant,” he said and chucked a pair of tuxedo pants at my head.

“What’s going on? I can’t see anything.”

“Drink this,” Tanner said and handed me a glass.

I shook my head. I’d vowed not to drink any more of Nigel’s green juice. I didn’t love the idea of him having a secret, unspecified ingredient. Especially because he liked to wink at me when he said it. I was almost 100% certain that he skeeted in it.

“Trust me,” Tanner said. “Nigel drugged you last night. You need this to properly wake up.” He slapped the side of my face.

“Ow.”

“See? You’re out of it. And you need to be with it because you’re supposed to meet up with Brooklyn in 20 minutes and I have somewhere to be or everything will be ruined.”

“Wait, what?” I took a sip of the drink and my vision immediately cleared. “Where am I meeting Brooklyn?” I’d been worried that she wouldn’t reach back out. But she’d texted me this morning like she’d promised. She wasn’t running away this time.

“Her text was very coy. She said Central Park. That you’d know where. She’s a flirtatious one, isn’t she?” He pointed to my phone, but I was already up and grabbing the jeans.

“No, the other ones,” Tanner said.

“I’m not wearing a tuxedo to Central Park.”

“It’ll make the proposal better.”

I paused with one foot in my jeans. “What?”

“Ignore me, I said I wouldn’t say anything. Pretend I’m not here.”

“That’s what Nigel said to me last night as he tried to blend into the wall again. Right before the whole night got very blurry.”

“Yes, whatever, you two had a little spat and he drugged you. Get over it. He had your best interests in mind. And it’s not like you drowned in your bath. You were fine. And he stopped

your hysteria, because you were certainly relaxed. I get it, Brooklyn being married is a bit of a blow. But she's single now and you're going to want to propose to her. This afternoon, I think. So put on your tuxedo and stop dilly dallying."

"She said last night that she just wants to talk. I wasn't at all hysterical, but I was upset. I can't believe she got married. After everything we promised each other?"

"The past is in the past," Tanner said as he looked through my shirts.

"It doesn't feel that way right now. And I know that her husband passed away. It seems like it was probably recently. She's really upset. She's not ready to get proposed to. Would you stop looking through my clothes and talk to me for a second?"

Tanner turned around. "I disagree with everything you said. You love her. And she obviously still has feelings for you if you made love and talked the night away."

"We talked about how she moved on from me."

"Because you didn't let her finish her story."

"Tanner, how much have you been hanging out with her?"

"A lot. We're friends. Here, this one will do." He pulled something out of my closet that I didn't own.

Was Nigel shopping for me now? I didn't have time to argue about this. I didn't want to be late. I pulled on the newer pair of jeans and the button-up shirt. It all fit perfectly. Because of course it did...Nigel was always checking me out.

“I need you to promise me something,” Tanner said.

“To not kill Nigel?”

“No. It’s impossible to kill Nigel, trust me.”

Wait...what?

He put his hands on my shoulders and made me look at him. “I know you have a hot temper.”

“I have a right to be annoyed about Nigel drugging me last night...”

“I’m not talking about Nigel. I’m talking about you in general. You’re hot headed. You like to fight. You like to not listen. Honestly, sometimes it seems like you enjoy pissing people off just for the sake of it. It’s an odd quirk if you ask me. And I implore you, for the love of all living things, please keep your mouth closed and listen to everything Brooklyn has to say. Think before you open your mouth. Take deep breaths. Do some introspective thinking. Yes?”

“I’m not that hot headed.”

Tanner laughed and let go of my shoulders. “So you aren’t planning on going to James’ place and yelling at everyone this afternoon?”

I pressed my lips together. Honestly, I was planning on doing that. But they deserved it. They were supposed to be my friends.

“Silence is consent,” Tanner said.

“No, that’s definitely not right.”

“Huh. It must have changed recently. Anyway, you’ll listen to Brooklyn and not freak out? Because you’re really going to

want to freak out. And you can't."

I stared at him. "What do you know?"

"Me?" He put my tuxedo back in the closet. "Nothing."

"No, you know something. Tanner, you kept Brooklyn's return a secret from me. Stop keeping more stuff from me. Just tell me what you know."

"I've already said too much. And I need to go hang out with my grandson." He started walking away.

"And what the hell is that about? You can't buy children!" I said to his retreating back. What the hell was he doing? I just hoped that while I was out of it last night, Nigel hadn't kidnapped a kid too.

As I finished getting ready, it was like Nigel knew I'd been thinking about him. He appeared in my bathroom mirror. I jumped and turned around.

Nigel cleared his throat. "Master Tanner says I must apologize. So...I'm sorry that *you* were naughty last night and that *you* needed to be put in a nice relaxing bath to ease the hysteria."

I glared at him. "That doesn't really sound like an apology, Nigel. You drugged me."

"But I said I'm sorry."

He didn't even sound a little sorry. And he blamed it on me. "I was just talking to you last night. About how I was upset that Brooklyn married someone else."

"Exactly, you were upset. So I helped."

"I just wanted to talk, Nigel."

He stared up at me. “You wished to talk...to me?”

“Yeah. We were having a conversation.”

“Oh. I like that. I like conversing. I won’t drug you again. Unless you specifically ask.”

That sounded like a much better apology to me. “I’ll forgive you. If you tell me what the secret ingredient in your green juice is.”

A smile spread across his face. “I can’t do that. It’s *my* secret ingredient.” He winked at me.

The way he said ‘my’ in that sentence, combined with the wink, made me want to hurl.

“Are you okay, Master Matthew?”

“Nigel, have you been skeeting in my juice?”

He cocked his head to the side. “Shooting clay targets around your juice? No, I haven’t been skeet shooting in ages. I prefer large game hunting.”

“I meant like...cumming.”

“Where are you coming?”

“Where are you cumming?” I asked.

“I’m confused. Are we going somewhere? Am I invited on your morning date to meet Brooklyn?” He looked down at his lederhosen. “I’ll need to change into something more appropriate. I want her to like me as much as Kennedy likes me.”

What was he talking about? He never wore appropriate clothing. “No, Nigel. I’m asking you if you ejaculate in my

juice?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Do you want me to?”

“No.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said and started walking away.

“Nigel, don’t you dare ejaculate in my beverages!”

But he didn’t respond.

Fuck. That did not go how I wanted it to. Now it seemed like the secret ingredient wasn’t Nigel’s skeet. And now somehow it was going to be. I shook my head. That wasn’t important right now. I just needed to stop drinking it.

What mattered was that I was going to be late. And 16 years ago, I’d had a bad habit of not showing up for Brooklyn when she needed me. She needed to know that I wasn’t the same guy.

I took a deep breath. But...I was the same guy. In the most important way: I was still in love with her. And I wasn’t sure if she loved me anymore. Tanner may have been hanging out with Brooklyn a lot. But he was wrong that Brooklyn was ready for a proposal. When she’d lost her mom, she’d been broken. When she’d lost her uncle, she broke again. She’d already lost so much. And now her husband?

I clenched my jaw, trying to not think about those words. I tried to just focus on Brooklyn.

I knew what it felt like to lose my fiancée. To lose her. It was devastating. All consuming. That’s how she was feeling right now. Right now she just needed me. I’d waited 16 years to be

with her. Brooklyn hated wasting time, but I'd wait a fucking lifetime for her to be mine again.

Chapter 12

Sunday

Brooklyn

Matt hadn't texted me back. I was pretty sure he was upset about me breaking a promise. And I'd broken two. First marriage. First child. I knew why he wasn't texting me back.

When Tanner arrived to watch Jacob, I told him I no longer needed a babysitter.

But Tanner told me that Matt had just accidentally slept in. That he was definitely coming. I wasn't sure that was true though. Because I'd been standing on this bridge like an idiot for ten minutes.

I stared out at the ducks swimming in the water. I remembered Matt getting on one knee and pulling out a hotdog. I smiled. He'd asked me to be his girlfriend instead of proposing.

Maybe Matt forgot about our time here. Maybe he didn't even know what I was referring to when I said to meet at our spot in Central Park. Maybe I'd had it all right the first time. That he'd forgotten all about me. For years, I'd believed I was forgettable. I'd felt forgettable to him.

Standing on this bridge with Matt that first time was a great memory. One of my favorites. But I also remembered that later that day, I broke up with Matt. We hadn't even lasted one day as boyfriend and girlfriend. Because I'd still been his dirty little secret. And he didn't stand up for me when I needed him.

Matt always had a bad habit of not showing up when I needed him.

But I still waited.

I waited another five minutes until I knew in my heart he wasn't coming. I'd mourned Matt like he was dead. And I knew Matt thought I was actually dead. But his ghost had haunted me too. God, and now that I remembered what he smelled like... I closed my eyes and imagined breathing in his exhales.

"Brooklyn."

I spun around.

"I'm sorry, I slept in. And then the traffic was terrible. I had to run part of the way here." His hair was slightly matted to his forehead. And his chest rose and fell as he caught his breath. "I also had to stop and get these." He smiled and handed me a hotdog.

He did remember. I wasn't forgettable. And he wasn't a ghost, he was here. He showed up for me.

"I thought maybe you wouldn't show," I said.

"A long time ago, this girl taught me that I always needed to show up for the people that matter."

I couldn't hide my smile.

"And you matter, Brooklyn."

"Thank you." He mattered too. But I kept my mouth closed. I was so used to thinking about him in the past tense. I didn't know how to let him back in.

We both just stood there staring at each other.

“Do you come here often too?” I asked. “Like you go to the graveyard?” I quickly shook my head. “Actually, don’t answer that. I’ve seen a picture.” I looked over at the restaurant. I’d seen the pictures of him with Poppy. He’d taken her to the place where we were meant to get married.

“What picture?”

“Of you and Poppy.” I swallowed hard. Matt was the only person that could ever make me feel so important one moment and then so invisible the next. I knew he was stuck in some sort of situation with Poppy. James had told me as much. But...why had he brought my evil cousin here of all places?

Matt closed the distance between us. “There is no me and Poppy. I’m pretending to date her because I owe James. I’ve been a really shitty friend over the years. Your dad showed you pictures of me being friends with James and Rob again. And I was but...not in the same way as before. I just...needed them. Because I didn’t want to lose anyone else. And I knew it was what you wanted. For us to all be friends again. But I hated them too. It was easier to blame James and Rob about what happened instead of myself.”

“It was none of your fault.”

“I know.” He reached out and lightly touched the side of my face, like he needed to touch me to believe I was actually standing there. “I was a mess without you.” His fingers slowly fell from my skin. “Poppy came to me and threatened James’ daughter. She told me she wouldn’t touch Scarlett as long as I put on this charade of us dating. Anything you’ve read or heard, it’s not true. She chose this restaurant for some weird tabloid photo op. Probably just to mess with me. I’m not

engaged to that psychopath. But I went along with it because it felt like my chance to make things right. To stand up for James. To be a good friend for once in my life.”

“I’m sure you’ve been a good friend.”

He laughed. “Honestly? No, I haven’t. I stopped having James’ back. I let him get so shitfaced that he got married to Wizzy.”

I was so disappointed that James married Isabella. But it wasn’t just Matt’s fault. “Rob also let him do it. So did Mason. And ultimately, that was James’ decision.”

“I think he blamed himself for your death too, Brooklyn. I think he thought Isabella was his punishment. And I let him think it. I didn’t stop him. I’m a shit friend. And it’s not just that. I’ve blatantly flirted with James’ new wife in front of his face. Partially to piss him off. Partially because she reminds me of you. I think the two of you will get along really well.”

I nodded. “I think so too. Penny’s really nice. I can’t believe James went to Delaware.” It made my heart hurt a little less. I’d told him that people were nicer there. And he’d remembered.

“All my friends married girls from Delaware. And I resented all of them. I was jealous. Because it should have been us.”

I closed my eyes because it was so hard to see his pain. Especially because I knew that I’d caused it. It *could* have been us. But *should* it have been? I’d never trade anything for those years with Miller. I slowly opened my eyes again. But standing here on this bridge? Staring at Matt? It kind of felt

like falling back in love. I felt different around him. I felt... younger. Like I was 16 again.

“I’m so sorry for hurting you. I’m so sorry, Matt.”

“Eat your hot dog before it gets cold and I’ll forgive you.”

I laughed. If only it was that simple. But I took a big bite anyway. I sighed. I’d forgotten how good these were.

We stood there in silence eating. Staring at each other. It would have been awkward if I didn’t so badly need to take him in. The new him. His hair was a little darker. His shoulders wider. I remembered waking up being wrapped in his arms. How safe I’d felt.

I remembered once that Kennedy said that Miller looked like a grown up Matt. They were both tall and strong. But that was where their similarities ended. I also remembered thinking that Miller was a man and that Matt was just a boy that kept making stupid mistakes. But Matt wasn’t a boy anymore. And I was pretty sure he’d grown up a lot after he thought I’d died. Like I’d cut his youth short. Matt was a man. A man I didn’t really know.

I wanted to know the new him. But what if he didn’t like the new me? It was possible that Matt and I were always meant to be...just not meant to last. Because I didn’t just break one promise. I broke two. And I regretted neither. I finished my hot dog and took a deep breath.

“Miller didn’t just die. He was murdered. And I think my father killed him.”

Matt paused mid bite and then cleared his throat like he’d swallowed it down wrong. “What?”

“I don’t know. My father claims he didn’t. He claims it was a rival family. And I’m so dumb, because I thought we were safe in our little bubble. But my father was watching the whole time. I was never safe.”

Matt looked like he wanted to reach out for me, but I held up my hand.

I wanted the comfort of his touch. And I didn’t at the same time. I just needed to get this out. “The bomb was in *my* car. And I don’t trust my father, but I also don’t know if he’d ever kill me. Steal a kidney? Try to ruin my life? Sure. But murder me?” I started blinking faster. “The bomb was in my car and we woke up late. I was blocking Miller’s truck in in the driveway. He was just moving my car and...” I’d already said the rest.

Matt opened his mouth and then closed it again.

“It should have been me,” I said. *It should have been me. It should have been me.*

This time when Matt pulled me into his arms, I didn’t stop him.

“No,” he whispered into my hair. He ran his hand up and down my back. “No.”

“It’s all my fault...”

“No,” he said more firmly. “That doesn’t help. Do you have any idea how much I’d wished I’d died instead of you? Wanting that doesn’t help anything. Don’t think that. You’re supposed to be here. You’re supposed to be alive, Brooklyn. You’re supposed to be right here, right now.” He grabbed both sides of my face so I’d look up at him.

Is that what he thought? That I was supposed to be here with him? Because that's not how my heart really felt. I was supposed to be back at the lake house with Miller right now.

But I couldn't have that.

Matt wiped away my tears with his thumbs.

Miller was gone. But I'd never be able to accept that it shouldn't have been me that died in that car.

Matt wiped away my tears again, before letting his hands fall from my face. "Brooklyn, I don't know if it was your dad behind it. But I do think I know who might have done it. Poppy. She was just telling me the other day that she loves car bombs..."

"I spoke to Poppy too. She said that we're family. That she'd never hurt me. Her story aligned perfectly with my father's. She mentioned loving car bombs and that she used one to get revenge for what happened to Miller. The rival family thing. Like my father said. She blew up...it begins with an L I think?"

Matt nodded. "A Locatelli. Yeah. That's true. I was trying to dig up dirt against Poppy to get out of this mess I'm in. And a friend got me the police report about that. She wasn't a suspect or anything. But my friend was able to actually get a picture of her placing the bomb under the car. I can do some digging too, if you want. To see what I can find out."

"Tanner is already looking into it. I like him. He's really nice."

"Yeah, he's a good guy. And he's probably who I would have asked to do the digging anyway."

I nodded. "Do you believe Poppy?"

“She’s manipulative. When I first met her, she didn’t seem quite as bad as Isabella. But I’m not sure anymore.” He shook his head. “Honestly, I think she kind of lost it when you came back to town. She’s hellbent on taking over for Mr. Pruitt.”

“Yeah, I think my dad expected me to take over when I came back. But I shut that down right away. And I know it’s not fair to judge her...just because she looks like Isabella doesn’t mean she’s like Isabella. But I don’t believe her when she says she’d never hurt me. Because she sure wanted to rub her relationship with you in my face.”

“There is no relationship.”

“I know.” I bit my lip as I looked up at him. “I’m just worried.”

“I’m not going to let anyone ever hurt you again, Brooklyn.”

I stared at him. I wasn’t really worried about me. I was worried about my son. Specifically, if something happened to me...would he be forced to live with my father just like I had? I didn’t want my father to ruin Jacob’s life. My will was iron clad. But I’m sure my uncle thought his was too.

“So that’s what you wanted to talk about?” Matt asked.

“Because I’m not worried about your dad. Or Poppy. I’ll deal with them. Honestly, I was planning on seeing your dad today anyway to get this Poppy thing dealt with.”

“I mean, yes, I don’t want to put you in danger. But that wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about.” I looked back out at the water. I had believed that I’d stopped loving Matt. I didn’t think that was true anymore. I think I just let my love for Miller grow stronger. And if I still loved Matt when I loved

Miller? I could still love Miller even though I loved Matt. It didn't have to be either or. "I think I'm still in love with you."

Chapter 13

Sunday

Matt

She said it back. But I never expected her to look so sad when she said it. She loved me yet...she hated that she loved me. And I didn't know what to say.

I looked out at the water, trying to see whatever she was so interested in. "Is that really such a bad thing?"

She laughed and then sniffed. "I feel guilty. Because Miller and I...we..." her voice trailed off. "Because I still love him too. So much. God, it hurts just to breathe."

I clenched my jaw and thought about what Tanner had told me. To take some deep breaths. To think before I spoke. I needed that advice right now. Because I didn't want to hear about how much she still loved her husband. And I definitely didn't want to hear about her time with him. But I also wanted to know everything. How long had it taken for her to really get over me? Did she ever wake up, wishing it was me in her bed?

"He was a lot older than you, right?" I wasn't sure why that was the question I asked. Probably because it would get the image of her in bed with another man out of my head.

"Not that much older. Just six years."

"That's a lot older." I stared down at her. She was 16 when she'd disappeared. Which would have made him 22. Wasn't that illegal? I pressed my lips together, instead of saying it out

loud. They'd lived in isolation together. He was supposed to be protecting her. And instead he slept with her?

"Not that much older," she said again. "Penny looks a lot younger than James."

"Yeah. She is." But this wasn't about Penny and James. This was about how Brooklyn had fucking Stockholm syndrome and this dick had taken advantage of her. I realized I was gripping the railing on the bridge so tightly my knuckles were turning white. I was trying really hard here not to say anything. But she had to see it, right? That wasn't love. What *we* had was love. And she'd fucking run away from me.

"Okay then," Brooklyn said.

I just stared at her. *Okay then?* Nothing was okay about what had happened to her. I took a deep breath, but it didn't help. "I'm sorry, Brooklyn, but it seems like maybe Miller took advantage of the situation..."

"No."

"You were locked up and..."

"It wasn't like that. At all. Yes, at the beach house we were trapped. But at the lake house? We weren't locked up. We were free."

The way she said *free* made my heart hurt. Like she hadn't been free with me. Like she hadn't been happy until she was with Miller. "You were still in hiding there."

"Yeah, but it didn't feel that way. I told you, I thought we were safe. I didn't think my father knew where we were."

“Did you ever think that maybe Miller was reporting to him the whole time?”

She stared at me. “He wasn’t loyal to my father. I got him out.”

“How do you know? Did you even really know him at all?”

Her stare had quickly turned to a glare. “Yes, I knew him. I knew everything about him. He was my husband, Matt. He told me everything.” She pressed her lips together. “I didn’t come here to talk about Miller.”

“All we’ve done is talk about Miller. I know you’re mourning him. But do you have any idea how hard it is for me to stand here and listen to you talk about how in love with him you are?”

“You don’t understand what it’s like to lose someone you...”

“Don’t finish that sentence. What the hell do you mean I don’t understand what it feels like? I lost you!”

“You didn’t lose me, Matt. I’m right here.”

“I did lose you. I thought you were dead. I feel exactly the same way you’re feeling right now. But my grief was all lies. Do you know how much it kills me to hear how *free* you felt all those years with your husband? When I was still right here loving you? Missing you? Feeling trapped in my grief?”

“I didn’t come here to fight with you,” Brooklyn said.

Why did she always act like I was lashing out at her? She was the one that hurt me. Not the other way around. “We’re not fighting,” I said. “We’re talking. But I can’t have a conversation with you if you’re not willing to hear my side.”

She pressed her lips together as she stared up at me. “I want to hear your side. I just... everything hurts so much. And I don’t want you to hate me on top of everything else.”

“I told you I could never hate you.”

“You don’t know everything yet. I...” her voice trailed off. “I didn’t marry Miller right away.”

“Okay.” It wasn’t okay. Nothing about any of this was okay.

“He proposed to me the summer after I finished my online high school courses. And I told him I couldn’t.”

“Why?”

She looked at me like I was crazy. “Because I promised you that you’d be my first husband.”

“Only husband,” I said. “I clarified that several times.”

“I know. And despite what you said to me when you last saw me, I’m not a liar. And I didn’t want to be.”

She said she went to California to get over me. But it hadn’t worked. She still thought about me. She still heard my voice. Those hateful words I hadn’t meant. But a part of me was glad I’d said them now. Because they’d prevented her from giving her heart to someone else. For at least a while.

“I took the ring and promised him that one day I’d be ready to marry him. One day.”

“How many years did it take until you thought you were ready to break your promise to me?” It was a shit thing to say. But I didn’t want to hear about this.

“One day turned into several years. Being engaged didn’t feel like breaking a promise. But marriage? You were still in my

head, even though I wanted you out. I thought you were off living happily ever after with someone else. But you still plagued me.”

Plagued. That was a good way to put it. Her memory had been a plague on my entire life.

“How long have you been married, Brooklyn?”

“Almost five years. But even though it took that long, it felt like we were married that whole time. We just didn’t make it official yet. Actually, it was never really official. We were both living under different identities. There was no officiant. No paperwork. Just us.”

So...she wasn’t actually married then. Right? She hadn’t actually broken her promise? I shook away the thought. No, she had. She loved him. She’d just said they acted married for way longer than five years. She’d been with him instead of coming back to me. She’d made her decision, and paperwork didn’t make a difference.

“You said almost five years,” I said. “When did you do it?” I realized how harsh my words came out.

“Christmas.”

“A Christmas wedding?” Was she serious right now? That’s what we’d planned. December 22nd was seared into my brain. Had she forgotten that? Was this supposed to be a slap in my face?

“Matt...”

“I get it, Brooklyn. You did what you needed to get over me. To erase me from your memories. But I never got over you. And this one fucking hurts.”

“I only did it because...” she shook her head. “This is coming out wrong. I love Miller. I love him so much.”

“I get that.” Why did she keep saying that? Was she trying to prove it to me or herself that she didn’t fall in love with her father’s puppet?

“But I married him because it was easier to break that promise to you when I’d already broken another.”

“What?”

She fiddled with the wedding band and engagement ring on her finger. But she didn’t say anything. I saw it on her face though. Guilt.

“What are you talking about, Brooklyn?”

“I found out I was pregnant a few weeks before Christmas. I told Miller on Christmas day. And I kind of repropose to him. And we made it official right away.”

I felt like I couldn’t breathe. She didn’t just marry someone else. She’d had his kid? She’d fucking promised me. She’d promised me.

“He’s four,” she said. “And he’s my whole world.” She shook her head. “Miller and him were my whole world.”

I just shook my head.

“And I’m sorry I hurt you. But I love Miller. And I love my son. And I don’t regret any of it because it all felt like the most amazing dream. Like I’d gotten everything I’d ever wanted.”

“Everything you ever wanted? Do you have any idea how that makes me feel? That I meant nothing to you? That you didn’t

think of me at all? That you were happy while I was fucking miserable? What the fuck?”

“I didn’t say that. I…”

“You had fucking Stockholm syndrome, Brooklyn!”

“No I didn’t.”

“You were kidnapped. You were trapped. You weren’t thinking straight! You had a child with a mobster.”

She slapped me hard across the face.

I hadn’t expected it. I just stared at her, my cheek burning.

“Like you didn’t break your promises to me?” she said.

“Sleeping with half of New York City?”

“I didn’t break a single fucking promise to you. And even if I had? It’s because you let me think you were dead. Instead of being brave enough to face me.”

“Go to hell, Matt.” She turned and started walking away.

“Yeah, run away!” I yelled at her back. “Like you always do!”

“Go fuck away your pain, like you always do.”

She kept walking. But I wasn’t surprised. That’s all she ever did. And I was right the first time. She was a fucking liar.

Chapter 14

Sunday

Brooklyn

“Oh, no,” Tanner said as soon as I stepped into the house.

I’d tried to calm down on my way back here. But I probably had some dried mascara on my cheeks.

“Tell me what happened.”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to talk about it. Matthew Caldwell was an asshole and had always been an asshole. *Run away like you always do?* Fuck him. He didn’t even know me anymore. And I didn’t run away. I left because I thought he was happy. And I’d stayed put for 15 years at the lake house with a man who I loved. A man who’d never yelled terrible things at me. I wasn’t some flaky runaway.

“What are you two up to?” I asked as I sat down next to them on the floor. It appeared as though they were just playing with some sticks.

Jacob lifted up the longest stick. “Abuelo took me for a walk so we could find some new swords!”

I smiled and ruffled his hair. “That’s a big one.”

Jacob smacked my leg with it.

“Ow. Sweet boy, you can’t actually hit people with those. It hurts.”

“But it doesn’t hurt Abuelo. See?” He whacked Tanner with it even harder than he’d hit me.

Tanner had no reaction. But then he must have seen my face. “Oh,” Tanner said and cleared his throat. “Woe is me. Ouch. Sticks hurt. Listen to your mother.”

Jacob frowned at him. “But you...”

“Yes, I am as easy to hurt as any other person.”

“But you said...”

“Nonsense, little man. Sticks hurt people. No hitting.”

Jacob frowned as he looked down at his stick.

“It’s okay.” I lightly tapped the bottom of his chin so he’d look up at me. “Don’t worry about it. We’re both fine. Right, Tanner?”

Tanner nodded. “I didn’t feel a thing.”

“See, Mommy!” He pointed to Tanner. “He didn’t feel it. I told you so.” He stabbed Tanner’s leg with the stick and Tanner didn’t even flinch.

“Ow?” Tanner said slowly. “That felt exactly like how a stick would feel on a leg. Like scissors on paper.” But he was smiling.

Jacob laughed.

“Jacob, how about you clean up your toys while I talk to Tanner?”

He nodded and started gathering his sticks. There were so many. Were they planning a huge battle or something? I turned to Tanner. “Are you okay?”

“What?”

“Didn’t that hurt?”

“Nah. Tough skin.”

Okay...

“So how did it go with Matt?” he asked.

“Oh. Um. He didn’t take the news very well.” I watched Jacob pick up his other discarded toys. But he got distracted halfway through and started rolling his little cars across the floor.

Tanner sighed. “Matt yelled, didn’t he? I told him not to do that.”

“And I told you not to interfere.”

Tanner shrugged. “I didn’t tell him anything you told me. I just recommended he hear you out and to take a few deep breaths before he spoke.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “He definitely didn’t do that.” I stood up and wandered into the kitchen. I pulled out the flour, eggs, and butter.

“What are you doing?”

“I feel better when I bake.”

“So it went really poorly then?” Tanner asked.

“He said...we both said some terrible things.”

Tanner looked down at his phone. “Well, I have some time before I have to head out.”

Honestly, I didn’t have anyone else to talk to this about. Back in high school I would have talked to Kennedy. But I hadn’t even spoken to Kennedy since Matt told me they broke up.

Matt told me he was a shit friend. But I was pretty sure that title belonged to me.

I stared at Tanner while I stirred the batter way too vigorously. I was pretty sure Tanner had somehow become my best friend over the past week. So I filled him in. And I tried not to cringe when he kept wincing at my exchange with Matt.

“You’re as hot headed as he is,” Tanner said.

I laughed. “I am not.”

“He said some terrible things. But he was just lashing out because of what you said.”

“I called him a man whore. Which is true.”

“I’m not talking about that. Brooklyn.” He grabbed my hand so I’d stop ruining the batter. “I know you’re still in love with Miller.”

“Of course I am.”

“But do you really think you need to keep saying that over and over again to Matt?”

“I didn’t say it over and over again.”

Tanner just stared at me.

“He needs to understand.”

“Trust me, Matt knows you loved Miller or you wouldn’t have married the guy. You don’t have to keep telling Matt how much. Put yourself in his shoes. How would that make you feel? How did it feel when you found out he was dating Kennedy?”

“I tried really hard to be okay with it. But...it hurt like hell.”

“Exactly.”

“I wasn’t trying to rub my happiness in his face. I was just...”

“Trying to stay loyal to Miller.”

My shoulders slumped. “You say it like it’s a bad thing. He’s my husband.”

“Trust me, I understand. But he’s gone. And you told me yourself what was in that letter he left you. He wanted you to be happy. He wasn’t just giving you permission to do so. He made you promise you’d do it.”

I blinked away the tears in my eyes as I poured my batter into cupcake tins. I didn’t say another word as I put them in the oven. I stayed silent as I wiped down the counter.

“Brooklyn,” Tanner finally said, breaking the silence.

I ignored him and put the dirty dishes in the sink.

“Hey,” he said and grabbed the bowl out of my hands.

“I can’t ask Matt to be the person to console me while I mourn everything I lost.”

“Why? He understands better than anyone what you’re going through. He lost you.”

I bit my lip. Matt had said the same thing to me. And I felt terrible for telling him he didn’t understand. Of course he did. He thought I’d died. And I knew he was telling the truth when he said that it killed him too. I think that’s what I regretted the most about our conversation. Belittling his pain. “Well...” I looked up at Tanner “You understand too.”

“I’m happy to hang out with you whenever you need a shoulder to cry on. Or when you need a minute alone, I’m

happy to come over and watch my grandson. But we both know hanging out with me isn't what you need right now."

"Did you just call Jacob your grandson?" I said with a smile.

"He calls me Abuelo."

"Yeah, but he's four."

Tanner shrugged. "I don't want to confuse him."

Actually, it didn't seem like that was the reason to me. Tanner hadn't once talked about any family. Other than mentioning that he lost the girl he loved when he was a teenager. I think he was lonely. "I think maybe you like hanging out with me as much as I like hanging out with you."

"Stop hitting on me, woman. You're destined to be with my best friend."

I laughed. "I'm not hitting on you. But I don't know if I'm destined to be with Matt."

"Well, luckily I know it. And I'm 99 percent sure of it."

"You're so weird."

"I've tried living a normal life. It was extremely overrated."

I couldn't imagine Tanner living an ordinary life. And I hoped he found someone else to love. Because he looked so sad when he thought people weren't looking. I swallowed hard. Why was it so easy to see what he needed? But so hard to admit that I needed it too? I didn't want to walk around sad for the rest of my life.

"The guilt will ease," Tanner said, like he could tell what I was thinking. "But if you wait for it to go away completely...your whole life will pass you by. And where's the fun in that?"

“I think we’re both good at giving advice but bad at taking it.”

Tanner laughed. “Oh, I think I’ve almost convinced you. And I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Now, what kind of sweet treat are my grandson and I about to partake in? It smells delicious.”

I took a deep breath. It smelled like cinnamon. It smelled like Matt. It smelled like home.

Chapter 15

Sunday

Matt

Tanner tried to call me again as I walked down the long hallway. I'd texted him and told him to meet me at James' place in an hour. Nigel too. They were both assholes. All my friends were. And I needed to get rid of the anger coursing through my veins.

I just had one stop to make before I yelled at all of them. I reached Mr. Pruitt's door and pounded my fist against it. "Open up, you piece of shit!" I yelled.

Part of me didn't expect him to answer.

I hit the door louder this time. "Mr. Pruitt! Open the fucking door!"

One of his bodyguards opened the door. The one that had opened the door the day I was told Brooklyn was dead. I remembered the tears on his face. He believed Mr. Pruitt's lies too. Or else he was a great actor.

"Where is he?" I said.

"We both know I can't let you in when you're acting like this."

Acting like what? I cracked my neck to the side. I wasn't acting. I was about to beat the shit out of this guy.

"It's fine," Mr. Pruitt said, as he joined his henchman at the door. "I was thinking you might be paying me a visit soon. It certainly took you long enough."

My hands were around his throat in two seconds flat. I shoved his back against the wall. Mr. Pruitt looked neither shocked nor scared that I was about to kill him.

“Enough,” the bodyguard said and pulled me back.

I shoved him off of me. He wasn't that much bigger than me. But I knew he probably had training that I didn't. I wasn't trying to die. I just wanted to kill Brooklyn's ass of a father.

My chest rose and fell as I stared at him. It looked like I wasn't the only one who wanted to hurt him. There were bruises fading in the corners of his eyes. Someone had tried to break his nose. I was going to finish the job. “Seriously, Mr. Pruitt? You couldn't have told me via text that Brooklyn was alive?”

“I thought it would be better in person.” He straightened his tie. “And you didn't seem all that interested.”

“I wasn't interested in talking to you because I thought you murdered my fiancée!”

“She gave me the kidney willingly. Why does everyone keep making it sound so terrible?”

“You saw me at the funeral. You saw me at all those stupid functions. You knew how hard I was taking it. Why the hell wouldn't you tell me?”

“As I said...you didn't seem that interested in what I had to say, or you would have texted me back. And honestly, I never thought you were a good fit for my daughter. I was always trying to encourage her to date your brother instead.”

Was he fucking joking? “So that's why you lied to her and told her I asked for her ring back? And told her that I didn't speak

at her funeral? You were trying to make her hate me. How could you do that? How could you manipulate her that way?"

"I did what I thought was best. And you weren't the best fit for her."

"You seriously thought one of your trained dogs was a better fit?"

"Watch it," his bodyguard said. "Miller was my friend."

"Miller was highly trained to protect my daughter," Mr. Pruitt said. "And she needed protection. If I recall correctly, half the time you were together you were dating her in secret. You weren't exactly at the top of my list of contenders to keep her safe."

"We were engaged. She was living with me. I was keeping her safe."

"And yet...she died during that time." He put 'died' in air quotes. "So really, you didn't keep her safe at all."

"You're the one that did that, you fucking maniac!"

"No, I stepped up and protected my daughter. Because I love her."

"If you wanted to protect Brooklyn you should have locked Isabella up in a psych ward!"

"I did. For a time. I thought she was better. Even James agreed she was better."

"James was high out of his mind when he married Isabella."

Mr. Pruitt shrugged. "That's not really any of my concern. Speaking of marriage. Does your intrusion mean your engagement to Poppy is in fact all a ruse?"

“She’s as crazy as Isabella. Of course it’s a ruse.”

“Interesting. I expected as much. Blackmail, I presume?”

“She’s threatening James’ daughter. She wants to take over the family business. She thought you were worried about her lack of finance skills. And apparently dating me would help that. Not that I’d ever touch your dirty money.”

“I never wanted you to be a part of my business. Another one of the reasons I wanted Brooklyn to be with someone else.”

“Fuck you.”

“Watch your language. My property. My rules.”

I wasn’t here to be reprimanded. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to give your business to Poppy. Because she actually wants it, unlike Brooklyn. And you’re going to get her to sign the contract I sent over, which just agrees that she’ll never hurt anyone in my life. And then you’re going to leave me and Brooklyn the hell alone. And her son.” I swallowed down the lump in my throat at saying those words. She had a kid.

Mr. Pruitt smiled at me. “Done.”

Wait, what? “You’re going to step down?”

“I stepped down yesterday. As per my daughter’s request. She said I couldn’t be in her life or my grandson’s unless I wasn’t part of this business. So I am no longer part of this business.”

“You’re really done?”

“I am. Now back to that last thing you said. You, Brooklyn, and my grandson... Is that the future you see?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Brooklyn and my grandson are my only living heirs. Of course their future is my business. Are you planning on marrying her and adopting my grandson?”

“Of course I am.” I didn’t even hesitate to respond. I wouldn’t be here telling him to fuck off if I wasn’t planning that. And yeah, Brooklyn and I just had a fight. But that’s what we did. We fought and made up. And I hated that she had a kid with someone else. But I didn’t hate that she had a child. I loved kids. I’d always wanted a big family. He was a piece of her. And that meant I was going to love him too.

“It just so happens that your relationship contract is still signed and sitting in my desk. So you have my agreement. I owe you an apology, though.”

“You think?”

“Not for faking Brooklyn’s death. More what happened leading up to it. As I’ve said, I didn’t think you were a suitable match. I knew I was going to fake her death all along. I was just waiting to convince her to pull the trigger on my plan. I never intended to let you marry my daughter. Your parents were just trying to distance themselves from my good name. And I wasn’t going to allow it.”

“What the hell? You knew she was excited. You knew...”

“No, what I knew was that she was 16 years old. Which was too young to make a lifelong decision. And that she was mine to protect.”

“Brooklyn is not an object. She’s not *yours*.” I clenched my jaw. But wasn’t that how I thought of her too? As mine?

“I’ve said my apology. You can have her hand now, if you want.”

I just stared at him. “So she was too young to marry me? But you didn’t care that she was shacking up with Miller when she was the same age?”

“Yes, but as I said before...Miller could protect her. And even though I wasn’t 100 percent certain of his loyalties to me, I was 100 percent certain of his loyalties to her. After all, Brooklyn wasn’t the only one who died 16 years ago. Miller agreed to be dead too. He agreed to disappear for her. They always had a bond. Since they spent so much time together here. She slept more in his bed here than in hers.”

I stared at him. Was he saying they slept together when Brooklyn lived here? In this apartment? “They were together before?”

“She used to sneak off to the servants’ floor when she first moved in. Probably during one of the times you were ignoring her existence in public.”

She’d told me she didn’t kiss him at the beach house. She’d told me she was loyal to me. She... *Fuck*. I remembered now. She’d told me she kissed someone else one of the times we fought in high school. She’d tried to tell me and I cut her off. I’d told her I didn’t want to know. But it was Miller. She’d always liked Miller. But it didn’t change anything. She’d felt alone here too. Isolated. She’d run to him because he made her feel safe. It was all so twisted and fucked up.

“Did you not know?”

I cleared my throat. “She told me.”

“Good, good. So...” his voice trailed off. “I guess you’ll be my son-in-law after all.”

I shook my head. “She wants nothing to do with you.”

“No, she told me that I couldn’t be in her life if I continued running my business. I gave it up. For her.”

I wasn’t sure that was going to be enough. But I was surprised he’d listened to her. He was used to controlling everything.

“And for what it’s worth,” he said. “I approve now. You have a good head on your shoulders, Matthew. You took over your father’s company. You’re an adult now.”

Condescending prick.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a lot to do. Welcome back to the family, Matthew.”

I hated everything about that sentence.

I knocked on James and Penny’s door.

Rob opened it. “Great, you came. We were just talking about what we should do for Penny’s birthday...” his voice trailed off. “Shit, you’re still mad, huh?”

“Of course I’m still mad.” I walked past him.

“Is that why you invited Tanner?”

I ignored Rob and walked into the great room. All my friends were here. Plus Tyler, Hailey, Ian, and Jen. They weren’t really part of this, but fuck it. And it wasn’t exactly fair, but I was a little pissed at Jen right now too. If Brooklyn hadn’t seen us in that pool... I sighed. No, that definitely wasn’t fair. But I was

just really angry about everything. And Tanner was right, apparently I was hot headed.

“Get over there,” I said to Rob.

“Why?”

“Because we’re having a reverse intervention.” The kids must have been upstairs playing. Which was good. Because there was a good chance I was about to curse.

Rob shrugged and joined everyone else in the room. So that I was standing alone. I took a deep breath. Just one to try to calm down. It did not help. “What the hell is wrong with all of you?” I said. The four people who didn’t know what was going on all looked confused. But everyone else looked really guilty. Except for Tanner. He just shook his head like he’d known what was coming. Since he’d predicted it.

“Matt...” James started.

“You of all people, James. You took Brooklyn’s death almost as hard as me. Why would you lie to me about her being back? Why would any of you lie? You should have come to me right away. And maybe not blindsided me by playing that stupid fucking song at homecoming and making me feel like I was insane.”

“You’re right,” Nigel said. “It’s not a very good song. I prefer instrumental music.” He wandered over to my side of the room.

“Get back over there,” I said.

“But I’m on your side. I’m not one of the bad friends.”

“Nigel.” I pointed to the couch and he sulked back over. I looked at James. “Seriously, James. You know how fucked up I was. How fucked up I still am over all this. You just had a freaking intervention for me because you thought I was depressed. So when the one person who could fix me reappeared in the city, you thought it was better to not say a word to me? Did you just want to keep her to yourself?”

James lowered his eyebrows at me. It looked like he was a few seconds away from walking up to me and taking a swing. “I’m happily married, Matt.”

“So rub it in my face why don’t you!”

“You know what I meant! I’m not trying to steal Brooklyn away from you. Are you insane?”

Honestly I kind of felt insane right now. I saw Penny staring up at James. Did she know that James had a crush on Brooklyn in high school? Had he filled her in? I’d made him promise not to tell her. But he’d had time now. And Penny deserved to know the truth. “He proposed to Brooklyn in high school. Did you know that?” I asked.

Penny folded her arms across her chest and stared at me like she stared at Scarlett when Scarlett was being naughty. “Yes, he told me. We talked all about Brooklyn after you finally told me about her. And you’re right, James took her death almost as hard as you. So *you of all people* can imagine how much pain and stress it’s caused him over the years to not talk about her with anyone. Especially me. Because you asked him to stay silent. Because he’s a good friend. And loyal to you. Like we all are.” She gestured toward the rest of our friends.

“And no, I don’t know Brooklyn very well,” she said, not giving me a chance to talk. “But her story wasn’t mine to tell. It’s her own. She needed to tell you in her own way. And we only knew she was back for a few days. A few days when she had 16 freaking years to explain. Sixteen years that hurt James too. And Rob. And Mason. So don’t you dare stand there and yell at my husband for doing his best to be a good friend to you when he’s been struggling too!”

Penny never shouted at me. Ever.

Mason whistled. Bee elbowed his side.

“You’re supposed to have my back, man,” I said to Mason.

“Brooklyn was outside MAC International when I ran into her. And as soon as she saw me she had a panic attack.”

I winced.

“If she couldn’t handle seeing me yet, she wasn’t ready to see you.”

“No,” Nigel said and joined me by my side. “You’re all terrible friends. You should have told Matt right away. He deserved to know the truth!”

Damn right, Nigel. Wait... “Nigel, you knew too and didn’t tell me.”

“I did tell you. I told you there was a new player in town. I even had pictures but you didn’t want to see them. Of Poppy and Mr. Pruitt and Brooklyn having a rendezvous.”

“What?”

“Our special night. When we were in the warehouse together. Faxing things.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Mason said.

“Is that like a sex thing?” Rob asked.

“No,” I said. “We were faxing.”

“In a warehouse?” Rob said. “That definitely sounds like a gay sex thing.”

“There was a fax machine...” my voice trailed off. “It’s not important.”

“But we love fax machines, don’t we Master Matthew?”

“Get back over to that side of the room.”

“But...”

“I’m mad at you too.”

“But...”

“Nigel!”

He sulked back over to the couch.

“Brooklyn’s death hurt me too,” James said. “You know that. And I wanted to call you right away. I didn’t even know at first. Scarlett and Brooklyn’s son hit it off at the zoo. Penny had no idea it was Brooklyn when she invited them over to our house for lunch. And as soon as I saw her...I actually did call you. But Brooklyn convinced me to hang up. To hear her out. Her dying hurt me too. It really messed me up.”

I knew that.

“I needed answers just as badly as you. And when I heard her story...I knew you needed to hear it from her. I didn’t want to go behind her back when she only just came back into our lives. We already lost her once.”

“It’s funny,” Rob said. “I invited you over here that day. It was hotdog day and I was coming for lunch. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“This could have all been prevented if you had a more flexible work schedule like me. And you can’t be mad at me, Matt. They were already all sworn to secrecy when I walked in here and saw her. And why are we even fighting right now?” He smiled. “Sanders is back. Shouldn’t we be celebrating? Shouldn’t she be here for the game?”

They all stared at me, waiting for me to respond. I cleared my throat. “We had a fight.”

Tanner sighed. “What did you do?”

“What did I do? She got married. She has a kid. She broke all her promises to me.”

“But she thought you moved on,” Penny said. “She saw you.”

I knew that. I knew this was somehow all my fault. Because I didn’t mourn the way Brooklyn mourned. And that wasn’t fair. So what that I fucked Jen? It meant nothing. Brooklyn hadn’t given me a chance to tell her that. She just ran away. She left me to fucking drown.

“She had a kid with someone else,” I said again. Like saying it again might make me believe it. Might make the pain in my chest less intense.

“But you’re great with kids,” Penny said. “You just told me you want a big family.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Because Penny wanted a big family too and she couldn’t have any more kids. And it didn’t

really matter that Brooklyn's son wasn't my blood. Because he was her blood. I looked down at my shoes. I'd meant what I said to Mr. Pruitt. I was going to marry Brooklyn. And I was going to adopt her son. She just didn't know any of that yet because I hadn't gotten a chance to calm down.

"We both know what you said," Tanner said calmly.

"How do you know what I said?"

"Because I spoke to Brooklyn right after..."

"Stop interfering in my life, Tanner! How many fucking times do I have to tell you that!"

"I kind of want to know what he said to her," Rob said.

Tanner turned to him. "He told her that she broke all her promises. That she had Stockholm syndrome when she got married. And that her son's father was a mobster."

Penny looked so disappointed in me.

"And then she slapped him."

"Well that's good," Rob said. "Sounds like he deserved that one."

I glared at him.

"Oh it gets better," Tanner said. "Then she said he didn't keep his promises either. That he whored around New York."

Rob laughed.

"Then she told him to go to hell. He told her to run away like she always does."

Fuck, I did say that. Why the hell had I said that?

"And she told him to fuck away his pain, like he always does."

Rob laughed again. “So accurate. Does that mean she’s not coming to the game today then?”

“No.” I shoved my hands into my pockets. “I doubt she’s speaking to me at all.”

“The Stockholm syndrome thing isn’t that off base,” James said. “She was locked up with that guy.”

Penny shook her head. “*That guy* was her husband, James. That’s like saying we’re only together because you were my authority figure and took advantage of me. Come on.”

“I mean...he kind of did,” Rob said.

“Stop it, Rob.” She turned back to me. “And I get that you’re hurting, Matt, but really? Brooklyn thought you moved on, so she moved on. It happened. No one can change it. And telling her that her love wasn’t real isn’t going to fix anything. It’s just going to make her loss feel worse. She’s hurting. She...”

“You think I don’t know that? It kills me that she’s hurting. But it kills me that she’s thinking about another guy when I try to console her. She doesn’t want me anymore. She wants him.”

“That’s not it exactly,” Tanner said. “It’s more that she feels guilty for wanting you to be her shoulder to cry on. She feels like she’s betraying Miller. More so because her feelings for you are so strong.”

I hated that she was talking to Tanner instead of me.

“There was one more thing she said...right?” He just kept staring at me when I didn’t fill in the blank for everything.

“She still loves you, Matt. And you still love her. So what are you doing yelling at us? *Go to her.*”

Rob laughed at the way he said ‘*go to her.*’

“I think she needs some time to cool down,” I said.

“That’s the problem with time,” Tanner said. “For most people there’s never enough of it. And for some there’s too much.”

What the hell did he mean by that?

Tanner sighed, grabbed the remote, and turned on the football game even though I knew he wasn’t really going to watch it. But it meant that he was done with this conversation.

Tyler cleared his throat. “So...um...who’s Brooklyn?”

James looked over at me, like he was wondering if I’d tell the story.

“Come on,” Penny said and grabbed my arm. “Sit down and relax for a bit. Tell us more stories. And maybe we can all strategize on how you can win her back.”

“I thought we agreed that you’re a terrible matchmaker. And aren’t you mad at me? You just stern talked me in your mom voice.”

“Only because you yelled at James. This is a messy situation, but I really think we can figure out a way to fix it.”

I nodded. I needed all the help I could get. My stomach was twisted up in knots. My chest hurt as much as it did those first few months after Brooklyn’s death. I felt physically sick. I wanted Brooklyn back. And that meant I needed to come to terms with what she’d done in her absence. What I’d done. How much we’d both messed up. Especially since Brooklyn wasn’t willing to admit that what she’d done was a mistake. I think that’s what hurt the most.

Chapter 16

Sunday

Brooklyn

I remembered fake smiling back in California. I remembered truly believing that happiness was just a bonus in life. Not a necessity.

I never wanted to fake smile again.

And being back in New York City was nothing like the beach in California. But this house did feel like it was taking away some of my pain. Like maybe my time here would give me clarity like my time in California did. I let my feelings for Matt fade there. And my feelings for Miller grow.

I didn't want Miller to fade away. I wouldn't let him. I wanted to remember our time forever. But that didn't mean I couldn't let my feelings for Matt grow.

I looked down at my phone. I wanted to text him. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for mentioning how much I loved Miller a thousand times.

But Matt had said some terrible things too.

I placed my phone down on the kitchen counter. I told Matt I was sorry for hurting him. I apologized. And yeah, I yelled at him about sleeping with half of New York. But what he'd said to me was worse. Stockholm syndrome? Really? He was discounting half my life. He was diminishing everything I'd built. And yes, Miller had worked for my father. But he gave it

up. Jacob's father wasn't a mobster. Miller was a wonderful person. Everyone was allowed a clean slate.

That included Matt though. I drummed my fingers along the granite as I stared at my phone. The real problem was that I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to repair 16 years of damage. I wasn't even sure it was possible.

And I'd already baked cupcakes and two dozen cookies that we didn't need as I processed all this. And cleaned the whole kitchen. I would have distracted my pestering thoughts by playing with Jacob, but he was taking a nap. There was someone else I needed to talk to though.

I grabbed my phone and hit Kennedy's name before I could chicken out.

It rang, and rang, and rang. Just when I thought it would go to voicemail she picked up.

"Hey, Brooklyn! Please tell me the two of you are back together."

I thought she'd sound...upset. She had every right to be mad at Matt. And definitely every right to be mad at me. I'd specifically told her I was okay with them dating. Why did she sound so *not* upset? "Um...no."

"What do you mean no?"

"I mean...it's complicated. I was married. I have a son. He's angry with me. Just like you should be angry with me."

"I'm not mad at you," Kennedy said. "You should be mad at me. I..."

“Kennedy, I told you it was fine that you dated Matt. And I tried to be fine with it. I thought I was fine. But when I saw him at the game. And then that song came on? It felt...it felt...”

“Like maybe you never got over him?”

“Yeah. That.”

“Yeah,” she said. Her cheery tone was gone. And I realized it had probably been over the top for my benefit. But I didn’t want to sugarcoat anything. She didn’t need to pretend around me.

We were both quiet.

“Are you still in love with him?” I asked.

Kennedy sighed. “I think I had it all backwards. I love Matt. I’ve always loved him like a friend. And I was missing you...” her voice trailed off. “We hung out a lot after you died. We kind of held each other together, if that makes any sense. And I think maybe I mixed up loving him as a friend and loving him as more than a friend.”

“Or maybe you didn’t.”

“No, I definitely did. He’s my friend. He’s supposed to come to me when he’s missing you. And I’m supposed to steal all his fries. That’s how we work. Besides, I don’t really think I was meant to be anyone’s girlfriend. If you haven’t noticed, I’m not the most social person.” She laughed.

But I didn’t think it was funny. It felt like she was shrinking away from me again. Just like she had in high school after Cupcake took advantage of her. My heart hurt just thinking about it. I didn’t want her to disappear on herself. “I don’t

think that's true, Kennedy. I think you choose not to let many people into your life. Because most people haven't earned your trust. But the people you do let in? You love them fiercely."

"Maybe."

"Definitely. But just because you love me doesn't mean you can't be mad at me. And you can't be scared to be mad at me just because the last time that happened I disappeared. You can yell at me. Curse at me. Tell me I'm a terrible friend. Because I am."

"You're not."

"Yes I am. But I didn't mean to be. I really thought I was over him."

"I'm the bad friend. Because I know you said you were over him. But I know you. And I knew you weren't, even if you thought you were. And I tried to stay away from him, but I kissed him a few times since you were back. I wore his freaking jersey to the homecoming game. And I knew, Brooklyn. I knew you'd eventually want him back. I just... I..." her voice trailed off. "He made me feel..."

"I know. He has a way of doing that."

Kennedy sighed. "Matthew freaking Caldwell. What on earth was I thinking?"

I laughed. "I've had that exact same thought."

We were both quiet again. And I didn't know what to say. Kennedy was hurting, but I couldn't make it better. Because I wasn't willing to give Matt up. Because I really did still love him.

“I tried to fight my feelings,” I said. “For so many years I told myself I didn’t love him anymore. But it took me all of two seconds of seeing his face to make me realize I was just pretending.”

“So why aren’t you too together right now?”

“Because every time we talk we fight.”

“You guys always fought a lot,” Kennedy said. “But you also always made up.”

Matt had said that too. That we fought and then we made up. That we always had. Until I’d decided to walk away. And I’d just walked away from him again.

“Look,” Kennedy said. “I’m on my last container of ice cream. And I didn’t eat three pints over the past 24 hours feeling sorry for myself just for the two of you to not wind up together. I’ve sacrificed my stomach. I’m committed to your happily ever after.”

“I’m committed to yours too.”

“Well, despite what you and Tanner think, I don’t need that.”

“Tanner?”

“Yeah, he keeps texting me, trying to get me to go on a date.”

I smiled. “Kennedy, that’s wonderful! Tanner is such a great guy. I think the two of you would make a great couple.” And the best part was that I loved Tanner too. And apparently he was Matt’s best friend now. We could go on double dates. I pressed my lips together. It was weird how I just pictured that so easily. Like Matt and I were already back together.

Kennedy laughed. “He’s not trying to get me to go on a date with him. He wants me to meet up with Felix.”

“Oh.” I smiled. “Well, perfect. I see that too.”

“Really?”

“Of course really. Felix always liked you.”

“I don’t know...”

“Why don’t you go on the date and just see if you still have feelings for him?”

“Did I not just tell you I ate three pints of ice cream in 24 hours? I’m not exactly ready to go on a date right now. And Felix? Really? If that was going to happen, it would have in high school.”

“It sounds like maybe you were busy being Matt’s shoulder to cry on. Thank you for that by the way. For taking care of him.”

“I knew it’s what you would have wanted. God, it’s so weird talking about you like you were dead. Or maybe it’s weird talking to you like you’re alive? All of it’s just so weird. And this whole situation with Matt is weird. I’m really sorry I dated your fiancé.”

“He wasn’t my fiancé anymore.”

“Yeah but...he kind of was. We spent most of our time talking about you. You’re what we had in common. You’re the only thing we had in common, really. It was just nice having someone to talk to.”

I got that. Miller had been my shoulder to cry on when I thought about Matt. He was my sounding board. And that had brought us closer somehow too. I knew that Matt and Kennedy

had more in common than just reminiscing about me. But honestly, I didn't want to hear about it.

Tanner was right. I hated the idea of Matt with someone else. I needed to put myself in his shoes. He was allowed to be upset about Miller. I did understand.

"Promise me you'll figure this thing out with Matt," Kennedy said.

"If you promise to go on that date with Felix."

Kennedy groaned. "Maybe."

That was probably the best I could do with Matt too. Because honestly? I wasn't sure I'd forgive myself in this situation.

"It's a maybe for me too."

"He still loves you," Kennedy said. "I know that for sure. He was a mess when I came back to New York. The first time we hung out one on one it was because I gave him a key to your old apartment. And he didn't want to be alone because it hurt too much. All we did was talk about you. And missing you. And all our regrets. The love he has for you is so big. There are no two people in this world that I think are more deserving of happiness. It's you and him. And you're meant to be together."

I wiped the tears off my cheeks. "Thanks, Kennedy."

"I gotta go. I have a few photo shoots today. But maybe I can come see your new place sometime this week? My mom keeps going on and on about how beautiful it is."

"Yeah, that would be great." I exhaled slowly. We were okay. I was so worried that she'd be angry with me too. "Go kick ass and take some amazing photos."

“Go make up with Matt.”

I laughed.

“Love you,” she said.

“Love you too.” I hung up and smiled. Kennedy didn’t hate me. I already felt a little lighter. And I was pretty sure that Kennedy and Tanner were both right. Matt and I were meant to be together.

But maybe not right this second. Because I was still hurt about what he said to me about Miller. He even had the audacity to imply that Miller was still working for my father. I could try to stop talking about Miller as much in front of Matt. But Matt also needed to accept the fact that I had loved Miller. Or else I wasn’t sure how we could move forward.

I wandered upstairs and changed into a pair of old leggings and a sweatshirt. And then I went out back and looked at my tomato plants. I still needed to look at outdoor space heaters for them.

And not for lack of trying, I hadn’t figured out how to hang up the lights back here. I needed to hire someone. I didn’t just have a Miller-sized hole in my heart. I had a Miller-sized hole in my life.

I crouched down in front of one of the planters. I’d also gotten some flower seeds to plant. I didn’t care that it was the wrong season. I felt better when my hands were in the dirt.

Chapter 17

Sunday

Matt

I felt better when I was around my friends. It was easy to laugh and pretend that everything was normal with them.

But as soon as I left James' place, it felt like there was a knife in my chest. Slowly twisting. I gripped my steering wheel tighter and made a turn that didn't head back to Tanner's.

I needed some time alone. With the old Brooklyn. The one that actually loved me. I couldn't go to Empire High or the graveyard. The real Brooklyn had shown up to both of those places. I felt bad about what I'd said to her. But I wasn't ready to apologize yet. I was still so mad at her.

Mad that she'd moved on. Mad that she hadn't given me a chance to explain 15 years ago. Mad about all the time we'd lost. Mad about her son. I shook away that last thought.

I wasn't mad that she had a child. I was curious, though. I wanted to meet him. I wanted to see if he looked like her. I wanted him to like me.

She said he was four. Scarlett and Sophie would be four soon. The three of them could hang out. It kind of all...fit.

But what if I saw her kid and just saw her husband? What if it was hard to look at him without feeling like Brooklyn betrayed me? Yeah, I just needed some time to calm down. I needed to

talk to the version of her I remembered. Not at Empire High and not at the graveyard. I only had one other place.

I pulled up outside my townhouse. I hadn't been there in weeks. My real estate agent, Bill, said the place would go fast, but I hadn't heard from him. Maybe it was a harder sell than he imagined. Or maybe someone had seen my "serial killer lair" as Tanner put it, and it scared potential buyers off. That's why I was here tonight. My room where I painted was where I felt closest to her. It wasn't that long ago that I'd fallen asleep on the hardwood floor in my studio, wishing she could still be alive.

I'd gotten my wish. So why did it still feel like it was hard to breathe?

I walked up the stairs and unlocked the front door. I was greeted by the aroma of freshly baked cookies. I smiled and took a deep breath. It smelled like my mom's kitchen. I glanced into the family room where there was all new furniture. There were even some toys strewn on the floor.

I told Bill it was a family home. That I wanted to sell it because it wasn't meant for me anymore. It seemed like the stagers he hired had leaned in a little too hard to that vibe. But I just stood there, smiling. Because I could picture it. I wouldn't allow myself to before. But I could picture Brooklyn here. I could picture a whole family with her in this house.

I exhaled slowly. I'd already agreed to sell it. And I didn't know what kind of house Brooklyn would want. But she'd lived on a lake for years. She might not even want to live in the city. I couldn't imagine leaving my family and friends and moving somewhere else though.

And I wasn't even sure why I was thinking about any of this. I wasn't sure if anything about Brooklyn and me made sense anymore. We were so different from who we were in high school. That's why I was here. To talk to the old her. The one that made sense in my head. The one that didn't yell at me whenever I tried to talk. I'd grown really used to her listening to my pain. Not throwing it back in my face. Not saying her pain was greater. That wasn't fair. She said I didn't understand. But I did. I lost her. It didn't matter that she was back. I lost the her I knew.

I walked toward the stairs and froze when I heard a noise in the backyard. It sounded like something scratching across the stone patio.

My heart hammered against my chest as I walked over to the back door. I opened the closet to grab something to use as a weapon, but it was empty. Because Nigel had taken all my stuff from the house. I cursed under my breath as I heard the noise again.

Honestly, I hoped it was an intruder. I was pretty sure I'd feel better if I got to punch something. I threw open the door and stepped out onto the patio, ready to attack whoever was back there. But my breath caught in my throat. "Brooklyn?"

She let go of the huge pot she was trying to move and spun around. "Matt? What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, smearing dirt across her face. "This is my house."

"No, this is *my* house." And why the hell was she in it?

“What?”

I looked over at the planters she'd dug up. And the tree that she'd repotted in a pot that was too heavy for her to move herself. Why was she here? Why was she messing up my yard? Why hadn't she shown up during the last 16 years when I'd wanted her to? And why had she started showing up now when I just needed one second to myself?

I looked over my shoulder. *Fuck*. Had she seen the paintings of her? I felt like I was going to throw up. I didn't want her to see them and think I was sick in the head. Tanner called it my serial killer lair for a reason.

“You weren't supposed to see this,” I said.

“See what?”

“Any of this.” The family house I built for her without realizing it. This wasn't for her now. This was for who she used to be. It was for a ghost. She wouldn't even fucking want this now. She wanted Miller. Not me.

“I'm sorry, Tanner said it was available...” her voice trailed off.

Fucking Tanner. I'd forgotten that he bought Bill's real estate company. That's how he'd gotten Kennedy back to New York City. So he'd set this all up to... Put a family that didn't need me into my house? Was this some kind of cruel joke? I was going to kill him.

“Did you see it?” I asked.

“See what?”

“Don’t play dumb, Brooklyn.” It was like something snapped inside of me. She couldn’t be here. Not here. This was the one place I didn’t want her. She was going to think I’d lost my mind. And hadn’t I? I wanted to pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless. But I also wanted to lift her over my shoulder and carry her out of *my* damn house.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Why are you so upset?”

“Because you robbed me of half my life, Brooklyn!”

She glared at me. “What exactly did *I* rob *you* of? Because I didn’t get to finish high school in person. I never got to go to prom. Or graduation. I never went to college. I never got any of those experiences. You got all of it.”

“And you think I enjoyed any of that without you? You’re making me out to be a monster. But that’s you, Brooklyn. You chose a kidnapper over me. You’re the fucking monster here.”

She slapped me. I should have expected it. She’d done that earlier. But now that we weren’t in the middle of Central Park, my reaction to it was a lot different. My dick stirred from the heat on my cheek. I couldn’t even help it. I’d obsessed over her for years. And now she was here.

I was pretty sure she felt the way the air had just shifted between us too. Because instead of hurling more insults at me, her eyes fell to my lips.

I pushed her backward, caging her in against the side of the house. “Hit me again. I dare you.” I wanted her to. I just liked when she touched me. Her skin on my skin made me feel alive.

“Matt...” her voice sounded as broken as I felt.

I slammed my lips against hers. I was so fucking mad at her for everything she'd done. And this was the only way I knew how to make it better. To feel closer to her. I bit down on her lip hard, but she just kissed me back. Like she wanted to feel my pain.

I palmed one of her breasts through her sweatshirt. Probably a little too hard. But I just needed to touch her.

She didn't seem to mind though. She just stood up on her tiptoes to deepen the kiss.

I needed this. I needed her. But there was a nagging thought in the back of my head. What if this was the only way we fit now? Hurting each other and then fucking that hurt out of our systems. I didn't know how to stop hurting. I'd meant what I'd told her the other day. She'd ruined my fucking life. And a part of me just wanted to ruin her back. I found her nipple through the fabric and tugged it. So hard it probably hurt her. She should have been begging me for forgiveness. Not fucking torturing me.

She moaned as she hit her fist against my chest. Like she wanted to hurt me too.

Didn't she realize she'd already done enough of that? But she could hit me as much as she wanted. She could slap me a thousand times if that's what she needed. Hell, I wanted her to hurt too. To make her feel as badly as I felt. But that wouldn't make it better. Only this would.

I grabbed the waistband of her leggings to pull them down, but I ended up ripping the material.

She gasped as I grabbed her thighs and hoisted her up.

We'd fought a lot back in high school. And this was always how we made up. Well, not exactly like this. I was gentle with her back in high school. But she wasn't the same girl. And I was done treating her like she was perfect. I'd put her on a pedestal for half my life. But she didn't belong there. She belonged right here with me. And I was done showing restraint with her.

I pushed her thong to the side and thrust inside of her, not bothering to warm her up. "Does that hurt, baby? Now you know how I feel."

She moaned.

Of course it didn't hurt. Because despite what she said, she still wanted me. She still needed me. And she was fucking soaked. Greedy for my cock like always. Maybe she'd decided I wasn't what was best for her. But her pussy still wanted me.

She buried her dirty hands in my hair, pulling me closer.

I kissed her like her breaths were the only sustenance I needed. I was greedy for her. I wanted her naked in my bed so I could kiss every inch of her skin. So I could remember what I'd been missing. But right now, I just needed to stop hurting.

I slammed into her harder, not caring if her ass was scratching against the stone wall. God I loved the weight of her perfect ass in my hands. I didn't want to ever let go.

I closed my eyes like I always did when I fucked. And I realized I did that so I could picture her when I was with other women. But I didn't need to imagine her right now. I opened my eyes and stared down at her. I half expected her to have her

eyes closed. Imagining she was fucking her husband. But she was staring back at me.

I dropped my lips to her ear. “Did you ever think about me like this when we were apart?”

She moaned.

“Did you miss my mouth on your sweet pussy?”

“Matt...”

“Did you miss my cock? It really feels like you missed it, baby.”

She moaned, the sound reverberating through her, making her clench around my cock.

Fuck. God, I’d missed this. Nothing felt as good as being deep inside of her. “I thought about you when I jerked off in the shower. I pictured you on your knees. You were frozen forever at 16 in my mind.” I kissed down the side of her neck, her skin pebbling from the sensation. “Picturing you like that? I’m fucked in the head.”

Her fingers dug in to my back like she couldn’t get close enough. She liked that I’d pictured her on her knees all these years. She liked having a hold on me.

“Nothing turned me on like the images of you in my head. You’re not the monster. I am.” I kissed her neck and then sucked on it hard, marking her. “You’re mine, Brooklyn. You’re fucking mine.”

She tightened her legs around my waist.

“Say it.”

She just moaned.

“Say that you’re mine. Say it.” I tugged on her nipple again as I slammed into her harder. Fuck, how had I ever lived without this girl? How had I kept going?

The anger was suddenly gone in my chest. Fucking didn’t help. Everything still hurt. She wasn’t mine. I dropped my forehead to hers as I slowed my pace. Slowly in and out. I remembered us like this. Making love tangled in my sheets. My ring on her finger.

Say it, baby. Please just fucking say it.

I slowed my pace even more. Savoring her warmth. Savoring her wetness. Savoring how perfectly she gripped my cock. Just savoring this moment. Because I knew moments were fleeting.

“I’m yours,” she whispered against my lips.

I exhaled slowly. She was still mine. I ran my hand down her baggy sweatshirt until I reached her bare skin. “Say it again.” I ran my thumb across her clit as I slowed my pace even more.

“I’m yours, Matt.” Her voice cracked.

I pressed my lips against hers, tasting the salt from her tears. I knew I’d pushed her. I knew it was hard for her to say those words. But I’d never heard anything so sweet. I eased my grip on her thigh, knowing I’d been holding her too tightly. And I ran slow circles along her clit.

Her lips fell from mine as she lost control, her pussy pulsing around me. Her moans were distorted as I kissed her again.

Fuck. I was wrong. Hearing that she was mine wasn’t the sweetest sound. This was. I forgot what her soft moans sounded like when she came. And now that I’d heard it again,

I never wanted to stop hearing it. I kept circling her clit with my thumb.

“Matt...I can't...”

“You owe me 16 years of orgasms, baby.”

She laughed, tightening around my cock.

“Fuck.” I dropped my mouth to her neck again, sucking on her skin as I lost control. Shot after shot of cum exploded right into her sweet pussy. Where it belonged.

Her moan sounded strangled as she dug her fingertips into my shoulders. She shook in my arms as she came again.

I placed a soft kiss against the bruise that was already forming on her neck.

She pulled me tighter. Our chests rose and fell together as I held her in my arms. Being with her felt like being home. But it was also like we were strangers. It didn't have to be that way though. She'd loved me once. She could love me again. I just needed to let her in.

“I missed you so much,” I said.

“I missed you too.”

I didn't put her down. I stayed buried inside of her as I kissed her again. Slower this time. Like how we used to kiss. Like we had all the time in the world. Like we were 16 again and had our whole lives left.

Chapter 18

Sunday

Brooklyn

My heart was broken. But like always, I felt a lot less broken in Matt's arms. I'd felt this way yesterday too, when he'd followed me into the auditorium. But I also remembered what happened afterward. All we seemed capable of was fighting.

Matt was still buried deep inside of me.

And I didn't want to move. I just wanted to stay like this forever. But I felt like any second now, he'd tell me to go to hell. And I'd yell something worse. He knew I loved Miller. I didn't need to say it anymore. He needed to hear something entirely different. "I love you, Matt. Even when you're covered in dirt." I reached out to wipe off his face, but my hands were still dirty.

He smiled. "I love getting dirty with you too. Speaking of which...now I'm going to take you upstairs and we're going to do that all over again."

"I want that. I do, but...how are we supposed to move forward?" I touched his cheek and smiled at the dirt I'd gotten all over him. "I don't know if I can let go of that feeling that you forgot me. That you grieved so differently than me. And I don't know if you can let go of the fact that I disappeared and had a life without you. I think a piece of you will always hate me, Matt."

“I need to show you something,” he said. He slowly pulled out of me.

Some of his cum dripped down my thigh. I pressed my lips together, not wanting to ask the question that was racing through my mind. But I did need to. “Do I need to be worried about this?” I grabbed my ruined leggings and wiped off my thigh. “We haven’t used a condom twice.”

“I always use a condom,” Matt said.

I just stared at him. He literally did not. My leggings were evidence of that.

He cleared his throat. “That was...those were the only two times I haven’t.”

He’d slept with a lot of women. I knew that. “Why didn’t you use one with me then?”

“Because...it’s you, Brooklyn.” He pushed his hair off his forehead. “I’m sorry, I should have asked you. I kind of lose my head around you.”

“Me too.”

He smiled down at me. “But you have nothing to worry about. Unless you’re worried about the other thing. I don’t know if you’re on the pill or...” his voice trailed off. “But I’m not worried about that. Not even a little.” His smile grew.

His words made my chest hurt. “I’m not worried about that either.” Not because of the pill though. But because I was pretty sure it wasn’t possible for me to have more kids. There was a calmness between us right now though. And I didn’t want to make it heavy.

“I also haven’t had sex in weeks,” he said. “If that helps.”

I stared up at him. “Didn’t you and Kennedy...”

“No. It was just like...third base stuff.”

I figured that they’d had sex. And I was honestly really relieved that they hadn’t. I couldn’t stop staring at him. He’d never had sex without a condom before. He’d saved something just for me.

He was staring down at me, his eyes searching my face.

I think he probably thought I had a lot more questions about his time with Kennedy. Or with other women. But I didn’t want to know any of it. If Matt and I had a future, we had to learn to live in the present.

“Come with me.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me back into the house. *His* house.

I couldn’t believe this was his house. Tanner said the owner had renovated it for years. And everything about it...it... “You painted your kitchen yellow. Why?”

“I mean...that’s what you wanted.”

He was going to make me start crying again. “Matt.”

“I did a lot of things, not realizing they were for you until they were done. That’s why I put it up for sale. Because I built a home for our family but you weren’t here. But you’re here now.”

I squeezed his hand. “I love it. I don’t know how to explain it, but as soon as I stepped into this house it felt like home.”

He nodded.

“And now we’re getting it all messy.” I tried to wipe my hands off on my sweatshirt.

“I kind of like this look.” He reached out and touched a strand of hair that was falling out of my ponytail.

“Like we’ve rolled around in the dirt?”

“Maybe we should do that on the Empire High football field.”

I laughed.

“But first...you want to know how we can move forward. When you don’t know how to let go of that feeling that I forgot you. I have a lot of ways to prove I never forgot. You saw how often I visited your grave. I coach football at Empire High because sometimes during crowded games, I can easily picture you in the stands.”

Yeah, he was definitely going to make me cry.

“And I painted this kitchen yellow. I made this home for you. But there’s more.” He pulled me up the stairs.

He looked over at Jacob’s closed door. And then back at me.

“Is that...” his voice trailed off.

“He’s taking a nap. We probably have a few minutes.”

“Okay.” He kept staring at the door. “I’m excited to meet him. If you want me to.”

I nodded. “I want you to. He loves football. I think he’ll be excited that you love it too.”

Matt smiled. But he looked nervous. And I wasn’t sure it was because he was nervous to meet my son. Or nervous to show me whatever he was about to show me.

“This is probably going to seem really weird,” he said. “But I made you a promise on Thanksgiving. And I kept doing it. I... it made me feel close to you.”

I didn't know what he was talking about. What promise?

He pulled a key out of his pocket and put it into the locked door. “Actually, doing it had exactly the effect that you wanted.” He pushed open the door. “I usually come in here when I'm stressed. Or sad. And...it helps me.”

I stood there in the hallway, staring at a large portrait of my face. *Oh my God.*

“Say something,” Matt said.

I stepped into the room and spun around, staring at all the portraits of...*me*. They blurred in front of me as the tears fell down my cheeks. All those years ago, Matt had been stressed out balancing football, homework, and wedding planning. He'd told me that he used to paint with his aunt. And I'd surprised him with paint supplies on Thanksgiving morning. Before everything broke. I remembered.

“I know you probably think I'm insane. But...I never forgot you Brooklyn. I was just working on this one a couple weeks ago.” He pointed to the one in the center of the room.

There was a smear down the side of my painted cheek, making it look like I was crying.

“You really gotta say something. Because I'm kinda freaking out.”

“Matt...this is...” my voice trailed off. “This is...”

“A lot.” He scratched the back of his neck. “I know.”

I shook my head. “No. I mean, yeah, it’s a lot. But I love it. I love you.”

The corner of his mouth ticked up.

“You painted. You painted *me*.” I stared at all the stacked canvases. “I didn’t realize you were so good at it.”

He laughed. “You don’t think I’m crazy?”

“No.” I couldn’t stop smiling. The flowers on my tombstone. Him coaching at Empire High. The yellow kitchen. These paintings. “I believe you. I believe you didn’t forget.”

“You’re unforgettable, Brooklyn.”

God, how had I ever not loved him? How had I so easily believed my father’s lies? I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward my bedroom. I let go of his hand as he sat down on the edge of my bed. He probably thought I was about to climb onto his lap.

Instead, I knelt down in front of one of my old boxes. I pulled out a smaller box that had all the notes he’d ever written me. I handed it to him.

“I didn’t forget either. Even though I tried. I kept all this stuff. I...I never stopped loving you. And it hurts me to say that. Because...well...you know why. And I believe you never forgot about me. But I still don’t know if we can move forward. Because I need you to not be mad at the life I had without you. I want to be able to talk about Miller to my son. I don’t want him to forget him. *I* don’t want to forget him. You’ll have to coexist with him in my life. It’s the only way I know how to keep going.”

Matt wasn't looking at me. He was reading the old notes. Mostly of him demanding I meet him in the auditorium.

"Matt?"

He looked up at me. "You kept these all these years?"

"Not just that." I grabbed his varsity jacket out of the box too. And some of the pictures my father had brought me. "These were the only pictures of you I had. My dad got them somehow." I handed them to him.

He stared at the Untouchables being happy again. Of him looking happy with other girls. Even though he hadn't been. He sighed and ran his hand down his face. "Okay," he said.

"Okay?"

"It's not going to be easy for me, Brooklyn. You talking about Miller. Knowing why sometimes you look so sad. But I do understand. I know you don't think I grieved correctly. But I was dying inside. I..."

"I know. I know you know how I feel. And I shouldn't have said you didn't."

He nodded. "And I'd never want your son to forget his father. But Brooklyn...I want to be part of his life. I don't know how that'll work. But we'll figure it out. Together. I'm done living in the past. I want to move forward. Let's move forward."

I straddled him on the bed. "You swear you don't hate me?"

"Never."

"Nunca," I said.

He smiled at me. "Nunca."

I smiled back as I breathed him in. “Cinnamon.”

“What?”

“I also started baking. That was my job. I brought baked goods to a local restaurant, where Miller was the chef. And I didn’t even realize it until I saw you again...but...I think I did it because it made me feel close to you. Even though I’d let you go. It smelled like home. Matt, you smell like home.”

He cradled my face in his hands. “Let’s get married.”

I laughed.

“I’m serious, Brooklyn. I don’t want to waste another second of my life without you.”

“You haven’t even met my son yet. And I...I’m not ready.” I’d told Miller that years ago. Because I was mourning Matt. “I need to take this slow. My heart really hurts. And I...”

“It’s okay. I’ve already waited half a lifetime for you. I can wait a few more days.”

“Days?” I laughed.

“Weeks?”

I shook my head.

“Months?”

I shrugged.

“Years?”

“Hmmm.”

“Baby, please.”

I pressed my lips against his. “We’ll figure it out. But first...I really want you to meet my son.”

Chapter 19

Sunday

Matt

It had been a really long time since I'd smiled this hard. Brooklyn baked to feel close to me. She kept all those notes I'd passed her in class. She still had my varsity jacket. She was still mine.

Her heart had been broken the first time we met too. And I knew how to make her feel better. It wouldn't take years. Or months. Maybe weeks. Weeks of reminding her that it was okay to smile and laugh. I'd always been good at making her laugh.

But I knew the most important part about our future was meeting her son. And him liking me.

I watched as she pulled a pair of worn jeans up her hips to replace the pants I'd torn. She turned toward me with a smile. Like she loved catching me watching her dress.

"Ready?" she asked.

"I babysit Scarlett a lot," I said. "And Sophie, Rob's daughter. I'm good with kids. But I'm used to hanging out with little girls."

Brooklyn laughed. "That sounded really weird."

"Yeah. Sorry. I'm a little nervous to meet him. I am good with Liam too. But he's just a baby. I..."

“It’s going to be okay,” she said. “But he’s a little shy sometimes. So don’t be offended if he hides from you. He’ll love that you coach football. If you talk about that...” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m nervous too. Is it okay if I just tell him you’re my friend?”

“Of course.”

She nodded. “I’ll go wake him. Just give me one minute.”

I stayed on the bed as she walked out of the room. *But maybe I shouldn’t be on the bed.* I stood up. And then sat back down. I shouldn’t have been this nervous. I was great with kids. Scarlett and Sophie loved me. And I was one of the best people to get Liam to stop fussing.

I heard Brooklyn’s muffled voice in the other room.

I wandered over to the door to try and hear what she was saying.

“Sweet boy, please put on some clothes. We have company.”

“Aunt Kennedy? She doesn’t care. I don’t have to wear pants.”

“No, it’s...”

“My abuelo is here again! I need my hat!”

I heard little footsteps and he ran out into the hallway butt naked except for an old-fashioned, brimmed hat. But he stopped when he saw me in the doorway of Brooklyn’s room.

I knew this kid. I’d thought Tanner had kidnapped him. This time when the boy looked up at me, his hat was pushed back. And I got a good look at his face. He had Brooklyn’s nose.

“Oh.” He smiled up at me.

He had Brooklyn's smile too.

"Jacob, this is my friend Matt," Brooklyn said.

"Hiya, Coach," Jacob said.

I stared at him.

"I thought you were Abuelo. Can we play football?"

"Wait, do you two already know each other?" Brooklyn asked.

She looked as confused as I felt.

"He lives with Abuelo in his castle. With the angry little man. Right, Coach?"

"Yeah..." I looked back at Brooklyn.

"What angry little man?" she asked.

I was assuming he meant Nigel. And I loved that description of him. Nigel had been rather perturbed about the fact that he wasn't the most adorable boy in the room or something equally disturbing. "It's a long story. But I was staying with Tanner while this place was on the market." I didn't want to go into any Poppy details right now. "Tanner was watching him last night. I'm sorry...how is he Tanner's grandson?"

"Jacob met my dad and he liked him about as much as I do. And Mrs. Alcaraz is teaching him some Spanish..."

"Sí," Jacob said. "I don't like my other abuelo. I like Abuelo Tanner. Why are you so dirty? Were you already playing football? Where's the ball?"

"Oh...um..." I cleared my throat. "I left it in the car."

"I'll go get mine." He ran back into his room.

Brooklyn looked up at me with a smile on her face. “It looks like he already likes you, *Coach*.”

Jacob ran back out into the hall carrying a football under his arm, like a perfect little running back.

“Nope,” Brooklyn said and picked him up. “If we’re going outside you at least need socks and pants.”

“Nooooo.”

I smiled. That was the cutest, drawn out no I’d ever heard.

“Yes,” Brooklyn said.

“No hablo inglés.”

“Yes you do speak English. And you also wear pants.”

This kid was about as stubborn as Scarlett. And Brooklyn was right, he already seemed to like me. And if he wanted to play football? That sounded a lot better than playing Barbies.

Jacob was surprisingly good at throwing and catching the football. There wasn’t a ton of room back here to do more than play catch. But this seemed to be what Jacob wanted to do anyway.

I stepped back when he tossed me another throw and almost ran into the huge clay pot Brooklyn had been trying to move.

“Where did you want this?” I asked and picked up the pot.

Brooklyn pointed to the corner she’d been trying to drag it to.

I set it down.

“Thank you.”

I looked over at the planters she'd removed the tree from. "So you like to garden?" I asked. It seemed like the wrong season for tomatoes. Weren't they going to die soon?

"Yeah. I think it's my equivalent to your painting. I find it very relaxing."

"These are baby Henry's," Jacob said and pointed to the tomato plant.

"Henry's?" I asked.

"They're all named Henry," Jacob said. "But this one is a baby. Because he's little."

Brooklyn cleared her throat. "I know it's silly. But I was really bad at growing things. And when I got better, I started naming them. They're all descendants of my original Henry plant."

"Really?" I laughed. *What are the odds?*

"Don't laugh at me."

"I wasn't laughing because of that. I just...there's this kid at Empire High. Henry Jefferson. A scholarship student I kind of took under my wing. I wanted to help him fit in." I shrugged.

"We both had Henry projects. What are the odds of that?"

She shook her head.

It was like we were on the same wavelength, even though we were apart.

"I'm hungry," Jacob said. "Cuppycakes."

I looked down at my watch. "For dinner? How about I order pizza or something?"

"Mommy and Abuelo let me eat cuppycakes for dinner."

Well, I wasn't going to argue with that. "Trying some of these famous baked goods sounds perfect to me."

Brooklyn elbowed me in my side as she picked Jacob up. Jacob had put on a pair of shorts. But he'd refused the shoes. I followed her into the kitchen. She plopped Jacob on the kitchen counter with his feet dangling in the sink. He kicked his feet as she cleaned them with soap and water. Then she washed his hands too before depositing him on the granite island.

He sat right there in the middle like it was where he always sat.

And I kind of loved that he was a little barbarian. He'd abandoned his hat before we'd played outside. His hair was darker than Brooklyn's and I wondered if it was the same color as Miller's. I couldn't remember what Miller looked like. I just remembered that he was a big guy. It was easiest to picture him pushing Brooklyn into a car after her uncle's funeral.

But that's not the Miller that Brooklyn knew. I tried to push away what I knew about him. "What do you usually do on Sundays?" I asked.

Jacob looked up at me. "Football."

"We usually play football outside in the morning," Brooklyn said as she put icing on a cupcake. "And then catch the game in the afternoon."

"Who do you root for?" I asked him.

"My dad and I like the Giants."

Yeah, I was going to get along with Jacob just fine. "Me too."

“Really?”

I nodded.

Brooklyn handed him the first cupcake.

Jacob looked down at it for a second, and then back up at me.

“You can have the first one, Coach. The first one is the best.”

He handed it to me.

“Thanks, kiddo.”

Brooklyn’s hand paused halfway through icing the next cupcake.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah...it’s just...that’s what my uncle always called me.”

“Oh. Yeah, I...I remember that now.” I shook my head. “I actually call all my nieces and nephews that.”

“Really?”

I nodded. I’d forgotten about that. Geez, I really did have her all around me over the years. I took a bite of the cupcake, thinking it would probably be some healthy variant of an actual cupcake. I even tried to make a neutral face so I wouldn’t offend Brooklyn. But...it was actually good. I was pretty sure there was real sugar in there. And butter. It was delicious. “This is really good, Brooklyn.”

“Yeah?” She looked pleased with the compliment.

“Yessie,” Jacob said and grabbed the one that she’d just finished putting icing on. “Mommy makes the best cuppycakes.”

“You got that right.” I smiled over at her. “Can I have another?”

“Más más!” Jacob said.

She laughed. “Insatiable.”

I raised my eyebrow at her. I was insatiable. In more ways than one. I thought about the fact that she needed weeks before I proposed again. But I think I had it right the first time. She only needed days. Because she could feel it too, right? That we all already felt like a family?

She blushed and looked back down at the cupcake in her hand.

“Are you my abuelo too, Coach? Or my aunt?” Jacob asked me.

I laughed. “I’m just...Matt. You can call me that. Or Coach. Or whatever you want.”

“Okay, Coach. Can you and Mommy dance?”

“Oh, Jacob,” Brooklyn said. “That’s okay, we...”

“Mommy’s always happy when she’s dancing. And I like when she’s happy. Please?” He looked up at me. He probably got his brown eyes from his father. I expected to feel...hurt. Or something. But he was just really cute.

I looked over at Brooklyn.

She shrugged.

“Dance, dance.” He clapped his hands together.

“I think I can handle that,” I said.

Brooklyn grabbed her phone and turned on a fast paced song. It was quiet in the large kitchen. And I made a mental note to

get a speaker system set up for her. She kept fiddling with her phone like she was nervous.

I hadn't danced with her since...when? Halloween maybe? *Yeah. Halloween.* She owed me 16 years of dancing too. I shimmied my shoulders at her and she laughed.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her in close.

"Sorry," she whispered. "It was a tradition at our house that we danced every night while we cooked dinner."

"I can get down with that tradition."

"Yeah?" She smiled up at me.

"Yeah." I looked over at Jacob. "You know, I usually have a much shorter dance partner. Scarlett loves dance parties."

"She does?" Jacob asked. "I like dancing too. I want down." He reached out for me.

And it tugged at my heart. It definitely already felt like I fit. I lifted him off the island and put him on the ground. He started jumping around the floor to the beat of the music.

Jacob loved football. And he didn't care what anyone thought of his dance moves. He wasn't my son, I knew that. But he felt like a little piece of me. It didn't really make any sense and yet...this felt right. Like I was supposed to be here for him. For his mom. I looked back at Brooklyn.

She's stopped dancing. She was rubbing her index fingers along her lower lip. A nervous tick she didn't used to have.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her into my arms. "What are you thinking about?" I whispered into her ear.

She swayed her hips to the music as she looped her hands behind my neck. “I was thinking that this feels right.”

Chapter 20

Monday

Brooklyn

“Mommy, Mommy! Coach is here!”

I put my arm over my face, shielding the light coming in through the blinds. I must have forgotten to close them last night. *Wait.* I sat up and stared out the window. I hadn’t gone to bed. I’d stayed up all night talking to Matt down on the couch. Had he carried me up here? I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face.

Jacob started jumping on the bed. “He brought doughnuts!”

That explained why he was so hyper this morning. I tickled his side and he jumped off the bed. I ran after him.

He squealed as I chased him down the stairs. I reached the landing and was just about to lift him up when my feet froze.

“What is all this?” I asked as I stared at the kitchen island.

There were more than a dozen vases filled with yellow roses.

Matt turned around. He was standing in front of several brand new planters. He set the hammer in his hand down. “I thought here would be good. This window is south-facing.”

I just stared at him.

“For your Henry tomatoes.”

For my Henry tomatoes? “You...you built these?” I don’t know why I was surprised. He was obviously handy if he’d

restored this house. But he knew the tomatoes were important to me. And he'd made it so I could bring them inside.

"Yeah," Matt said. "They won't last much longer outside in the fall."

I didn't know what to say.

"Sorry, I let myself in," he said. "I hope that's okay." He walked up to me and reached out to touch me, but stopped.

Because Jacob was staring at us. And I'd told Jacob we were just friends.

"I'm sorry," he said again, whispering this time. "Should I have called first?"

"Did you carry me upstairs?"

"Yeah, you fell asleep," he whispered. "I let myself out. But I should have called before letting myself back in..."

"No. I'm not upset. I'm...overwhelmed. I was worried about my Henrys."

Matt smiled at me.

"And all the roses?"

"Hear me out..."

Jacob tugged on the leg of his jeans. "Coach, I want another."

"Can do, kiddo." Matt grabbed a doughnut out of the box on the counter and handed it down to him. The two of them were acting like they'd known each other forever.

If my heart wasn't already so full, that would have filled it.

Matt turned back to me. "Let's be honest...I was going to send you a bouquet every day for as many days as it took for you to

agree to walk down the aisle to me. So I figured I'd skip some time. There's three dozen bouquets here. So...we're more than three weeks into this thing as far as I'm concerned. We're dangerously close to a month then, don't you think? You're not going to make me wait a whole month, are you? Oh, wait. Here." He grabbed me a doughnut too.

I was smiling so hard it hurt. "You're very hyper this morning. Have you already had a few of these?"

"Yes," he said. "But I also stopped by Tanner's to shower and change and Nigel was brewing some special coffee..." He stopped talking and made a grossed out face.

"Who's Nigel?"

"Tanner's assistant. Kind of. And I probably shouldn't have drunk that coffee. Don't ever drink anything Nigel serves you. He's very suspicious with beverages. He made the doughnuts too. I think he overdid it with the sugar a bit. Wait, there's something else I need to show you." He grabbed a remote off the island and tapped a button.

Music flooded the kitchen. Just as loud as it used to be back at the lake house. He must have installed several speakers.

"And one more thing." He grabbed my hand and pulled me to the back door. He opened it and pointed up.

"You strung up the lights?" I didn't even realize he'd noticed them in a heap the other day.

"Yeah, this was a pretty terrible reveal. I should have waited until it was dark. Are you hot? I'm really hot." He started pulling on the collar of his t-shirt even though it couldn't be more than 50 degrees out here.

“You need water.” I grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. I made him sit down as I poured him a glass. “Drink that.”

He downed the whole thing in one gulp.

“Is Nigel a fan of triple shot espressos or something?”

“Maybe,” Matt said and downed another glass. “It’s so hot in here.” He kept pulling on his collar.

“Then take your shirt off.”

“Thank God.” He pulled it off over his head.

There were a lot of things about Matt that seemed the same. But he was more ripped than I remembered. When he wasn’t high on over-caffeinated coffee and over-sugared doughnuts, he was probably working out.

“Me too,” Jacob said and pulled his shirt off.

I laughed. Honestly I was surprised he was even wearing a shirt this morning.

“I need another,” Jacob said and reached up for a third doughnut.

“I think that’s enough doughnuts for both of you.” They were going to go into sugar comas. “We should probably go for a walk or something. Go get your shoes,” I said and lightly nudged Jacob to the door. He needed the nudge or he’d never willingly put on clothes.

Jacob picked up his shoes for just a second before abandoning them to play with his trucks. He zoomed them across the floor making revving noises.

“So you liked it?” Matt asked. “I wanted to bring more of your lake house here. So it would feel like home.” He opened up

the fridge to grab more water. He looked so comfortable. Probably because it was his home first.

“I didn’t like it,” I said. I glanced at Jacob to make sure he was still out of earshot.

Matt paused mid-sip.

I grabbed the glass from him. “Matt, I *love* it,” I whispered. “I love you.”

“I’m never going to grow tired of hearing you say that.”

“Well get used to it. I can’t believe you did all this for me. You’re amazing.”

“I really wish I could kiss you right now.”

I wanted that too. But I had no idea how I’d explain that to Jacob. I’d told Matt last night that he couldn’t spend the night. So instead we’d snuggled on the couch. I’d fallen asleep in his arms. Wasn’t that the same as him spending the night?

Matt looked over his shoulder to make sure Jacob was preoccupied with his trucks. And then he cupped my face in his hand. “I mean...we are three weeks into this thing.” He gestured to the roses.

He was ridiculous. “I forgot that you’re used to always having your way.” I leaned toward him like I was going to kiss him. And switched direction halfway, leaning over to smell the roses.

He groaned. “Dirty move, baby.”

“Shush with that.” I swatted his arm.

He pulled my hand off his forearm and intertwined his fingers with mine.

And we just stood there smiling at each other, holding hands behind the kitchen island. I wasn't staring at our hands though. I couldn't keep my eyes off his six-pack abs.

"Are you checking me out?" he asked.

"No. Psh. I was looking at the flowers." I tried to focus on the vases instead of him. "Thank you. For three weeks' worth."

"I'll keep bringing them until you give me what I want."

"And what exactly do you want?"

"What I've always wanted. You." He looked over at Jacob and squeezed my hand. "I want to be part of your family, Brooklyn. I want to wake up every morning with you in my arms."

I wanted that too. But I stayed quiet. I still needed to tell him that I wasn't sure I could have more kids. And even if I could get pregnant...I was terrified of having another miscarriage. Miller said he was happy just the three of us. I wasn't sure if Matt would feel the same. He wanted four kids. We'd talked about it. We'd talked about everything.

I needed to tell him. Because he'd already wasted 16 years on me. I didn't want to waste any more of his time if Jacob and I weren't enough for him. He deserved the truth. But still, I stayed silent. It was selfish but I wanted just a little more of him before he realized I couldn't give him the life he wanted. I forgot how much love could hurt sometimes.

"There is one more thing," Matt said.

"How did you have time to do anything else?"

"I may have had some help with this. Are you up for a drive?"

Honestly, I'd go anywhere with him.

Matt smiled over at me as he drove. I think he would have been smiling at me either way. But it was definitely bigger because I was wearing his varsity jacket. I'd grabbed it at the last minute. And now that I had it on, I never wanted to take it off.

It was stupid, but when I stared at him staring at me, it felt like no time at all had passed. And that he'd just given me this jacket. That we were still at Empire High together, frozen in time.

I looked into the back seat at Jacob.

"Are we there yet?" Jacob asked.

"Not yet," Matt said.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

"Por qué?"

"Because surprises are fun, kiddo."

"Noooo. I don't like surprises."

"Hey," I said and grabbed his knee. I was the one that didn't like surprises, not him. After everything that happened with my dad, surprises always freaked me out. But Jacob usually loved them. "What's going on?"

"I don't want to go home."

Normally he'd say he *did* want to go home. "I don't understand, sweet boy. Do you want us to go home right

now?”

“Noooo.” He shook his head. “Abuelo promised I didn’t have to go back again. Don’t make me. I can’t go home. I want new home.”

Oh. He was talking about that limo ride we’d taken with Tanner. When Tanner brought us back to the lake house. Jacob was so upset he’d sworn he didn’t speak English. I knew he didn’t want to go back there right now. But he would one day.

“Hey,” I said and squeezed his knee. “We’re not going to the lake house. Right, Matt? He’s taking us somewhere else...” my voice trailed off as I looked out the window. *Oh my God.* I’d been so distracted, I hadn’t seen the familiar turn.

The car rolled to a stop in front of Matt’s house. Well, his parents’ house. It looked exactly the same. Even the creepy gargoyles. But it was hard to be creeped out when his mom and dad were standing there on the front steps laughing.

“Where are we?” Jacob asked.

“My parents’ house,” Matt said. “You’ll like it. My mom just made a fresh batch of hot chocolate. Do you like hot chocolate?”

“Yessie.”

“Do they know?” I asked and turned to Matt.

He shook his head. “I called them this morning and told them I’d be stopping by with a surprise. And that they should have some hot chocolate ready around noon. And to have the gardener rake some piles of leaves.”

I looked out the window at the huge piles of leaves just begging to be jumped in.

“I know you used to jump in the piles with your mom. I thought Jacob might like it too.”

I turned back to him. If he asked me to marry him again right now, I don't know how I could resist saying yes. “Yeah. He loves it too.” Miller would always rake up piles for us to jump into. Jacob was going to be so happy. “Your parents really don't know I'm back?”

He shook his head.

I couldn't wipe the smile from my face. I'd really missed his family. His mom was so sweet. And his father had warmed up to me in the end. I'd been so excited to be part of his family. I opened up the car door and stepped out.

Mrs. Caldwell was laughing at something Mr. Caldwell had just said. But the smile fell from her face when she turned toward me. Her jaw dropped.

“Brooklyn?” Mr. Caldwell said. He took a step forward. But then he froze, like if he moved again, I'd somehow disappear.

“It can't be,” Mrs. Caldwell said. She put her hand to her chest.

I ran up to them and threw my arms around Mrs. Caldwell.

“It's me. I'm okay.”

She immediately hugged me back, a sob escaping her throat. And I started crying too. Because I'd always loved her hugs. They reminded me of my own mother's hugs. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her.

And I felt Mr. Caldwell hug me from the side too.

“How?” Mrs. Caldwell asked. She pulled back and wiped the tears from her face, before grabbing mine and staring at me.

“How is this possible?”

“It’s a long story,” Matt said.

Mrs. Caldwell’s hands dropped from my face as she turned toward Matt.

He was holding Jacob. But you could barely tell because Jacob kept ducking under Matt’s arm to hide. “This is Jacob,” he said. “Brooklyn’s son.”

Jacob ducked again.

“Sweet boy, these are Matt’s parents. And you’re going to love them. Just like I do.”

He stopped squirming and looked up at me. “Can I play in the leaves now? And have hot chocolate?”

“Absolutely.” I booped him on his nose and he smiled.

“I want down, Coach,” he said.

Matt put him down on the ground.

I was about to tell Jacob to say hi to Matt’s parents, but he’d already sprinted off. I smiled as he jumped into the biggest pile of leaves.

“I can’t believe you’re alive.” Mrs. Caldwell pulled me back into her arms. “And you have a son? Are you married?”

“She will be soon,” Matt said.

I gave him a sideways glance.

He smiled at me. He knew he was right. I’d say yes soon.

Chapter 21

Monday

Matt

Brooklyn blew on the steam wafting up from her mug. “What are you thinking?” she asked

“That this is everything I’ve ever wanted.” I reached out and pulled a leaf out of her hair.

She laughed and ran her fingers through her hair, even though I’d already gotten the only leaf. “Really, what are you thinking?”

“I’m serious.” I scooted closer to her on the front steps, until my thigh brushed against hers. I stared out at where my parents and Jacob were still jumping in leaves. Or...just Jacob really. My dad kept raking them up. And my mom was tossing Jacob into the piles.

“I thought I might be bitter,” I said. “But I don’t feel that way at all. Or maybe I’m just able to let that all go because I’m so damn happy right now.”

She smiled up at me.

I wanted her to let go of everything too. I set my mug down and stood up. “Come with me.” I put my hand out for her.

She slid her hand into mine. “I should tell you...I’m kind of bad at surprises. I get a little panicky. Not knowing what’s about to happen reminds me of how my dad used me.”

That killed me. I wanted to take away her pain. And I would. One day, she'd look at me and she'd forget how much her father hurt her. She wouldn't think about him at all. But first I needed to make sure I never hurt her again.

I pulled her around the side of the house and into the backyard. We stayed close to the wall and stared at the covered pool. "I'm sorry that you saw what you saw 15 years ago. I need you to know...I would have traded anything for it to be you in that pool with me instead. I was drowning that summer. I've been drowning for 16 years. And I finally feel alive again."

"I'm sorry I didn't talk to you. I'm sorry I ran away."

I shook my head. "I just want to bury the past. I just want to move forward. Replace this memory with a new one." I leaned down and kissed her.

She stood on her tiptoes, deepening the kiss.

I pushed my varsity jacket off her shoulders.

She laughed and caught it before it could fall. "Your parents and Jacob are right out front."

"You don't recall how many times I've had you in my bed here? While my parents were downstairs. And Mason was just down the hall."

"I also remember Mason seeing my boobs once."

I laughed. "Well, he's not here today, so we have nothing to worry about."

She raised her eyebrows at me.

"I just want to erase all the hurt," I whispered against her lips.

“You’re doing a really good job of that.” But instead of kissing me, she pressed the side of her face against my chest. “I’d convinced myself that I’d never fit in your world. But I was wrong. I can picture it all with you.”

“Us against the world, baby.” I rested my chin on the top of her head. “The three of us.”

She held me tighter.

“And you always fit.”

She didn’t respond.

“So that’s a no for taking you in my parents’ backyard?”

“Let’s put a pin in that for later. When we’re not about to be caught.”

“Is this revenge?” I ran the tip of my nose down the length of hers. “Making me your dirty little secret instead of the other way around?”

She laughed. “No. But...it is kind of fun sneaking around.”

“I shouldn’t have done that to you back in high school. But it was kind of hot, right?”

She lightly shoved my shoulder.

But I could tell she thought it was too. I loved sneaking around with her. “I’ll accept putting a pin in this for later. After all, there’s a Halloween party coming up in a few weeks. I’d rather take you in my old bed. Besides, that’s not why I brought you here.”

“Then why did you bring me here?”

I grabbed her around the waist and threw her over my shoulder.

“Matt!” she screamed as I carried her back out front. “Put me down!” She slapped my butt.

I tossed her into a pile of leaves and jumped in beside her. I’d brought her here to make her smile.

Chapter 22

Monday

Brooklyn

“We should do this all over again tomorrow,” Matt said as he pulled to a stop outside my house.

I mean...his house. I stared at him. *Our house?* “Don’t you have a company to run, Mr. Hot Shot CEO?” We’d spent all day at his parents’ house.

“Get this,” he said. “I’m so good at it that it kind of runs itself in my absence. And I have more important things to do than work.” He looked over his shoulder to make sure Jacob was sleeping. “Like buying you two dozen more bouquets of roses every day until I win you back.”

“What about coaching the Empire High football team?”

“They deserved a day off after that epic homecoming win. Which they did without my help, since I was a little preoccupied. But you should come to practice tomorrow. It’ll be fun. You can meet my Henry.”

“Jacob would really like that.” I bit the inside of my lip. “Isn’t it going to be a little weird though? With Kennedy? She’s your assistant coach.”

“Kennedy and I will always be friends,” said Matt. “Just like you’ll always be friends with her. And we’re moving forward, remember?”

I took a deep breath. “You guys just looked really good together down on that field.”

“Kennedy distanced herself from me as soon as she found out you were back. Trust me, it wasn’t all hearts and roses down on that field. She practically cringed at my touch.”

I laughed. “That’s not how it looked.”

“She could barely even look at me. I actually thought she was going to tell me she was in love with Felix after the game.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We had dinner with him last week. Well, I crashed their dinner. Tanner was meddling. It’s not important. What’s important is that Kennedy reacted differently to seeing him than she did to seeing me. I think I may have messed up their chance back in high school. And now that I’m seeing everything a little clearer...they’re a really good fit.”

“I hope so. I want her to be happy. I want both of them to be happy. I can’t believe Felix never got married.”

“We all took your death hard, Brooklyn. But now that you’re back? Hopefully we can all just move forward.”

“He looks almost exactly the same,” I said.

“Please don’t put me back into that love triangle.”

I laughed.

Matt grabbed my hand. “I’ll be your dirty little secret, but I won’t do that again.” His eyes dropped to my lips.

Matthew Caldwell was no one’s dirty little secret. And I was done over thinking all of this. “Do you want to come in?”

He smiled. "I thought you'd never ask." He climbed out of the car in a hurry, like he was worried I'd change my mind. Or maybe he was just excited to get upstairs. But instead of pulling me inside, he opened up the back seat and picked a sleeping Jacob up into his arms.

Matt was really good with him. And seeing them together made my heart beat better. It made it feel like I'd eventually be okay again.

I followed Matt up the front steps. He pulled out his key and let himself in. Yeah, this definitely just felt like *our* house. Especially with all the amazing things Matt had added this morning.

Matt froze in the entranceway and I almost bumped into him.

I stepped to the side to see what he was staring at. The tops of all the roses had been cut clean off. The vases were just filled with thorny stems. It would have been a little menacing looking if there weren't yellow rose petals scattered everywhere. Creating a path upstairs. It was like a romantic scene you'd see in a movie. How had Matt arranged this? I hadn't seen him on the phone all day.

I walked around him and started to follow the path.

"Brooklyn, stop," Matt said.

But I was already running up the stairs, following the path. I was getting used to surprises from Matt. And I couldn't wait to see what this one was.

"Wait!" Matt yelled. I heard him bounding up the steps behind me. "Brooklyn!"

I pushed the bathroom door open and screamed at the top of my lungs. There was a man leaning over the tub with a machete.

He screamed when I screamed, and dropped his machete onto the tiled floor. He stepped away from the tub that was filled with yellow rose petals.

Matt pulled me out of the way, somehow shielding me and Jacob even though Jacob was still in his arms. “Nigel, what the fuck?” Matt said.

“What does that word mean?” Jacob asked. But his eyes were glued to Nigel. And there was a scowl on his face, like he knew Nigel and didn’t like him.

I grabbed Jacob out of Matt’s arms. “Wait, you two know this guy?” I asked.

“That’s Mr. Nigel,” Jacob said. “He lives in Abuelo’s castle too.” He kept scowling at him.

Nigel scowled back. “Mr. Jacob,” he said.

They both kept glaring at each other.

“Nigel, seriously, what the heck?” Matt asked. It really seemed like he wanted to drop the F bomb again, but I was glad that he didn’t. The last thing I needed was for Jacob to be a nudist *and* love profanity.

Nigel stopped glaring at my son and looked up at Matt. “Have I done something to offend?” He kicked the machete out of the way. But it was a machete and he hadn’t hidden it at all.

“Why did you cut up all those roses I got for Brooklyn?”

Now Nigel was glaring at Matt. “You know why.”

“No, I definitely don’t,” Matt said. “And how did you even get in here?”

“You gave me a key to your place.”

“I definitely didn’t do that.”

“No? Oh. I must have made a key. I have so many keys, sometimes it’s hard to remember which ones were given to me or which ones I taketh.”

“I’ve seen your crazy big keyring. But that’s no excuse to break into my house.” He shook his head. “Brooklyn’s house, I mean. And why did you ruin all those bouquets?”

“Because Tanner is not always right. And you’re my friend too, so I’m looking out for you. And I’m a master of sabotage.”

“Nigel, you can’t sabotage what I have with Brooklyn. I love...” Matt’s voice trailed off. He couldn’t say he loved me in front of Jacob.

I didn’t really know what the two of them were talking about. But it seemed like a good time to jump in. And I wanted Nigel to like me if the two of them were friends. Even if this weird little man didn’t seem fond of my son. Maybe Jacob had stabbed him with a stick or something.

“This is actually really lovely,” I said. “The rose petal trail up the stairs? And this bath?” I looked at all the rose petals in the bathtub. It really was pretty. It seemed like something prepared for honeymooners. Not any kind of sabotage...

Nigel followed my gaze. “Gah! I’m too good at baths!” He turned back to me. “Wait. You like it?”

“Yeah, it’s beautiful.”

“You...you appreciate it?”

“Of course,” I said. “It was so nice of you. This must have taken a long time. And I love baths.”

He just stared at me. But at least he’d stopped scowling.

“I’m Brooklyn, by the way.” I put my hand out for him. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Nigel.” I’d heard *a little* about him. But he didn’t need to know that.

He looked at my hand for a few beats too long before finally taking it. “And I, you, mademoiselle.” He kissed the back of my hand.

I laughed.

He smiled up at me. And then he turned to Jacob and stuck his tongue out at him. I looked down at my son, whose tongue was also sticking out. I wasn’t sure who had started that, but that was quite enough.

“Put those away,” I said.

Both of them stopped sticking their tongues out.

“I knew I’d like you,” Nigel said. “Master Tanner usually is right about these things. I shouldn’t have doubted him. Shall I strip you for your bath now?”

Whoa...What?

“That’s entirely inappropriate, Nigel,” Matt said.

“Oh. I can only strip you, Master Matthew?”

“Nigel, get out.”

“But...”

“Nigel.”

“But she likes it. Sabotage turned glorious surprise! Brooklyn likes me. She said so. She appreciates me. Let me at least get the temperature just right.” He turned the spigot back on.

This was the weirdest thing I’d ever witnessed in my life.

“I’m so sorry,” Matt mouthed silently at me.

I just shrugged. Honestly, this was all very entertaining. “So you’re Tanner’s assistant?” I asked Nigel.

“Houseboy.”

“A houseboy?”

“You got a problem with that?”

I laughed. “No. I just...I’ve heard that term before. That’s what Isabella wanted.” I turned to Matt. “For you to be her houseboy.”

“You want to be like me?” Nigel said. He abandoned the tub and walked right up to Matt. Really close. Way too close.

“Isabella was a crazy person,” Matt said.

“I can teach you all my ways. It’s always important to be prepared. Like the key thing. I stole your key in your sleep to make a duplicate. And then I lied. Because lies are also important to safeguard your master’s secrets. You must also demand time off. Because time off accumulates over the years. Don’t tell Master Tanner, but I only work three hours a week. Oh, and you must blend into the walls. No orange clothing.”

“You just learned that last thing over the weekend,” Matt said.

“Good houseboys are always learning what their masters want. Come with me. I’ll show you my journal. We’ll be houseboys together. Excuse me, Brooklyn,” he said. “I’ll need him for the rest of the night. And the next few days. I have so many lessons. And so little work to do otherwise. This will be my new special project. Because I just finished my last one.”

There was so much to unpack there. “What was your last project?” I asked.

“My renovations.”

“Did you buy a property and restore it too?”

“I like that you ask me questions, Mistress Brooklyn. Yes. Another one of the reasons I have a key. Because neighbors have keys. And I’m your new neighbor. I bought the house next door.”

“What?” Matt said. He sounded very annoyed.

But Nigel just beamed up at him, nodding.

I’d remembered seeing a sold sign out front when Tanner first brought me here. I’d thought that was the house he was letting me stay in. “The house to the right?”

“Yes. And don’t worry. I’ll put a door in between our houses. Better to serve you that way.”

“Oh...I don’t think that’s necessary...”

“Of course it is. Much easier than using a key. This way it’ll be more like one big house. For all three of us.” He sighed. “I mean four. Mr. Jacob,” he said and stared at my son.

Jacob stuck his tongue out again.

Where had he learned that? “Jacob, be sweet.”

“Mr. Nigel started it.”

I had a feeling that was true. But still.

“Shall I strip you for your bath now, Mistress Brooklyn?”

Nigel asked.

“Cut it out,” Matt said. “You’re not seeing Brooklyn naked.”

“I won’t look that much,” Nigel said.

This was too weird. “I’m actually going to give the two of you a moment. It’s Jacob’s bedtime.”

“Noooo,” Jacob said. “I want to play in the bath too.”

“You like baths, Mr. Jacob?” Nigel asked.

“Yessie.”

“Oh. I presumed you were too uncouth for such luxuries.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Jacob said.

“That’s kind of my point. But alas, a fellow bath lover is a friend of mine. I guess I will stop glaring at you.”

“Okay,” Jacob said.

“Good.” Nigel turned to me. “Can I stay now? Since I’m friends with you and the little one? I believe there is a Monday night game on. Master Matthew and I usually watch them together. I’ll make the snacks.” He hurried out of the room.

I turned to Matt. “Um...”

“I’ll handle it. I watched the game with him one time. What the heck?” He followed Nigel out of the bathroom.

“Do you not like Nigel?” I asked Jacob.

He yawned. “I think he’s funny, Mommy.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“And he makes really yummy snacks. Can I watch the game too?”

It was way past his bedtime. But I was terrible at saying no to him. Besides, he’d probably just fall asleep in a few minutes snuggled up on the couch. “Sounds good.”

“Can Coach come for breakfast again? I like his doughnuts.”

I think those were actually Nigel’s doughnuts. But I couldn’t hide my smile. “You like him too?”

Jacob nodded. “He plays football with me. And jumps in leaves. And has hot chocolate. And he makes you smile like Daddy.”

Oh, sweet boy. I peppered his face in kisses and sent him into a fit of giggles.

“Maybe he can move in next door with Mr. Nigel?” Jacob asked. “And then they can visit whenever they want. Abuelo too.”

I laughed. Honestly that didn’t sound that bad to me.

Chapter 23

Tuesday

Matt

I stared at Brooklyn's face as she slept. The light streaming in through the window made her look almost ethereal. I was almost scared to move. Like she'd suddenly disappear again.

But it was morning, and Jacob would probably come running in here. I needed to get going. I'd wait until whenever Brooklyn was ready to tell him about us. It already seemed like a big step that she'd let me up here last night. We were moving forward. Just like we agreed. And I already had another delivery of two dozen bouquets set to arrive today. That would put us at almost seven weeks as far as I was concerned.

I reached out and ran my fingers through her hair. "Brooklyn?"

She slowly opened her eyes and smiled. "Hey."

"I'm going to head out," I whispered.

She shook her head and nestled into my chest. "Not yet."

I stared down at her hand on my bicep. Her wedding band and engagement ring shone in the morning light.

I wanted to propose to her. But was she ready to take those off? I wanted the rings not to bother me. But I'd be lying if I said they didn't. I wanted my ring back on her finger. And this time when I asked her to marry me, I'd do it right. In front of all our friends. A grand gesture. Tanner would definitely be

able to help with that. But I already had a few ideas. And I knew when all my friends would be together next: Penny's birthday this Friday.

I kissed the top of Brooklyn's head. "Meet me at Empire High for practice later?"

"Or you could just take the whole day off again," she said and smiled up at me.

As good as that sounded...I had a proposal to plan. And other work to do, unfortunately. "I wish I could. But I have a few meetings."

"Okay. Jacob and I will see you after school then." She laughed. "That is so weird to say. But also somehow so right. Doesn't it kind of still feel like we're 16?"

"You certainly have the stamina of a 16-year-old," I said as I climbed out of bed.

She threw a pillow at me and I caught it.

"Trust me, I meant that in a good way." I climbed back onto the bed and kissed her. "See you later, baby."

"See you later."

Not even the idea of Nigel moving in next door could wipe the smile off my face as I headed out to my car.

James opened the door holding a steaming cup of coffee. "I saw you heading up. Everything alright?"

"It's so weird how many cameras you have." I walked into his apartment.

“When you have something to protect, it doesn’t seem that weird.” He stared at me. Like he was waiting for me to admit I now had something to protect.

I shrugged. He’d kept Brooklyn’s return a secret from me for days. I could make him squirm for a few minutes. I walked past him and poured myself a cup of coffee too.

“So you’ll probably want some cameras soon too. Right?”

I shrugged again.

“We haven’t heard from you since Sunday. What’s going on?”

Okay, that seemed like long enough. “If you’re asking if I’m going to get back together with Brooklyn... The answer is yes.”

He smiled.

“But I have an idea I want to run past you. I know we were talking on Sunday about what we should all do for Penny’s birthday. Hear me out...” I lifted my hands and spread my fingers. “Prom.”

“I think she just wants a quiet night in. And there aren’t any proms to crash right now. It’s October, not May.”

“We’re not going to crash one. We’re going to throw our own. Penny never went to prom, right?”

“Yeah...but...”

“Brooklyn was talking about all the things she missed out on. Graduation, prom, college. I can only really give her one of those things.”

“So this isn’t really about Penny,” James said.

“It’s for both of them. Since they both missed out. Come on, this will be so much fun. And it will be the best surprise ever. The birthday to end all birthdays. Plus...I think it’ll be a pretty great time to re-propose to Brooklyn.”

“You want to propose to Brooklyn on Penny’s birthday? This really doesn’t feel like a great birthday present.”

“Are you kidding? Penny has been meddling in my love life for years. She’ll be thrilled. And...I mean...it’s prom. That means you’ll get lucky at the end of the night. Come on. Say yes.”

“Yes!” Penny said. “I can’t wait!”

We both turned to see her hurrying over to us.

Shit. I hadn’t seen her come into the kitchen. “Penny, how long have you been listening? It was supposed to be a surprise.”

She swatted her hand through the air. “I’d rather be in on it anyway. I’m so freaking excited! Prom?! And are you really going to propose? This is going to be so much fun!”

James laughed. “Are you sure? I know you said you wanted a night in...”

“No, this is so much better. I’ve always felt like a loser for not going to my own prom. Now I can tell everyone I *did* go to prom. And no one has to know it was a decade after I graduated.”

“Why didn’t you go to your own prom again?” I asked.

“Because no one asked me. I was really shy. I was basically an invisible nerd.”

I couldn't picture that at all. And I was pretty sure she was wrong about all of it. "The guys at your school were probably just too scared to ask the hottest girl out."

For the first time in years, James didn't give me a death stare when I talked about Penny looking hot. Instead, he just pulled her into his arms. "That sounds right to me. And this is going to be the best prom ever. So much better than whatever lame prom your high school had back then."

She smiled.

"Definitely," I said. "Plus, this time all of us will be going together."

"What do you remember about your prom?" Penny asked, looking up at James.

"Not much really. I do remember getting really high in the limo."

Penny shook her head. "And you?" she asked me.

"I was a total downer."

"Yeah, I think we all need this," Penny said. "But is there really time to plan it? It's only three days away..."

"I'll handle everything," I said. "It's for your birthday. Leave it to me." *And Tanner*: I definitely needed Tanner's help if I was going to pull this off.

"It's for Penny's birthday," James said. "I want to help too."

"That would be great. Prom, guys! This is going to be epic."

"It definitely will be," Penny said.

I would have loved for it to be a surprise for her too. But, she already looked really happy about it. “I should go get started. Maybe we can meet up after your classes to talk about some ideas?”

James nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll try to have a few venue options by then. I gotta go, I have a million things to do.”

Penny laughed as I hurried out of their apartment.

This really was going to be epic. As long as I could get Tanner on board to help. But...of course he’d help.

The traffic this morning didn’t even bother me. Or the weird moat outside Tanner’s apartment. I half expected Tanner and Nigel to be sitting in wingback chairs, ready to scold me for sleeping at Brooklyn’s last night. But I’d texted Tanner a heads up. And Nigel had been with us for way too long last night.

“Yo, Tanner!” I called into the hall. “Tanner?” I popped my head into the kitchen. Where was he? I walked into the great room. “Tanner?” He wasn’t in the dining room either. “Nigel?”

No response.

There was a pretty high chance Nigel was at his new house. Or in mine, bothering Brooklyn. Was I all alone in here? I didn’t think that had ever happened. Ever since I’d moved in, I hadn’t really gotten to explore. And there was one room I was really curious about.

I walked past the door that led to the pool, and over to the only other door I’d opened. The one with the glowing light. It had been blinding. I hadn’t gotten a chance to see what was in the

room other than too much light. I wrapped my hand around the doorknob.

“No!” Nigel yelled and threw himself in front of the door.

“Snoopers get burned!”

Where had he come from? “Nigel, I just want to see what’s in the room...”

He slapped me hard across the face. “Shut your whore mouth!”

What the hell? Had he picked that slapping thing up from Brooklyn? And we’d been over this... “You can’t say that to people, Nigel. It’s really offensive. And why did you just hit me?”

“I’m sorry I struck you. But you’re not allowed in that room.”

He looked to his left. “Or that one.” He glanced to his right.

“Or that one.” He pointed to one across the hall. “And definitely not that one.” He shuddered. “You’re not allowed in any of the rooms unless invited in. Snoopers get burned.”

“You’ve said that. Burned how exactly?”

“It’s an old saying.”

“It really isn’t.”

Tanner ran out into the hall from a room I hadn’t been in yet.

“I did it!” he yelled. “I did it, dear boy!” He lifted me up off the ground and spun me around.

“You did it?!” Nigel yelled. “You did it!”

“I did it!” Tanner yelled again and set me down on my feet.

“You glorious, bastard.” He clapped both sides of my face.

“I’m one step closer!”

“What is happening...”

Tanner high-fived Nigel.

But Nigel kind of grabbed his hand and awkwardly shook it instead.

“I’d tell you to work on that, but I don’t even care right now,” Tanner said. “Celebrate however you want to celebrate, Nigel! Studying be damned!”

“What are you so happy about?” I asked.

“Kennedy finally fucked Felix! And apparently they weren’t intimate in high school. So it’s true love in its finest and most magnificent form!”

“She’s in love, she’s in love, and everyone knows it!” Nigel said and jumped up and down. And then he did some weird jig number with his feet.

“Okay, maybe don’t do that,” Tanner said to Nigel. “It’s a lot.”

Nigel stopped mid dance.

“Thank you, Matt. For not marrying Kennedy and robbing me of this win. I really needed this.”

Okay...

“You’re okay right? With Kennedy and Felix being lovers?”

Actually...yes. I thought I might feel a little weird. But, I’d seen the way they looked at each other. It was the same way Brooklyn and I looked at each other. “I’m really happy for them.”

“Thatta boy.” Tanner slapped me on the back. “And I can tell you’ve had sex, but I checked and that’s not a win for me.

Total shit if you ask me. But I am happy for you. And I'm more like 99 percent sure it's true love for you two now."

"Great." This conversation didn't make any sense. "Speaking of Brooklyn...I need your help. I want to propose to her. And I have this idea to get all our friends together and kind of recreate prom for Penny's birthday on Friday. I know it's last minute, but do you think you could help?"

"Oh, a promenade? I haven't attended one in ages. That sounds marvelous. We'll need horse drawn carriages." He snapped his fingers at Nigel. "Take notes."

Nigel pulled out a notebook from behind his back and wrote down 'horse drawn carriages.'

"No, not a promenade," I said. "A prom."

"Yes. *Promenade*. I've got this."

"No, I don't know what that is. I'm talking about like a high school prom."

Tanner just stared at me like he'd never heard of it before.

"With dancing."

"A promenade has forms of dancing..."

"No, like a prom." *What the hell? Why was he not getting this?* I pulled out my phone and did a Google search for prom. I held it up to show him some pictures.

He adjusted his glasses and squinted at my phone. "So just like a normal dance?"

"Yes. But it's for graduating seniors. Brooklyn and Penny both never got to attend theirs. I want to recreate it."

“Are there even strippers?” Tanner asked.

“No, there aren’t strippers.”

“What kind of promenade doesn’t have strippers?”

When he was first talking about a promenade it sounded old-fashioned. The stripper thing just came out of left field.

“Proms don’t have strippers. No sex club stuff at all.”

“None? That doesn’t even sound that fun.”

I laughed. “It’ll be fun. You attend events all the time, Tanner. Normal ones with dancing. You know what I’m asking for here. Prom.”

“I’ve honestly never heard of it. Have you, Nigel?”

“No strippers or horse drawn carriages? But there’s dancing? That doesn’t make sense, Master Matthew. There must at least be horses. And cheese plates.”

What the fuck? “No horses. Or weird cheeses. You guys, it’s just like a normal high school dance. Can you help or not?”

Nigel shrugged. “It sounds boring. But we can do it.”

“Can I at least choose the location?” Tanner asked. “I have a few venues that I think would be perfect.”

I didn’t think that was a good idea, based on the fact that he was very confused about what I wanted. “Run everything by me before confirming anything.”

“But I already booked the carriages,” Nigel said.

“How? You didn’t even move.”

“I did. You just didn’t notice. We’ve been having this conversation for a while.”

“You guys have to run everything by me and James. He’s helping, since it’s for Penny’s birthday too.”

“Oh, good,” Tanner said. “Certainly he’ll know what a promenade is. I’m starting to think it’s a billionaire thing.” He slapped me on my back. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Sick burn on the fact that I only had millions. “Just promise me there won’t be tons of sex club stuff,” I said. “I want it to be classy.”

“I only ever hire classy strippers. This is going to be epic.” Tanner shook his head and his smile grew. “I can’t believe Kennedy and Felix were true love. I’m the best. I bet I can set up a few more people at our Friday promenade.”

Hopefully James was actually going to help me with the planning. Because apparently Tanner only knew how to throw orgies. And I wanted my proposal to be perfect this time around.

Chapter 24

Tuesday

Brooklyn

I'd texted Kennedy, asking if she'd mind if Jacob and I invaded their practice. She said she couldn't wait to see us.

But I knew she was hurting. I knew she'd fallen for Matt. Honestly, I knew exactly how she felt. Because Matt had broken my heart before too.

A part of me wanted to just stay home and bake more cupcakes with my new assistant. Nigel had been here all day with us. And even though he sampled as much as Jacob, he was much more helpful in the kitchen.

The timer went off and Nigel scrambled off the counter to pull out the most recent batch. Yes, he was sitting on the counter with Jacob. I tried to tell him he could sit in a normal chair, but he wouldn't hear of it.

Nigel pulled on his oven mitts and grabbed the tray.

"Perfection, mademoiselle," he said and smiled at me. "Time to taste test!" He hoisted himself back onto the counter and grabbed a cookie for himself and Jacob.

"Wait until you try Mommy's cuppycakes," Jacob said.

"They're delicioso."

"You're a fan of the fine art of language, Mr. Jacob? My Spanish is rusty. But I can teach you French."

"Sí."

“It’s oui in French,” Nigel said.

Jacob nodded. “Oui.”

Honestly, Jacob learning yet another language didn’t sound great to me. I didn’t even know all the words he’d started using in Spanish. But I was happy that the two of them were getting along.

“It’ll have to wait though,” Nigel said. “We must get to practice.”

“Oh, are you coming too?” I asked.

Nigel slid off the counter and turned the oven off. “Oui.”

“Oui!” Jacob yelled.

“They can’t practice without me,” Nigel said. “I’m the water boy.”

Somehow that made so much sense.

“And we mustn’t be late. I’ll drive. I don’t have the limo today though. We’ll have to take my Hummer. Are you ready, Mr. Jacob?”

“Sí oui!”

“We’ll work on it. Let’s wrap up these cookies for the hungry gents. Today I’m also the snack boy!”

I was nervous the whole ride over to Empire High. I hadn’t seen Kennedy and Matt together up close. What if they looked...right together? What if me showing up back here was just messing up Kennedy’s life all over again? I’d stayed away because I thought everyone was better off without me. I never intended to show up and cause chaos.

I wasn't sure if I could walk away now though. It was selfish, but I wanted to be here. And I wanted Matt.

And Nigel's driving didn't help my nerves. He was a freaking crazy driver. I swear he drove through two red lights within two minutes.

"Nigel!" I yelled as he sped up and switched lanes without a signal.

"What?"

"Slow down! And obey traffic lights. And use your signal."

"Newfangled stuff. I don't need them. Besides, this thing is like a tank. Also, I would never let harm come to you or Mr. Jacob." He drove through another red light.

Jesus. I grabbed on to the dashboard. "Nigel!"

"But if you insist I use my turn signal..." He flipped on the right turn signal and turned left.

That's even worse! "Please just a little slower."

"Too late, we're here." The Hummer jumped over a curb and came to a screeching halt in the small parking lot by Empire High.

"Again, again!" Jacob said from the back seat and clapped.

Nope. Never again. I climbed out of the Hummer and got my son out too.

Nigel was talking about the shortfalls of American football to *real* football all the way to the stadium. Jacob was nodding along, absorbing all of it.

Kennedy and Matt were both already on the field. They were both laughing about something. Kennedy punched his arm.

Honestly...they looked like they always had. Like friends. The three of us had hung out all the time back in high school. This didn't have to be weird.

And Jacob running right up to Matt made whatever nerves I had dissipate. This was going to be okay. As long as Jacob was smiling, it was impossible for me not to.

Matt lifted Jacob up and put him on his shoulders.

"Mommy, Mommy look how big I am!"

"So big!" I said and smiled up at him. One day he'd be tall, just like his father. But I didn't want that day to come any time soon. I wanted him to be my little boy forever.

Matt leaned forward and kissed my cheek. Yeah, this didn't feel weird even in the slightest.

"Hey," Kennedy said and gave me a big hug.

She sounded as happy as Jacob. I hugged her back.

"I really need to talk to you," she whispered. "Like right now."

Oh crap. She didn't actually sound happy at all when she was whispering to me. It was all an act. I knew all this was too good to be true.

"Maybe we can go sit on the bleachers for a minute?" she asked.

"I'm so sorry, Kennedy. I knew we shouldn't have come..."

"What?" She pulled back. "Of course you should have. I want you here. Matt wants you here. This is exactly where you

should be.”

“Then...what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I just really need to talk to you about...”

“Congratulations on the coitus, Kennedy,” Nigel said and plopped the cookies down by the water.

We both turned to Nigel.

“What...how did you...” Kennedy’s voice trailed off. “How did you even know that, Nigel?”

“Tanner told me.”

“How did Tanner know?”

Nigel pressed his lips together. “I presumed you called him?”

“No. Wait did Felix...”

“Yes that was it. Felix did it! He tattled!”

“Wait,” I said and turned to Kennedy. “You and Felix?”

She nodded, a huge smile on her face.

I squealed and hugged her again. “It’s about time.”

She laughed.

“What’s coitus, Coach?” Jacob asked.

“Oh.” Matt cleared his throat. “That’s when two people... ummm...you’re a little young for that, but...”

As curious as I was to find out how Matt would finish that sentence, I grabbed the whistle around his neck and blew it.

“Time for practice!”

Matt looked very relieved as all the players ran over.

“How many girls are you dating right now?” one of the players asked.

“Shut it, Smith,” Matt said.

At least he knew how to handle that question. I grabbed Kennedy’s hand and pulled her over to the bench. “Tell me everything.”

She was beaming. “I don’t even know what happened...” she laughed. “Sorry, wrong words. I remember every second this time. But Felix just...ugh. I don’t know how to explain it. I thought I was so far in the friend zone with him but when we hung out one on one it was just different. A good different. A really really good different.”

I couldn’t stop smiling.

“I really did think we were just friends. But he told me the other night at dinner that he had liked me freshman year. And I never knew that. I always thought it was one sided. But when we met up last night just the two of us, I saw everything differently. I never saw him as just a friend. I always wanted more. Kind of like the opposite of what I had with Matt. Matt and I were friends that turned...whatever it was for a second. And I had the biggest crush on Felix but we were just friends for the longest time. And now? This feels so right.”

“I’m so happy for you, Kennedy.”

“Just for the record, I don’t ever hop in bed with guys on the first date. Ever. There was a reason why Matt and I didn’t do that. He told you that right? That we didn’t...”

I nodded.

“I actually hadn’t slept with anyone since Cupcake. Every guy that was ever remotely interested in me, I kept at arm’s length. Taking things slow. Including Matt. But I think maybe I just knew it wasn’t right. *Especially* with Matt.”

I laughed. “Kennedy, it’s fine, you don’t have to keep diminishing that.”

“I know but...I think maybe I was just waiting for Felix this whole time.”

“You know, back at the lake house, I didn’t know what anyone was actually up to. But I had this vision in my head of what I thought everyone was doing. I pictured Matt with a big family.” I stared out at the field where the team was letting Jacob run around the field with the ball. It looked like Jacob and Nigel were playing keep away from the players.

The more days that passed, the more right this felt. I wasn’t scared of giving Matt my heart again. And I was hoping that Jacob and I were enough for him. Especially surrounded by all our friends. We were one big family. Just...different than how we’d originally planned. Different wasn’t bad.

I turned to Kennedy. “And I thought you were married to Felix. Traveling the world together taking photos. I pictured it so clearly. And I can’t picture it any other way.”

“I guess it’s never too late for that to come true,” Kennedy said. She stared at me for a few seconds. “And you swear you don’t like Felix? Because I’m really tired of sharing guys.”

I laughed. “It’s like what you said about Matt. I love Felix. So much. But I’m not in love with him.”

Kennedy exhaled slowly. “Good.” The smile slowly spread across her face again. “I’m going to marry that boy.”

I felt tears welling in my eyes.

“And you’re going marry Matt. And everything is going to be like how it was supposed to be 16 years ago.”

I wanted her words to make me smile too. But they felt like a knife in my chest. *Supposed to be*. No, Matt and I weren’t *supposed to be* 16 years ago. Because I was *supposed to* have 15 beautiful years with Miller instead. Sixteen if I was being completely honest. I’d loved Miller for 16 years.

I stared at Matt running after Jacob on the field. And if I was still being completely honest...I’d been in love with Matt for 16 years too.

I’d always loved both of them.

And I always would.

Nothing hurt more than loss. But one thing I’d learned over the years was that knowing how much your heart could hurt made little moments like this feel so much bigger. I knew how fleeting they were. Miller was gone. And I was going to keep living for him.

“Which one is Henry?” I asked.

“The kicker.” Kennedy pointed to the scrawniest guy on the field.

It felt like Matt had been a world away from me. But we both had Henry projects. We were both haunted by each other’s ghosts. We both still loved each other. And that was all that mattered.

The cool autumn breeze blew and I shivered. I turned around and stared at the empty stands. Miller had sat in them when I came to Matt's games. He would have loved seeing Jacob out on the field. He would have loved this.

And I was hoping that what Matt said was true...that on game days, if you squinted and let the faces blur in the stands, that you could see ghosts. I hoped that I'd be able to see Miller smiling at me. Letting me know this was okay. Because I really needed it to be okay.

"What are you looking at?" Kennedy asked.

I shook my head. "Just remembering." The wind blew again and I closed my eyes. I knew why Matt kept coming back here. And it wasn't just the ghosts in the stands. The freshly cut grass of the field and the fall air reminded me of him too. We'd fallen in love in the fall. We'd had one season together. And now I was ready to experience the rest of them with him. I was ready. I opened my eyes and stared at Matt.

He turned to me, like he could sense I was staring. He lifted his hand and rubbed the tip of his nose with his index finger.

I smiled. Our secret signal from back in high school. So that I'd know he was thinking about me even when we weren't beside each other.

I rubbed the tip of my nose too and he smiled.

Chapter 25

Tuesday

Matt

I had Brooklyn's ring back. It looked even better than it originally had. That jeweler was a genius. And he'd somehow even predicted that I'd only need this ring.

I only had one more stop to make before I headed over to James' for some prom planning. I pulled up outside the restaurant Poppy had picked out.

Mr. Pruitt had done what he'd promised. Poppy had texted me earlier today telling me she was ready to sign the papers. She'd be out of my life. For good.

I walked into the restaurant and spotted Poppy chatting to someone with a camera. When she saw me, she immediately stepped away from the guy she was talking to and ushered me over to a table.

"What is that about?"

"To capture our break up, of course."

"We're not breaking up. We were never together."

"Whatever you say, sugar tits. I can't believe you ratted me out to Uncle Richard. But I guess it all worked out because he was very impressed by my blackmailing you."

He would be impressed by that.

“Here.” She handed me the contract. “It’s all signed. You don’t have to make a scene and check it or anything.”

The way she said it would have made me check it, if I wasn’t planning to already. I skipped to where my signature already was. Hers was scrawled beside mine. This was binding. If I knew anything about her, it was that she honored contracts.

A waiter stopped by. I was just about to tell him I wouldn’t be staying, but Poppy cut me off. “We’ll have two glasses of whatever stains the most.”

“Um...stains?” the waiter asked and looked at me.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Red wine will do,” Poppy said. “But make it expensive. He’s paying.”

The waiter shrugged and walked away.

“Poppy, I told you I’m not having dinner with you. I have plans.”

“It’s just drinks. Besides, we can still tear the contract up, if you want. I think we could really do great things together, Matthew. Expand the business. I’ve always wanted to do more internationally. And with our skills combined? We’d be unstoppable.”

Now she wanted to break international laws? I wasn’t interested in any of it. “I’m in love with Brooklyn.”

She sighed. “How utterly predictable. Are you at least going to thank me?”

“For what?”

“I told you, I did it for you. Partially. I rather enjoyed myself.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Poppy.”

“The car bomb.”

I lowered my eyebrows at her. “What?”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not talking about the one that killed Brooklyn’s husband. Although, you’d probably be thanking me for that too if I was responsible. Since you’re in love with her and now she’s single again. But no, that wasn’t my doing. I’m talking about the retaliation. The Locatellis killed a member of my family. So I blew up the Locatelli heir.” She made an exploding gesture, showing just how expendable she thought a human life was. “I thought you’d be pleased with me.”

“What about our contracts makes you think that I’d be pleased about you murdering anyone?”

She shrugged. “Murdering someone you care about is different than murdering someone who’s out of line.”

“Murdering anyone isn’t the solution. Maybe you should learn from what happened with the Locatellis. They resorted to trying to kill Mr. Pruitt’s daughter. And all it got them was losing their son.”

“Oh but Matthew, there is nothing more powerful than instilling fear in your allies. Do you think anyone is going to cross me now?” A smile spread over her face. “I own New York. And it could have been ours together. It still can be...” She reached across the table to grab my hand.

I pulled my hand onto my lap.

She pouted at me.

Really, who did that work on?

“Well, I do need to thank you. For keeping Brooklyn away from the family business. So that I could have what was rightfully mine. And for getting Mr. Pruitt to step down. I have everything I’ve ever wanted. Except someone to share all the glory with.”

Mr. Pruitt stepped down because Brooklyn had asked him to. It had nothing to do with me. But I figured talking about Brooklyn any more in front of Poppy wasn’t a good thing. I just nodded. “Best of luck to you with all that. I’m going to get going...”

“But our drinks just arrived!”

The waiter dropped off two glasses of red wine.

She lifted one up. “Cheers to our future,” Poppy said.

I didn’t lift my glass. “There is no future. It was nice knowing you, Poppy.”

“Nice knowing me? Matthew, we’re about to be family, one way or another.”

One way or another? “Poppy, you and I are done. I’m only going to say this one more time: I’m in love with Brooklyn. I’ve always been in love with her. And I always will be.”

“If you say so.” She turned to the paparazzi sitting at the table next to ours and snapped her fingers at him.

He picked up his camera and took a photo.

“What are you doing, Poppy?” I asked.

“I need to make sure everyone knows that *I* dumped *you*.”

“And how are you going to...”

She threw the contents of her wine glass right in my face.

What the fuck?!

“You slept with my cousin?!” she shouted for the whole restaurant to hear.

“Poppy, sit down,” I hissed.

“No, I won’t sit down, you slut! The two of you belong together.”

I tried to wipe the wine out of my eyes.

“Burn in hell, you cheating asshole!” She grabbed the second glass of wine and threw that in my face too.

I couldn’t see anything but the flash of a camera. I sighed.

“Of all the people in New York,” she yelled, “you had to cheat on me with my own dear cousin?!”

I was pretty sure the whole restaurant got the gist of what she was trying to accomplish here. “Would you stop yelling now?”

She leaned forward to whisper in my ear. “See you at the next family get-together, hot stuff.” She bit down on my earlobe.

I scooted my chair away from her. “Cut it out, Poppy.”

“Whore!” She slapped me hard across the face, winked at me, and then stormed out of the restaurant.

I didn’t love anything about the weird shit she was saying about family get-togethers. But she’d signed the contract. That was all that mattered. Scarlett was safe. And I was free.

“What happened to you?” James asked as he opened the door.

“I finally figured out how to get out of that mess with Poppy.”

“By pretending to die?”

I looked down at the red wine all over my shirt and laughed. I guess it did look a little like blood. “No, blackmail and a binding contract. This was the result of the break up scene for the tabloids. All that matters is Scarlett is safe.”

“Thanks, man,” James said. “For handling that. But are you out of your fake engagement too?”

I nodded. “It’s all in the past. And no problem, I kind of owed you.”

“Can there be balloons?” I heard Penny’s voice flitting into the foyer.

What was she doing here? I walked into their great room. Penny, Rob, and Mason were all seated around the coffee table talking.

“I hope you don’t mind, I brought in the calvary,” James said and plopped down next to Penny.

She lifted up her notebook. “Oh, we should play music from when we were all in high school.”

“We weren’t all in high school at the same time, though,” Rob said. “Because you were like 10 when we were teenagers.”

She laughed. “From both our times in high school.” She jotted the idea down in a notebook.

“Penny,” I said.

She looked up at me. “Bad idea?”

No, it was a great idea. But that wasn't the point. "It's a *surprise* prom. Which means we're planning it for you. You already found out too soon so that James couldn't do a promposal for you..."

"Are you going to do a promposal for Brooklyn?"

"Yeah." That was going to be half the fun. And I wanted to see her reaction to gauge how she was feeling about a real proposal.

"Since the prom is on my birthday, and I found out about it early...can I watch?"

"You want to watch my promposal with Brooklyn?"

"Absolutely." She smiled.

"I mean...I was going to do it tonight."

She looked down at my stained shirt. "You're going to need to shower. James will let you borrow something. Right?" She looked up at James.

"I'm sure I have something that's...stretchy," he said.

Rob laughed. "Matt's fat."

I hit Rob in the back of the head.

"You wish you guys were as ripped as us," Mason said.

"We're not having this conversation again," Penny said. "You all have six-packs, so calm down. Okay, here's the plan..."

"We're going to take turns bench pressing you?" Rob asked.

"No." She shook her head. "I'm going to go over to Matt's house right now to hang out with Brooklyn. And I'll let you guys plan the prom of Brooklyn and my dreams. This is going

to be great, I really want to get to know her better.” She stood up. “Wait, should I bring Scarlett? Oh what if I stop by Tyler’s and grab Axel too? I bet Jacob and Axel will get along really well...”

“Penny, are you okay?”

“What? Of course.”

“You seem...nervous,” I said.

She exhaled slowly. “I really want her to like me. We’re going to practically be sisters.”

“Brooklyn already likes you.”

“Usually girls that fall in love with the same man have a lot in common,” Rob said. “To clarify, I’m talking about James here. Not Matt.”

“Hilarious,” Penny said. “Okay, I’m going to go. But definitely note down the balloons because that would be fun. And do you need me to pick anything up for your promposal? Wait, does that need balloons too?”

“Penny, I’ve got this,” I said. “Go have fun with Brooklyn. I’ll be there in a couple hours.”

“See you guys later.” She leaned down and kissed James before heading upstairs to grab Scarlett.

There was a knock on the door.

“Who is that?” Rob asked.

“Tanner.” James stood up to answer the door.

Rob frowned. “What is Tanner doing here?”

“He’s helping plan the prom,” I said and sat down where Penny had been sitting.

“But...why? We don’t need his help. He didn’t even go to school with us.”

“Neither did Penny,” I said.

“Yeah but...she’s Penny. She gets us.”

She definitely did. I smiled. It was really fun hanging out just the four of us. Now that I wasn’t harboring any secret hatred toward them. It felt like it used to. Back in high school before everything broke.

Tanner and Nigel walked into the room. “So what are we doing tonight, lads?” Tanner asked.

I stared at him. “Planning the prom.” We’d talked about this extensively.

“Oh. That’s already done.” He leapt over the back of the couch and stole James’ seat.

“What do you mean it’s already done? I told you to confirm everything with me first.”

“I thought you were joking. We’re all set for Friday night.”

I was scared to ask, but... “Where is it going to be?”

“Club Onyx, of course.”

“What the hell? I specifically said no sex club stuff.”

“This is going to be so much better than actual prom,” Mason said.

Tanner pointed at Mason. “He gets it. Speaking of getting it...” he turned to James. “What are your thoughts on

promenades versus proms?”

“Is that like a French thing?” James asked.

“What is up with you guys? It’s a good thing Nigel and I planned this or it would have been a disaster.”

“Indeed,” Nigel said. “We have saved the day. I already ordered a dozen cheese plates and lots of carriages.”

Damn it, Nigel!

Chapter 26

Tuesday

Brooklyn

It was easy to feel okay when Matt was by my side. But it was just as easy to feel *not* okay when he wasn't with me.

Guilt wrapped around my chest at just the thought of laughing with someone other than Miller. Holding someone other than Miller. Loving someone other than Miller.

Love wasn't supposed to hurt this fucking much.

I drew closer to the fire. The smell of burning wood reminded me of my husband. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath of him. Tonight everything just hurt.

My phone buzzed.

I opened my eyes and stared down at a text from Tanner: "Are you okay?"

I took a deep breath of the burning fire. Tanner understood. And even though he wouldn't talk to me about the woman he'd lost, he knew exactly how I'd be feeling tonight. He knew I needed this check in. I texted him back: "It hurts the most when Matt's not here."

"I told you grief is easier when you're surrounded by love."

He had told me that. I stared down at his words. And he was right. Of course he was. I'd tried to tell myself that I could do this on my own. But I didn't want to drown in my grief. Not again. I remembered feeling like a shadow of myself when I'd

moved to California. I didn't want that. I just wanted to be... me.

My phone buzzed again. "And even though Matt's busy right now, there are other people that love you in this city. Open the door when you hear a knock."

I lowered my eyebrows. What was he talking about? The only person I hung out with one on one other than Matt was Tanner. And I was pretty sure they were together right now. Maybe it was Nigel? But Nigel wouldn't knock. He'd walked right in this morning while I was baking.

I jumped when there was a knock on the door.

Jacob came running down the stairs. "Is Abuelo here to play with me? He's the best to play knights with."

I laughed. Yeah...because Tanner actually let Jacob hit him with his sticks for some reason. "I'm not sure. Let's see who it is."

I peered out the blinds to get a look. I was still a little on edge in this city. My dad might appear at any moment and try to steal my liver or something. Or Poppy might pop up with a bomb.

But it wasn't some sinister presence. Penny was standing there with a bottle of wine and Scarlett. And a few people I didn't recognize - another woman, a little girl, and a little boy. Or maybe I did recognize the other woman. I think she'd been at the homecoming game. But that day was a little blurry.

I knew Penny was close to Matt. And she was James' wife. I wanted to get to know her better. Really, I wanted to thank her for taking care of the Untouchables when I couldn't. Because I

knew she had. And I knew just how much work that was. They were all impossible.

“Scarlett!” Jacob yelled. He ran to the door and threw it open.

“Hey, Jacob!” Scarlett walked into the house and pointed to the other kids. “This is Sophie and Axel. They can be your friends too.”

“Okay,” Jacob said. I thought he’d be nervous, but he looked so excited to have more playmates. “Can we play cowboys and Indians?”

Well, that explained it. That was much more fun with more people. And we’d always played everything just the three of us.

“Can I be a cowboy?” asked the little boy.

Jacob nodded.

“Where are the guns?”

Jacob didn’t have any toy guns. We’d lived a really simple life at the lake house. We used sticks as swords. And we just made finger guns for our pistols.

Jacob lifted his hand, not at all embarrassed that he didn’t have some fancy toy gun. “Pew.”

The boy smiled and lifted both his hands.

Scarlett screamed and grabbed Jacob’s arm. They ducked for cover behind the couch.

The other little girl looked up at me. “Can I have one of those?” She pointed to the cupcakes on the counter. “But only if the icing is chocolate. And the cupcake is vanilla. And no

sprinkles. I'll have them on the side if I have to, but I don't really like them."

I laughed. Because it was the most ridiculous request and also kind of the cutest thing ever. "I think I have just what you're looking for." I grabbed one of the cupcakes that fit her descriptive list.

Her eyes beamed.

"Sophie!" Scarlett yelled. "You need to be a cowboy with Axel!"

"Coming!" She ran into the family room carrying her special order cupcake.

The woman next to Penny cringed. "There's probably an 80 percent chance that is going to end up on the floor." She hurried after Sophie.

"Sorry to barge in," Penny said. "But the guys were hanging out and...I figured maybe you could use some company. Plus Scarlett asks me ten times a day to hang out with Jacob again."

"Jacob does the same thing."

"And I brought wine." She lifted up the bottle. "I'll be honest with you, I know very little about wine. Daphne is great at picking things out though and she recommended this one." She lowered her voice. "She orders everything just like her daughter. It's a nightmare when we go out to dinner."

I laughed. "Okay, so Sophie is Daphne's daughter. And Daphne is married to Rob, right?"

"Nailed it."

“I was kind of a mess on Saturday. What is Mason’s wife’s name again?”

“Bee. She had a work thing or she would have been here too.”

Daphne walked back over carrying the cupcake. “I can’t believe Matt restored this house. I really thought he lived in a bachelor pad.”

“Wait, you’ve never seen this place?”

“No,” Daphne said. “He never invited us over.”

“Really?” I knew Matt was close with his friends. And his friends’ wives.

Penny nodded. “I only saw it because I showed up unexpected with a housewarming present he didn’t want. I refused to be turned away.”

“I wonder why he didn’t want you to see it,” I said.

Daphne looked at Penny.

“What?” I asked.

“I know everyone’s already told you this, but ever since I’ve known him he’s been holding on to all this pain. And...”

Daphne looked around the kitchen. “This is a family home. Do you think maybe he made it for you?”

Matt had said that. He kept this part of his life private from his friends. Not just the house. But his paintings upstairs.

“One of the reasons why Daphne is amazing,” Penny said.

“She’s the most understanding person I know. She... gets it.” It looked like she wanted to say more, but she pressed her lips together.

“I lost my brother,” Daphne said. “And I know that’s not the same. At all. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through. But I’m here if you want to talk. We all are. Matt wouldn’t let us in. But I don’t want it to be that way with us. I know only Mason and Matt are related, but I view them as family just as much as Rob and James. As far as I’m concerned, if you’re with Matt, you’re basically our sister.”

“Agreed,” Penny said.

I barely knew these women. But Tanner was right. I did feel loved. They wanted to get to know me just as much as I wanted to get to know them. But I didn’t know if I wanted to spend the whole night talking about how much my heart was hurting. I’d rather fill in some missing pieces. “So what on earth is it like being married to Rob?”

Daphne laughed. “An adventure. Even more so now with the kids. Every day is like a circus.”

That was a really great way to put it. “And is that your son?” I looked back over at the kids. The little boy didn’t look very much like Rob or Daphne. He had a head of blonde hair. “Or is that maybe Mason’s son?”

“Mason and Bee don’t have any kids,” Penny said. “Yet. But I bet they will soon. That’s Axel. He’s the son of my friends Tyler and Hailey. You’ll love them too. Sophie, Scarlett, and Axel are all the same age. They’re practically inseparable. And now Jacob too. How old is he?”

“Four.”

“That’s so perfect. They’ll all be in the same grade. All the kids are enrolled in the same kindergarten. We’ll have to get

Jacob a spot too.”

“Oh. I don’t think...” my voice trailed off. These women were both married to Hunters. They were filthy rich. “I doubt I can afford the same school that your kids are going to.”

“Well Matt can,” Penny said.

I was sure that was true. But Matt and I weren’t technically together. And I wasn’t going to ask him to pay for my son’s kindergarten. As far as I was concerned, children should go to free kindergartens.

“Sorry,” Penny quickly said. “It’s just...the two of you are going to end up together. I have a really good sense about these things.”

“Penny thinks she’s a matchmaker,” Daphne said. “She’s definitely not. She set Matt up twice. Once with a girl who accidentally set his dick on fire. And once with our wedding planner, Justin, because she thought Matt was secretly gay.”

I had a lot of questions about what she just said. But my mind stuck on one thing. “Wait. Justin Belle?”

“Yeah, do you know him?” Daphne asked.

I nodded. Yeah I knew Justin. He’d practically been my fairy godmother back in high school. And now he was a wedding planner? That was his dream. I couldn’t believe he’d done it. “I’m so glad he followed his dreams. I knew him back in high school when he was working for Odegaard. Did he plan both of your weddings?”

Penny nodded. “And he’s amazing. He planned Daphne’s shotgun wedding in record time.”

Daphne laughed. “Let’s have some wine and you can rapid fire questions at us. Penny and I haven’t had a drink in a million years. I figure now is as good of a time as ever to pump and dump.”

That sounded like a good idea. I had so much more I needed to know.

Okay, I officially loved these girls. I’d never really been able to see why James was with Rachel. And I definitely couldn’t see him with Isabella. But Penny and him made total sense. I bet she made him smile every day. And that’s exactly what he needed. I remembered his silly proposal back in high school. Where he said we could be miserable together. Why be miserable when you could be so blissfully happy?

And Daphne was the complete opposite of Rob. I loved Rob, but I felt like this was a good thing. No one needed two Robs in a room. And I bet Daphne balanced him out. She was always quick to laugh at a joke too. She was a perfect match for him.

“Isabella left you naked in the warehouse district?” Penny asked.

I nodded. “I had to make my way all the way back to the hotel in just my underwear and a map wrapped around myself.”

Penny cringed. “And then what happened?”

I went to your husband. I walked in on him with his cock shoved down Rachel’s throat. He helped me when no one else would. I remembered him holding me in the shower as I cried. “James helped me.” That seemed like the best way to put the

events of that night. “But God, I messed everything up so bad back then. The Caldwells were fighting with the Hunters. And even though it was Isabella’s fault...I put some of that blame on myself. I’m just so happy they’re all friends again.”

“They had another falling out after college,” Penny said. “Not anything like what you described in high school. It was more that they drifted apart. I asked James about it the other night. And I think they were all just so broken from what happened. It was hard for them to see each other. It was hard not to talk about it because Matt didn’t want to. It was all such a mess. You left such a hole in all their hearts.”

I got that. They’d all left a hole in my heart too. I was only in love with Matt. But I’d loved each of the Untouchables in my own way. “I can’t believe no one calls them the Untouchables anymore.”

“Because they weren’t untouchable,” Daphne said. “They lost you.”

I took another sip of my wine. “Part of the reason why I stayed away was because I thought everyone was better off without me. I thought they were okay. I really did. I never meant to hurt anyone.”

“Time heals all wounds,” Daphne said. “I truly believe that.”

Penny nodded. “Time helped James, Rob, and Mason. And I know it would have eventually healed Matt too, but I’m so glad you showed up when you did. You two are so meant to be.”

Penny was definitely a romantic. And I don’t know if it was the wine, or the fact that I couldn’t get Matt out of my head all

night, but I believed what she said. That maybe Matt and I were meant to be *now*. It was our time to be happy together.

Penny's phone buzzed. She downed her glass. "It's showtime," she said.

"What?" Daphne asked.

"Wait for it."

I laughed. "You sound like Rob."

"This is actually even more epic than something Rob would plan. Come with me. Daphne, will you stay here and watch the kids?"

"Um...sure?" Daphne seemed just as confused as I was.

Penny pulled me out the front door.

Matt was standing there with a boombox on his shoulder, blasting *My Dirty Little Secret*. He was in his old football uniform, minus the helmet.

And for just a moment, it felt like we were back in time.

"Brooklyn, I wanted to do this 16 years ago." He put the boombox down and knelt on the city sidewalk.

Oh my God, what was he doing?

"Will you..."

I shook my head. I wasn't ready. It was too soon. I couldn't do this to Miller. I couldn't. I wouldn't. I just kept shaking my head. *I can't, Matt. I can't.* I felt the tears trailing down my cheeks. And I was pretty sure I was freaking out because I wanted to say yes. I wanted to and it killed me.

Matt kept the smile on his face. But he lowered his eyebrows ever so slightly. Like he was disappointed by my reaction.

“Matt...” my voice cracked.

He cleared his throat. “Brooklyn, will you go to prom with me?”

Wait...what? “Prom?”

“It’s a promposal!” Penny said as she snapped a photo of us.

“Prom?” I said again.

Matt got up off his knee. “Don’t cry.” He wiped my tears away with his thumbs. “You said you missed out on so many things. I can give you this. We’re going to recreate prom for you. And for Penny. For her birthday party celebration this Friday. Be my date, Brooklyn.”

I nodded. I could do that. I could definitely do that. I threw my arms around him.

He laughed and caught me around the waist. He twirled me around in his arms to the song that meant the world to me. And I had the oddest sensation that everything was going to be okay. Because Matt would always be there to catch me when I fell.

Chapter 27

Tuesday

Matt

Brooklyn said yes to going to prom. But it would have been a no for a real proposal. I paced in front of the fireplace in our house. Yes, *our* house. The one I'd renovated for *us*.

I knew Brooklyn was grieving. I understood what that felt like better than anyone. But when I'd lost her I'd leaned on everyone around me. Why wasn't she leaning on me? Why wasn't she letting me back in? Did she not understand that I was all in?

I stopped and stared at the fire. It crackled and popped and I took a deep breath. Or maybe she did understand. And she just...didn't want the same things as I did anymore.

I tried to shake away the thought, but I couldn't. What if she didn't want to get married again? What if she didn't want to have any more kids?

Reluctantly, I lifted my gaze from the fire and stared at the pictures on the mantel. I'd done my best to avoid looking at them. But it was impossible when they were right in front of me. I stared at the familiar picture of Brooklyn and her mother. The next was of Miller holding a baby Jacob in his arms. It felt like I'd stopped breathing. I stared at Brooklyn, Miller, and Jacob covered in mud. Jacob was holding a football in his hands. They all looked so happy. I stepped in front of the last picture. Miller was kissing Brooklyn in the snow. They were

in pajamas. Christmas pajamas. I swallowed hard. That must have been when they made it official. A Christmas wedding. It felt like a knife was in my chest. Not just because they got married right around the date that Brooklyn and I should have. It hurt because Brooklyn was staring up at Miller like she used to look at me 16 years ago. She was in love with Miller. Really in love. They were happy. And I didn't know if I could make Brooklyn that happy again. I wanted to. Desperately. But what if I wasn't enough?

A floorboard creaked on the stairs. I turned to see Jacob in Brooklyn's arms, wide awake even though she'd been upstairs reading him a bedtime story for a while.

"He wanted to say goodnight to his dad," she said, without really looking at me.

I didn't know what that meant. The lack of eye contact. And the saying goodnight thing.

She carried Jacob outside. She'd left the door ajar. And I couldn't help but follow her. I paused outside the door and listened to the two of them.

"I don't see Daddy," Jacob said.

"We just have to look a little harder, sweet boy."

"But he's not here."

"Of course he is. Even if we can't see him, it just means he's behind a cloud."

"Nooooo."

"Yes."

Jacob giggled.

I peered out the crack in the door to see her tickling his side.

“We’ll see him tomorrow, okay?” Brooklyn said.

“I can’t go to bed without saying goodnight to Daddy.”

“I know, me either.” Brooklyn kissed the top of his head.

“Let’s wait a few more minutes to see if the clouds part.”

They both just stood there on the patio, looking at the sky, like they’d rather be anywhere in the world but here.

I felt like I couldn’t breathe as I watched the two of them staring at the sky. I was so consumed by what I wanted. What I needed. But Brooklyn and Jacob didn’t want the same things. They didn’t need me as much as I needed them. They’d always wish I was someone else.

“Wait, look!” Brooklyn said. She was pointing up. “The brightest star, remember?”

“Daddy!”

I felt tears welling in my eyes.

“I miss you,” Jacob said to the star.

Fuck. I took a step back, wiping the tears from my eyes. I took another step back. I’d never loved anyone the way I loved Brooklyn. But she’d loved someone else the way she’d loved me. Maybe she’d loved Miller more. And it didn’t matter that I wanted to adopt Jacob. I wasn’t his dad.

I felt like an intruder standing here in this hall. I wasn’t supposed to be seeing this. I wasn’t supposed to be interfering. I wasn’t even sure they wanted me here.

But I couldn’t make myself leave. Because I loved Brooklyn. I loved her so much that it physically hurt to see her hurting.

Wasn't there a way to show Brooklyn that? Show her that my love was going to be enough to get us through this?

I took another deep breath. Panic had wrapped around my chest. I felt like I was losing her. And I couldn't lose her again. Over the past 16 years, whenever I felt shaken like this, I'd usually just go talk to Brooklyn. The dead her in the graveyard. Or... I stared back at the steps. I'd paint her. The version of her stuck at 16. But she wasn't stuck at 16 now.

Brooklyn and Jacob were talking to the stars. I knew how important it was to talk to the dead. But Brooklyn wasn't frozen in time anymore. And I was done living in the past. I knew exactly how to show Brooklyn she was my present and future.

I wandered up the stairs and into my studio. I needed a new portrait of Brooklyn. A real one of her. Not a fantasy from 16 years ago. The real thing. I grabbed a fresh canvas and my palette. I loved Brooklyn in the past. I squirted a blob of paint out. I loved her in the present. I squirted out another blot of paint and started to blend the colors together. And I was going to be the one to love her in the future.

I wasn't fucking going anywhere. It didn't matter if she was scared to accept my proposal. I brushed the first stroke against the canvas. It didn't matter if she told me no a thousand times. I'd keep asking.

I would never be Brooklyn's first husband. I'd never be Jacob's father.

But I could be Brooklyn's last husband. And I could help raise Jacob. I could love him like he was my own son. That had to be enough. Because I wasn't walking away.

“Matt?”

I didn't turn around. I kept painting. “You owe me something from 16 years ago.”

She walked in front of my easel. “And what is that?”

“When you got me all those painting supplies on Thanksgiving, you agreed to pose for me. I'm cashing in on that.”

Brooklyn smiled. “Okay, where do you want me? Here?” She took a step back and stared at me.

“Not quite.” We both knew that wasn't what she'd agreed to. I set my brush down and walked over to her. I grabbed the bottom of her sweater and pushed it up.

She laughed.

I kept pushing it up. “Lift your arms.”

“You're serious?”

“Of course I'm serious.”

“But Jacob could wake up...”

I walked back over to the door and locked it. “Take it off, Brooklyn.”

She pressed her lips together.

I reached out and unbuttoned her jeans.

“Matt, I don't think this is a good idea.” She looked over at one of the other portraits I'd painted of her.

I pushed her jeans down over her hips. “You're my muse, Brooklyn.”

She still didn't move. "But I don't look like that anymore."

She thought I was still in love with a ghost. She thought this version of her wasn't good enough. Was she kidding me?

"Every day you were gone, I didn't love you less. I loved you more." I pushed her sweater up again, and this time she lifted her arms. I tossed her sweater to the side and reached behind her back to unclasp her bra.

She put her arms across her chest. She'd been shy about this 16 years ago too. And I wasn't having it now either.

I grabbed her arms and put them to her sides. "I painted you that way because it was the only version of you I knew. Not because it was the version I preferred." I hooked my thumbs in the waistband of her thong and pulled it down.

She stared at me like she didn't believe me. But at least she didn't try to hide herself from me this time.

"Is that why you freaked out when I got down on one knee earlier? Because you don't believe I love this version of you? The real you?"

She dropped her gaze to her bare feet.

I put my fingers under her chin so she'd look at me again.

"Tell me why you were upset."

"We're still just getting to know each other again, Matt."

I shook my head. "I've been in love with you for half my life. And I think that deep down, there was a piece of you that still loved me too. So tell me the real reason why you were upset."

She pressed her lips together as she stared at me. "Honestly?"

"Honesty is all I'm asking for."

“I was having a hard evening before Penny and Daphne showed up. I...I miss him.”

Honesty was what I wanted. But it still hurt.

“It’s the quiet moments when I’m alone that hurt the most. But I’m so happy when you’re here with me. You’re helping me to keep going, Matt.”

That’s all I’d needed to here. That she wanted me here. “Good. Now lie down.”

She smiled. “What?”

“Right there. On that sheet. You promised to pose nude for me. And after you see this painting, you’ll know I love you at 32 just as much as I loved you at 16.”

She didn’t move, so I picked her up in my arms.

She laughed as I carried her over to the sheet on the ground. I bent down and put her where I wanted her. And maneuvered her to be posing exactly how I wanted. Leaning back, propped up on her elbows, with her back arched.

I wanted to tell her that I wished we’d stayed home on Thanksgiving all those years ago. And done this instead like I’d wanted. But I knew she didn’t regret parts of what happened. I knew she’d been happy. And I was so fucking happy for her. But it hurt to hear about it. I couldn’t stand it. It made my chest burn. But I knew I needed to hear it. All of it.

I moved her legs so that her knees were bent. One a little more than the other, giving me a view of every inch of her. I put my fingers in her hair and pulled, tilting her head back. *Perfection.*

I went back to my easel.

“This pose is going to be very hard to keep,” she said.

I realized I wasn't even painting. I was just staring at her. Completely exposed to me. I picked up my palette again. This was so much better than a still image.

After a few minutes she shifted slightly. But I didn't even care. I wanted her to move. Break the pose. Do whatever she wanted. I was just happy she was breathing. That she was here with me.

I paused and stared at her toned legs. “Do you still like to run?”

She turned her head slightly to me. “Yeah.”

“I can tell.”

She laughed and turned her gaze back to the ceiling.

“Tell me what a normal day was like at the lake house,” I said. Even though it was hard for me to hear it, I wanted to. I needed to know about those years that I'd missed out on.

“I'd bake every morning with Jacob. And deliver the desserts to the restaurant where Miller was the chef. And in the afternoons I'd try to teach Jacob, but I mostly just played with him.”

I smiled. “It must have been hard to persuade Jacob to do something he didn't want to do. Because of how he says nooooo.” I did my best interpretation of him.

She laughed. “Exactly. He knows just how to make me give him whatever he wants.”

I got that. I certainly didn't know how to say no to him. I was used to spoiling Scarlett and Sophie. But I'd probably need to

do more than that if I was going to be a good father figure to Jacob. “Tell me more.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Matt.”

“I want you to tell me the truth. I want to know everything.”

She didn’t reply.

I was pretty sure this was as hard for her as it was for me. I focused on painting her left breast. Because it was easy to not be upset when I was staring at her breasts. “You told Jacob that his father is a star?”

“The North Star.”

I was quiet as I painted her.

She cleared her throat. “Miller put up string lights like the ones you hung for me outside. He said we were written in the stars.”

I stayed quiet. Even though it felt like there was a knife in my chest. I focused on her other breast.

“I feel close to him when I look at the stars. And I wanted to give Jacob that. And maybe Miller is up there, you know? I don’t know if I believe in any of that. It’s hard when so many people I know died too young. Is there really someone out there watching over us? If there is, it feels like all he does is take.”

“I felt that too. Bitter that you were taken away from me. And I liked having your tombstone to visit. And going to the school. But I only started visiting the school after I came back from college. Before then it was too hard to go to Empire

High. But mostly I felt close to you by doing this.” I nodded to the canvas.

“Painting nude portraits of me?”

I laughed. “No. Usually just your face. Sometimes when I really felt like shit, I’d think that maybe I made you cry more than I made you laugh.”

“Well that certainly wasn’t true.”

I saw the curve of her lip as she smiled at the ceiling. Her words and that smile made me feel better about how I’d treated her when we first met.

“You were everything to me, Matt.”

Were. “Tell me more. About the lake.”

“I used to run around it. I wore down a path around it. Miller used to run with me, but he secretly hated running. But I used to feel someone watching me. I was paranoid about it. And he knew I felt safer when he was beside me.”

“I like running,” I said.

She tilted her head toward me again. “Do you run in Central Park?”

“No, usually at the gym. But I can do that. For you.” I used to avoid Central Park because it reminded me of her. And sometimes when I remembered it was hard to breathe. Which wasn’t great in the middle of a workout.

She looked back up at the ceiling. “I think I’d like that.”

I smiled. This was good. We were making progress. “Tell me more.”

“I have a question for you first.”

I didn't respond, I just kept painting.

“Penny and Daphne mentioned a date setting your dick on fire?”

I laughed. “Yeah. Not my finest moment.”

“Did you like...upset her or something?”

“No. At least...I don't think so.” I put another blob of paint on my palette. “She was a little all over the place. In a cute way. Or maybe just a crazy way. I never talked about you with anyone I was close to. But for some reason with her, it just came out. And when I said you'd died, I think she was trying to reach for my hand on the table. She hit a candle into the bread oil. And then proceeded to try to put it out with the tablecloth. But when she yanked it, she hurled the flaming oil right onto the front of my pants.”

Brooklyn's body shook with laughter. “I think that's the best reaction ever to hearing about someone's death.”

“Oh and then she just ran out of the restaurant. Leaving me with singed pants. The next time I saw her, she jumped into a lake to avoid me.”

“What?” Brooklyn was laughing so hard now.

I stared at the way her breasts bounced.

“I kind of want to meet this girl.”

“You'd like her. Get this, she was married to Cupcake.”

Brooklyn turned to me. “No.”

I nodded.

“Ugh. That poor girl. Oh my God, I have the best idea. We should set her up with Nigel!”

“Nigel? I don’t think he’s into girls.”

“What? Of course he is.”

My paintbrush hovered in the air. “I don’t think so.”

“He tried to see me naked like ten times the other night when he surprised us with that bath,” Brooklyn said. “And he was very flirtatious while we were baking. He’s quite charming. And suave. But yes, he’s a little awkward. I think the two of them could be perfect.”

I laughed. Flirtatious, charming, and suave? Were we talking about the same Nigel? Because that sounded nothing like Nigel to me. I’d describe him as perverted, over-attentive, and really into meat. But then I thought about when he’d been able to infiltrate that restaurant as Francois. He said the hostess let him because he had a way with the ladies. Did he actually? I kind of always thought he was into me...

I shook my head. “If you say so.”

“Or if not Nigel, maybe she’d be a good fit for Tanner. Tanner’s not awkward at all, but he’s always saying strange things. And he’s funny. They’d probably laugh a lot together.”

“Tanner usually dates super tall models.”

“Oh. Interesting. He doesn’t seem that superficial to me.”

“He’s not. But his type definitely isn’t someone who’s going to set his dick on fire.”

Brooklyn laughed. “Fair enough. He does seem kind of lonely, though, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah. His girlfriend died when he was young too. One of the reasons we started hanging out so much. He just understood better than anyone else could.”

“Hmm.” She kept staring at the ceiling, doing her best to hold the pose.

“Back to you,” I said. “Tell me more. Tell me all of it.”

She told me about fall days similar to the one I’d given her at my parents’ house. She talked about playing in the snow and cozy nights in front of the fireplace. She smiled as she reminisced about playing football in the yard and swimming in the lake. The sounds of the cicadas lulling them to sleep during the summer. And her huge garden.

Brooklyn had a simple life. A beautiful life. The life I wanted with her. And as I painted her, and listened to her stories, I felt closer to the real her. The one that had lived. It felt like falling in love all over again.

My hand paused as I painted the dip of her stomach. This was probably the part of her that was the most different. She had a few stretchmarks from her pregnancy. But that wasn’t what I was fixated on.

I stepped away from my easel and walked over to her. I could feel her eyes on me as I knelt down beside her. But she didn’t say a word as I reached out and traced the ragged scar on the side of her stomach.

Chapter 28

Tuesday

Brooklyn

I stared at Matt as he traced the scar from my kidney surgery. The scar was a reminder of what my father had stolen from me. And I didn't just mean my kidney. He'd also stolen my future with Matt.

The bright light in the room made the scar look worse. It made my stretch marks more pronounced too. I'd never felt so exposed.

"Did it hurt?" he whispered, his thumb lightly touching my scar like he might hurt me all over again.

He hadn't shied away from any of the hard questions tonight. He didn't get angry when I'd told him my stories about Miller. I knew he was trying to prove that he still knew me. All of me. But somehow this felt more momentous than the rest of it. Him staring at my scars and not turning away.

I nodded. He deserved to know the truth. And I was done holding back pieces of my life from him. I remembered the white room I was locked up in after the surgery. And I remembered the pain in my chest more vividly than the pain from the surgery. "It hurt. But not as much as my heart hurt thinking you'd moved on."

"Never, Brooklyn. I'm incapable of loving anyone but you."

I believed him. I believed all of it. That he'd loved me then. That he still loved me now. Despite everything. We weren't written in the stars. But my heart was bound to his. Through everything. We were intertwined somehow. I knew that. And I'd never seen it more clearly than I did right now. As he leaned forward and kissed my scar.

"I love every inch of you." He traced the rest of my scar with his lips.

My back arched even more.

"I'm going to make you my wife." He touched my rings.

Rings I didn't know how to take off. But I believed his words. I knew that whenever Matt wanted something, he got it. I'd pushed him away so much when we first met. But he'd won me over. And he was already doing it again. Not that he needed to. It was only my guilt making us not move forward.

His fingers traced my stretch marks. "I'm going to adopt your son."

I swear my heart skipped a beat.

"We're going to be a family." He leaned forward and kissed a thin scar on the side of my thumb. "And it's going to be perfectly imperfect." His breath was hot on my skin. "What happened here?"

"When Jacob was a baby, I got distracted while I was baking. He was crying and..." my voice trailed off as he blew on it. Like he could take away the sting from the burn even though he was three years too late.

"I'm not 16 years old anymore either, Brooklyn. I know that real love is messy. I know I'm not untouchable."

That's what Daphne had told me. That Matt and his friends stopped calling themselves the Untouchables after I died. Because they realized that their money and prestige didn't protect them from pain.

He leaned forward and kissed the outside corner of my eyes, where I knew I had a few laugh lines. His lips left a trail of kisses down to one of my breasts. "And these are bigger," he said with a groan.

I laughed.

His eyes met mine as his tongue swirled around my nipple.

Jesus.

He lifted his mouth from my skin. "For 16 years I've been painting still images." He grabbed his palette and put his palm in the center of it, smearing the paints. "I think true art is feeling your subject." He pressed his wet palm down in the center of my chest.

I felt my heart beating rapidly against his hand.

"Every curve." He spread the paint over my right breast.

"Every dip." He moved his hand down my stomach, leaving a trail of light blue paint. "Every scar." His thumb gently brushed against my scar again.

His eyes locked with mine. "You're different, Brooklyn. But you're more beautiful than ever."

I blinked back tears. But then I squealed as he moved forward, pressing my back against the floor.

"You know what else you should do besides touch your muse?" he whispered into my ear.

“No.”

“Taste.” He kissed down my stomach where there wasn’t paint, spreading more paint down the sides of my body with his hand. His mouth stopped between my thighs, his eyes locking with mine. His tongue slowly circled my clit.

Good God. I buried my fingers in his hair as he thrust his tongue inside of me. I’d never heard of tasting a muse before. But now I had no idea how anyone created art without doing this first. It seemed like a very important step to me.

“Do you still like when I do this?” he asked as his lips encircled my clit and he sucked hard.

“Matt,” I moaned.

“Say my name like that again.”

I laughed. “Matt.”

“No, that wasn’t it.” He moved his hands to my ass, pulling my pussy flush against his mouth. He feasted on me like he’d been starving for me for years.

“Matt,” I moaned again. God, I was so close.

“That’s better. Say it again when I make you come.”

“So cocky.”

He smiled against my skin. “Baby, all I need is 30 seconds.” His fingers dug in to my ass cheeks as he thrust his tongue even farther inside of me. He reached one hand up, palming my breast, smearing more paint across my skin.

He moved his other hand to my thigh, pressing the side of it into the paint. We were making a terrible mess, but all I could think about was his tongue slowly circling my wetness. Why

had he slowed down? I just needed another few seconds of... My train of thought drifted away as his mouth moved back to my clit. He sucked hard.

Fuck. My body started to tremble. I grabbed the sides of his head to hold him in place. Okay, he won. That couldn't have been more than twenty seconds. He knew exactly what he was doing. He still knew my body just as well as he had when we were teenagers.

And I wanted to see him. I wanted to see how he'd changed. "My turn." I clawed at the back of his shirt.

He laughed and pulled back. He grabbed his t-shirt by the nape of its neck and pulled it off. He didn't seem to care that he'd just ruined it with paint. "Your turn for what exactly?" He raised his eyebrow at me.

I had every intention of returning the favor. But first I wanted to explore his body. "It's my turn to examine every inch of you." I pushed on the middle of his chest so he'd lie down. I grabbed a tube of green paint but paused. I pulled off the rings on my finger. I didn't want to ruin them with paint. But it felt more momentous than that as Matt stared up at me. He'd wanted me naked. I'd never felt more naked than I did now without my rings. And this felt momentous for me too. Showing him my scars. Letting him back in.

I set the rings down out of the way and squirted the paint on my hands. I moved my eyes away from his face to his muscular shoulders. "You were always strong. But you're not a boy anymore." I leaned forward and placed my palms on his broad shoulders. "You're a man." I let my hands trail down his biceps.

He just stared up at me. I was pretty sure he felt as exposed as I'd felt while he was painting me. On the canvas and on my skin.

I squirted some royal blue paint on his chest. "All of this is bigger." I smeared the paint over his strong pecs. "It's like armor."

His Adam's apple rose and fell as he stared at me.

"You've been at war with yourself. Not letting anyone in for 16 years. Is it selfish that I'm glad you saved your heart for me? That I'm relieved you waited for me to come back?" I ran my fingers down his six pack, stopping at the waistband of his pants. I traced his happy trail with my index finger.

"It's only selfish if you keep tormenting me."

I smiled down at him. "How am I tormenting you exactly?" I reached up and smeared paint across his cheek.

He grabbed my waist and flipped us over, pressing my back against the hard floor. I expected him to joke about how I was teasing him instead of wrapping my lips around his cock. But he looked more serious than I expected.

"I need it to be my ring on your finger." He grabbed my hand and pinned it over my head. "I need you to take my last name." He grabbed my other hand and pinned it next to the first. "I need you to let me help raise Jacob. And I want to move back in here with both of you."

"Oh, is that all?" I tilted my hips up to meet the bulge in his pants.

He groaned. "Don't distract me. Say yes."

“I love you.”

“That’s not an answer, Brooklyn.”

“Isn’t it though?”

“Now I’m just going to make you scream yes.” He let go of one of my wrists and pushed his pants down. I expected him to slam into me. But he entered me slowly. So painfully slowly when all I wanted was for him to fill me. It felt like it took a lifetime before he was all the way inside.

Fuck.

“Say yes, baby.”

“Are you actually proposing right now or...”

His fingers dug in to my hip.

God. I arched my back.

“You’ll know when I’m proposing,” he whispered into my ear before biting down on my earlobe.

“Matt.” That wasn’t an answer. But all I could think about was his hard cock slowly sliding in and out of me. This was slow torture.

“I need you to tell me right now that you want all those things. Just say yes and put my mind at ease.”

I dug my fingers into the muscles of his back. “Fuck me.”

“No.”

I moaned. “Please.”

If anything he moved his hips slower. “Not until you say yes.”

What was I agreeing to? I couldn’t even remember.

“I’m very content making very slow love to you.”

I loved this. But God I needed more right now. Posing for him naked had been more arousing than I’d realized. And when he’d put paint on me. I could barely think straight. “Ask me again.”

He smiled down at me. “You’re going to wear my ring.”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“You’re going to take my last name.”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to let me help raise your son.”

Of course. “Yes.”

“And I’m moving in with you guys. Actually I want that first. I’m moving in tonight.”

I smiled up at him. “A thousand times yes. Now please fuck me.”

“That’s different too. You used to like it painfully slow. You loved when I cherished your body.”

“I still love that. But I’m so turned on I could cry.”

“I used to be scared of breaking you,” he said. He still didn’t increase his pace.

“You won’t.”

His eyes searched mine. “Then turn around.” He slowly slid out of me.

When I didn’t move right away, he lowered his eyebrows.

“On your hands and knees,” he said, his voice tight. “Face the wall.” He nodded to the opposite wall.

I pushed myself up and got on all fours.

He grabbed my hips and slammed into me. It was rough. Raw. Like when he’d fucked me in the auditorium. And against the wall outside. I loved when he was slow and loving. But God I loved this too.

The paint on his hips stuck to my ass as he took me from behind. I had a feeling that Matt preferred sex like this. That maybe he hadn’t quite been himself with me back then. But he could be himself now. I wanted him to be. We were both different now. But I was pretty sure we fit better than ever. And I loved this domineering side of him.

He pressed on my lower back, making me arch more. He groaned as I obliged.

I somehow felt 16 around him but also 32. And I knew it made no sense. But somehow it made perfect sense.

His fingers dug in to my hips so hard it almost hurt. And I loved every fucking second. I pushed against the cloth on the floor to match his thrusts, leaving green handprints. I looked down at the mess beneath us.

It was a beautiful mix of greens and blues. Some spots had turned into perfect turquoise chaos. And I wanted to frame this sheet. I wanted to remember him looking at my body for its differences instead of its similarities. I wanted to always remember him loving the real me.

I looked over my shoulder at him. The green paint mixed with the blue on his torso too.

He leaned forward and grabbed my breasts before pulling me up. My back hit his chest and somehow it made his cock feel even more amazing inside of me.

“Look what we made.” He whispered in my ear as his hands trailed down the front of my body. “We’re framing this, baby.” He’d loved every second of tonight too. I stared down at what our bodies had made. With him deep inside of me.

His thumb fell to my clit, smearing paint where it really shouldn’t be. But I didn’t fucking care because...

“Yes!” I tilted my head back on his shoulder.

“That’s how I wanted you to say it.” He groaned as I pulsed around him. But he kept fucking me. “Get in the same position as before,” he said when I caught my breath.

I moved back to my hands and knees.

“No. When I was painting you.” He pulled out of me.

Oh. I flipped over, my ass smearing in the paint. I arched my back.

He grabbed his hard cock as he stared at me. He pumped his hand up and down. “I figure we already made a mess...” his voice trailed off. “Fuck.” His first shot of cum landed on my stomach. Another on my breast. And another and another.

God, watching him like that...I wanted him all over again. He’d listen to me talk about my past. I stared down at his cum mixing with the paint. But Matt was my present. And this felt very present to me.

His chest rose and fell as he caught his breath.

I went to sit up.

“Stop.”

I froze.

“Stay just like that.” He stood up, ass naked, covered in paint, and moved behind his easel. “This is how I really wanted to paint you.” He grabbed his brush.

“Covered in paint with your cum dripping down my body?”

“Perfection.”

I shook my head but looked back at the ceiling like I had in my original pose. I stayed in the pose even though my back started to hurt. The paint dried on my skin, making it harder to move anyway. I wasn't sure how long I lay there. But I didn't dare move. I wanted to be his muse.

Finally he took a step back. “Okay,” he said.

I cringed as I stood up.

“I owe my beautiful model a massage,” he said and pulled me into his chest. The paint had dried on him too, but we were still somehow sticky. I didn't care about any of it, though. Because my eyes were glued to the painting.

“Matt...this is...it's...beautiful.” I laughed. “That sounded weird. I don't mean me. I mean the painting. It's so good.” I stared at the smears of turquoise paint he'd added to my body on the canvas. He'd captured it all perfectly.

“It's only beautiful because it's you.” He held me to his chest as we both stared at the painting.

“We're framing this one too,” I said. “Although, I don't know where we'll put it.”

“Downstairs right in the entranceway.”

I laughed and swatted his arm.

“You have no idea how serious I am, baby.”

“Not in the entranceway.”

“How about in my office at work?”

“No way.” I yelped as he grabbed me around the waist and threw me over his shoulder.

Chapter 29

Tuesday

Matt

I carried Brooklyn into the bathroom. “We’ll think about where we want to hang your portrait while we’re in the shower.”

She slapped my butt. Her hand stayed on my ass cheek. I wasn’t sure if it was because it was stuck with paint or she just liked what she felt. I was counting on the latter.

“I masturbated to you the most in here.” I turned on the water. “In this exact shower, I pictured you on your knees.” I was already growing hard again.

“Right there, huh?” she said.

“Yes.” I ran my fingers through the water, testing the temperature. “You owe me about a thousand blowjobs, Brooklyn.” I stepped into the shower, letting the water hit her back. The white tiles turned blue beneath us. I set her down on her feet. “And I’m cashing in on one of those now too.” I put my hands on her shoulders and pushed her to her knees.

Her eyes still looked innocent. But she loved when I fucked her. She wanted to know the real me. This was me. I squirted some soap into my palm and ran it down my length, cleaning the paint off my cock.

I stared down at her as I rinsed off under the stream of water. Never once had I pictured her in here covered in paint, already

dripping with my cum. This was so much fucking better than my dreams.

“So you don’t want me to treat you like you’re fragile?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“Crawl to me.”

Her eyes widened, but she shifted forward, closing the distance between us on all fours.

I touched the bottom of her chin so she’d keep my eye contact. I grabbed her hand and washed it with soap.

“Now touch yourself.”

She lightly brushed her clit with her index finger.

“No, baby. I want to see two fingers in your wet pussy. Now.”

She swallowed hard as she trailed her fingers lower, pressing them inside her. Her throat made an adorable squeaking noise. She was probably sore from earlier. Just the way I liked her.

“I know you like being filled.” I reached out and trailed my thumb down her lower lip. “So suck.” I pressed my tip against her lips. “Now.”

She wrapped her lips around me and slowly went down, her mouth the perfect amount of pressure.

Jesus. I pressed my hand against the tile as I fisted another in her hair. “You’re better at this now too.”

She moaned around my cock.

“But you’re about to learn what it means to have your pretty little face fucked.” I gripped her hair tighter and guided her

faster.

Her eyes started to water.

“Oh, baby. I’m only just getting started.” I slammed my cock into the back of her throat as I watched her touch herself faster.

She was loving every second.

“Do a good job and I’ll reward your greedy pussy with my cock.”

She moaned again.

So much better than a dream.

A buzzing noise made me slowly open my eyes. I reached out to my nightstand, but my hand came up empty. I blinked, remembering I wasn’t at Tanner’s apartment. And the noise wasn’t coming from my side of the bed.

Brooklyn sat up and grabbed her phone. A frown spread across her face as she stared down at the screen.

“Is everything alright?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, it’s just my dad.” She put the phone down even though it was still buzzing.

“Are you going to answer it?” I asked.

“Definitely not.” She lay back down and snuggled into my side.

I understood her reasoning for screening his calls. But...

“When he’d tried to reach out to me during all those years, he’d been trying to give me good news. I wish I’d answered his texts.”

Brooklyn tilted her face up to me. “What on earth could that man possibly tell me that would make a conversation with him worth my time?”

I ran my fingers through her hair. “You haven’t heard from him the past few days?”

“He texted me a couple times saying he wanted to meet up. But I ignored them, because I don’t want to see him.”

“He gave up his business,” I said. “He handed everything over to Poppy.”

“Wait, what? How do you know that?”

I slowly sat up. “I went to see him on Sunday.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Honestly? To kill him.”

Brooklyn laughed, but the laughter died in her throat when she saw I was serious.

“I’d just found out you were alive and...I...fixated all my anger on him.”

“Yeah. I get that.” She sat up too. “I wanted to kill him. For what he did to Miller.” She shook her head. “For what I *think* he did to Miller. When I first came back, I dropped Jacob off at Mrs. Alcaraz’s. And I took Miller’s gun and went to go see my dad. But...I couldn’t go through with it either.”

I couldn’t imagine Brooklyn ever hurting someone. “I’m glad you didn’t do it. Jacob needs you. I need you.”

She nestled into my chest again. “I still think about it though.”

“Well, if it ever comes to it, let me pull the trigger, okay?”

“No. I need you too.”

I rested my chin on the top of her head and held her closer.

“When I went to your dad, he said that he gave it all up. Because you asked him to. That you didn’t want him in your life as long as he was still part of that business.”

“I did say that. But I don’t believe a word about him giving it up.” She shook her head.

“Well, he helped me with Poppy too.”

“Are you really trying to get me to talk to him?”

“No. I just wanted you to know. And I probably shouldn’t... but I do believe him.” Mr. Pruitt had done terrible things to Brooklyn and me 16 years ago. But he’d apologized for some of it. Kind of. And he said he wasn’t going to stand in our way now.

“He told me when I was 16 that there was no out. He married into it. And Mrs. Pruitt doesn’t seem like she accepts their separation.”

I stared down at her. “They’re separated?”

“I don’t know. They’re living in different houses. They’re not divorced or anything.” She sighed. “If he really was able to get out of it, he would have when my mom got pregnant. If he loved her as much as he claims, he would have figured out a way. But he didn’t then. And he certainly didn’t step down now.”

“It’s different now though. Isabella’s gone. You just said he’s separated. You’re all he really has left, Brooklyn.”

“Then maybe he shouldn’t have ruined my life.”

That was fair. I hugged her a little tighter. “Trust me, I don’t want him to be a part of our lives. I just wanted you to know what he told me.” I stared at her for a moment. I wasn’t sure how much she’d talked to her father when she returned. But I wasn’t going to hide this from her. “Did he tell you that he always planned on taking you away? That he never really approved of our engagement?”

“Yeah, I kind of pieced that together when I begged him to let me go.” She sighed. “It honestly doesn’t matter what he says to me. Half of everything he says is a lie. He’s always manipulating me. And I don’t want to be part of any more of his twisted games.”

I nodded. There were other things Mr. Pruitt had told me too. Like how Brooklyn used to sneak downstairs into Miller’s bed at night. But that was in the past. And I was determined to keep it there. All that mattered was that she was here right now with me.

Her phone started buzzing again. She ignored it.

That was probably the right choice. The more she distanced herself from her family, the safer we’d be.

There was a clanging noise downstairs.

She jumped.

“Don’t worry, it’s just Nigel,” I said.

“He’s really made himself at home, hasn’t he?”

I laughed. “He has a way of doing that. Don’t worry though, I won’t let him build that door between our properties. He’s here because I asked him to grab a few things for me this morning. Something for you. And something for Jacob too.”

There was another clanging noise.

What was he doing down there? “Get dressed and meet me downstairs, okay?” I climbed out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants. I wanted to make sure Nigel had gotten the right things.

I reluctantly tore my eyes away from Brooklyn’s naked body as I made my way out into the hall.

More noise came from downstairs.

Seriously, what was Nigel up to? I walked down the stairs and turned into the kitchen.

Nigel was sitting ass naked on the kitchen counter with a sauté pan covering his junk.

“What the fuck, Nigel?”

He arched his back to be in the same pose that Brooklyn was in last night. “Better?”

“Why are you naked?!”

“It’s my turn to pose for you. For your nude portrait collection.” He pointed to the entranceway where my painting of Brooklyn from last night was...hanging?

“What the hell?”

“You said you wanted it in the entranceway.”

“How would you know that?”

“I set up the new security system yesterday. I have eyes and ears *everywhere*.” He said everywhere very sexually.

I didn’t even know what to say. “Just...stop it. Right now.”

“I thought you’d prefer a tasteful nude. But I’m okay with showing it all.” He grabbed the handle of the pot.

“Don’t you dare lift that...”

But it was too late. He lifted the pot in the air. To reveal his ginormous penis. *What the fuck?*

“Holy monster dong,” Brooklyn said from behind me.

I turned to see her slap her hand over Jacob’s eyes.

“What’s a dong?” Jacob asked.

“I’m a grower, not a shower, mademoiselle,” Nigel said and winked at Brooklyn.

Okay, maybe he wasn’t gay after all... Also, what the actual fuck? It was already massive, could it even get any bigger?

Nigel looked so pleased with himself. “As the boys say.”

Brooklyn glared at me. “Why would you think I wanted this, Matt?!”

“This isn’t the surprise.” I turned back around. “Nigel, get off the counter.”

“But...I want a Master Matthew original. For my new home.” He shimmied a little.

“Get down. Right now.”

“But Mr. Jacob sits on the counter like this all the time.”

“Not in that pose he doesn’t.”

Nigel arched his back even more. “Better?”

Why did he keep asking me that? I stepped forward to pull him off. But then stepped back. I didn’t want to get anywhere

near his huge penis. I put my hand out to block it from view, but I could still see the tip. “Nigel, I swear to God, if you don’t get off the counter and put on some clothes, I’m never speaking to you again.”

“Is it my penis? I know it’s big. Sometimes it’s a hindrance.”

“It’s the fact that you’re nude on my kitchen counter.”

“But Brooklyn did it last night...”

“Shush!” Did he not see Jacob right there? “There’s a child in the house.”

“And he’s nude like me right now. Mr. Jacob, come join me on the counter while your mother makes us our morning batch of cuppycakes.”

“Cuppycakes!” Jacob yelled.

Brooklyn held Jacob tighter so he couldn’t move.

I walked around the counter and found Nigel’s discarded lederhosen. “Get dressed, Nigel.” I tossed it at him. “Now.”

He sighed. “But it’s not fair. I’m just trying to be the cutest boy in the room.” He stuck his tongue out. But he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking over my shoulder.

I turned around to see Jacob sticking his tongue out too, even though his eyes were covered.

I suddenly had two children instead of none.

“Now, Nigel.”

Nigel hopped off the counter and took his time pulling his outfit back on. But now I was wondering where his dick fit in that lederhosen. *Why the hell am I thinking about that?*

I turned away from him. “I’m so sorry,” I said to Brooklyn. I grabbed Jacob out of her arms and plopped him on the island far away from where Nigel’s bare ass had been. I needed 12 liters of disinfectant. “Jacob is allowed to be naked. Because he’s four. And adorable.”

“Yes, we’re both adorable little boys.” Nigel scrambled up onto the counter.

“I think you’re regressing.”

“No. You’re wrong. I just wanted my nude portrait. Actually, I’d prefer a fresco. It would be perfect in my new bathroom. We can do it later. While I’m bathing.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Right.” He winked at me.

Why did he think ‘absolutely not’ was code for ‘yes’?

“What’s that?” Jacob asked.

I assumed he was pointing at the nude portrait of his mother. But there was something even more shocking down here than that. There was a huge wooden door in the middle of the living room wall. Where the TV had been hanging last night.

“Nigel.” I turned back to him. I had so many questions. How? When? There hadn’t been any noise. It wasn’t freaking possible that he’d done this in one night.

“Do you like it? Don’t worry, I’m the only one with a key. Only me. And before you ask...no you’re not allowed to have one. I need my privacy.”

“You just watched Brooklyn and me last night on the security feed.”

“For your protection. Don’t you feel protected and taken care of?”

“I feel a little violated, honestly.”

“Oh.” He raised his eyebrows at me.

“Not in a good way. Undo the door. Immediately.”

“I can’t. I don’t have any more time off until June. You know how these things go.”

I was going to kill him. I hadn’t been able to kill Mr. Pruitt, but I could definitely go through with it with Nigel.

Brooklyn started laughing for some reason.

I looked at her. She was laughing so hard that I couldn’t help but start laughing too. Okay...this whole morning was a little funny. But that door really had to go.

“Let’s get you boys your cupcakes,” Brooklyn said and turned on the oven. She started pulling out ingredients.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Nigel pulled a long, velvet box out of his pocket. “For you, mademoiselle.” He held it out to Brooklyn.

“Really? For me?” Brooklyn grabbed it.

Yeah, Nigel really did seem to have a crush on Brooklyn now.

“It’s from me,” I said.

“But I picked it out,” Nigel said. “So it’s really from me.”

“It was my idea and I paid for it.”

Nigel shrugged. “Well, in that case I’ll need to be tipped. That door was very expensive to install on such short notice.”

I was not tipping him. I ignored him and grabbed Brooklyn's arm, pulling her away from Nigel. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine," she said with a laugh. "But seriously... What the hell was between his legs? That was the biggest penis I've ever seen."

I laughed too. "I'd pretend to be insulted, but I've never seen a dick that big either. I think there might be something wrong with him. That's like a deformity or something."

She laughed. "So what is this?" She held up the box.

"Open it."

She lifted the lid. It was a simple, long gold chain. Long enough that the bottom would dip well below anything she was wearing.

"I thought maybe you could put your rings on it. To keep them close to your heart. And then there'll be room on your finger for the ring I'm going to give you."

She ran her fingers down the chain.

I waited for her to say something, but she didn't

"It would mean a lot to me, Brooklyn."

I waited, but still nothing.

"And you did say yes last night," I tried to keep my voice light and playful. But I was slowly dying inside.

"I was under duress," she said, but she was smiling when she looked up at me. "I think that this is a good compromise. I love it."

"Yeah?"

She nodded.

Thank God. Because I really couldn't stand seeing those rings on her finger.

"Thanks, Mr. Nigel!" Jacob said.

I turned around to see Jacob playing with the glow in the dark stars I'd had Nigel pick up. Why was Nigel claiming all my gifts?

I walked over to Jacob. "We can stick these to your bedroom ceiling. So that even on cloudy days you can talk to your dad."

"Really?" Jacob looked so excited.

"I'll put them up for you today, okay?"

"Thanks, Coach." He leaned forward and hugged me. "Can we go to Mr. Nigel's house?"

"Only you," Nigel said. "No grown-ups allowed."

"What?" I said. "Why?"

"Because you wouldn't understand what you were seeing."

And a child would? That sounded like a really bad idea.

"Maybe later, kiddo," I said. "Rumor has it we get cupcakes for breakfast."

"Cuppycakes!" Jacob yelled.

"Cuppycakes!" Nigel mimicked. He grabbed the straps of his lederhosen like he was about to undo them.

I glared at him. And I hoped he realized I was silently telling him, 'Don't you dare.' Because if he got naked again, I was throwing him through his weird door.

But maybe he was just acting out because he needed more attention or something. “Thanks, Nigel. For picking up the gifts. And hanging up the portrait.” Exactly where I’d wanted it. Jacob didn’t seem to notice it or care. He was much more curious about the door. Besides, it was art. I didn’t see a problem with it being down here at all.

“I’ll frame the sheet later as well. I need to iron it first.”

That seemed like a really bad idea. But I’d learned to let Nigel do Nigel. As long as it didn’t mean he was naked on my counter and hitting on my soon-to-be-wife.

Chapter 30

Wednesday

Brooklyn

I pulled out a tray of brownies. Baking always made me feel better. But it wasn't the guilt that was making me feel uneasy today. Having my rings against my chest somehow eased the pain of missing Miller. I barely noticed the rings on my finger. But I noticed them pressed against my chest because it was a new sensation. The rings shifted every time I moved. A constant reminder. And it was like Miller was where he belonged...right next to my heart.

Jacob reached out for a brownie, but I grabbed his hand.

"In a minute, sweet boy. They need to cool."

He reached out with his other hand.

I grabbed that too. "Fine, you win." I released his hands and grabbed a knife to cut him a small piece.

He shoved the entire thing in his mouth.

I laughed. "What's the verdict? Good?"

"Oui."

Luckily that was one of the only French words he'd picked up from Nigel. Because I really didn't know any French. I tickled his side and he laughed.

His laughter made me smile. I knew Miller meant what he wrote in his letter to me. He wanted me to be happy. And I

was doing my best to choose that. I also felt him here in this house. I wouldn't have loved it so much if I hadn't felt his presence.

So no, for the first time it wasn't Miller's absence that made the quiet of the mornings unbearable. It was that my dad kept texting me. And calling. Every few hours. I pressed the center of my chest, feeling the rings through my shirt. *What should I do, Miller?* I knew what I wanted to do. Push my father into oncoming traffic. But what if he was telling the truth? What if he hadn't ordered the hit that killed Miller? I wasn't sure it mattered if he had or hadn't. It was still his fault.

My phone buzzed. *Speak of the devil.* I grabbed my phone and stared at his words: "Angel, please answer my calls. We need to talk."

I was gripping my phone so tightly that my knuckles were turning white. What would Miller have done in this situation? I thought about how he'd told Jacob to punch my father. I knew exactly what he'd do. And it was better to take care of this now. I texted him back: "We have nothing to discuss. Please stop contacting me."

My phone started ringing.

I'd said what I needed to. I rejected his call and started on another batch of brownies. Hopefully the team would be hungry today.

"Mommy?"

"Yes?" I stopped stirring when I saw his face. I'd been stirring too hard again. I'd had a bad habit of doing that recently.

He glanced at the spoon in my hand and then back at me.

“When’s Coach coming back?”

“I’m...I’m not sure.” When he’d left this morning he said he’d see me later. I didn’t know if that meant at practice. Or after work. Or...some other time soon.

“Can he come back now?”

“He’s at work right now. But we’ll see him later this afternoon.”

“Can we call him?”

I put my elbows on the counter to get on eye level with Jacob.

“You want to call him?”

“Yessie.”

I could never say no to him when he said that. And honestly, I was happy that Jacob wanted to talk to Matt. “Okay, let’s call him. But don’t be upset if he doesn’t answer, okay? He has meetings and things.”

I hit Matt’s name in my phone and put it on speaker. I expected it to go straight to voicemail, but he picked up in two rings.

“Miss me already?” Matt said in a very seductive tone.

“Hiya, Coach,” Jacob said. He didn’t seem to notice that Matt was definitely talking to me.

“Oh.” Matt cleared his throat. And then he coughed. “Hey, kiddo. Did you steal your mom’s phone?”

“No. Mommy let me call you.”

“Hey,” I said, stifling a laugh. “Jacob wanted to call and say hello.”

“No,” Jacob said. “I called because we need you, please.”

“Is everything okay?” Matt asked. A bell chimed. It sounded like he’d just stepped on the elevator.

“Everything’s fine,” I said and looked at Jacob.

“Nooooo. We need you.”

Jacob was used to Miller having a bit of flexibility in his schedule. But Matt had already been missing a lot of work since I’d been back in town. And I knew he was busy. “I think he just misses you,” I said. “But we’re baking brownies and everything is fine.”

“Nooooo.”

“Jacob, Matt’s at work. He can’t come home right now.”

“I can come,” Matt said. “Just give me a few minutes. I’m heading outside right now.”

“That’s really not necessary...”

“Yes, please,” Jacob said.

What was he doing? “Really, Matt. You don’t need to come. We’ve just had too much sugar this morning or something. How about I make us some sandwiches, Jacob?”

“Nooooo.”

“Tanner was actually going to stop by here for lunch in about an hour,” Matt said. “How about I order some extra food and you two join us at the office?”

“Yessie,” Jacob said.

“If you’re sure that’s okay?” I asked.

“Of course it’s okay, Brooklyn. I’ll see you both in an hour.”

“We’ll come now,” Jacob said.

I just stared at him.

“Even better,” Matt said. “Love you.”

There was an awkward silence. I knew he was saying that to me. We hadn’t gotten a chance to tell Jacob about our relationship yet. So it was an awkward slip. But...maybe he hadn’t said it to me. Maybe Matt had said it to Jacob. And something about that made my chest feel all warm and fuzzy. But he probably hadn’t meant to... It probably just slipped out by mistake. I opened my mouth to try to ease the awkward silence, but Jacob cut me off.

“Love you too, Coach.” Jacob hit the end call button. He looked up at me. “Do I have to wear clothes?”

I laughed, even though all I wanted to do was pepper his face in kisses. He loved Matt. And that meant everything to me.

“Yes, you do have to wear clothes. Matt works in a very fancy office building.”

“With clothes?”

“Yes, with clothes.” I put the last batch of brownies in to cook while we got ready. “Why did you tell him we needed him?”

“Because you looked sad. And he makes you happy.”

Sweet boy. I pulled him off the counter. “You make me happy.”

I carried him up the stairs to his bedroom.

“But Coach makes you happy like Daddy makes you happy.”

I wasn't entirely sure what he meant by that. And now I was a little worried he'd overheard Matt and me last night.

"I think Daddy would have really liked Coach."

I was absolutely positive that was not true. But Miller did understand that Matt could make me happy again. He knew it better than I had. "And do you like Matt?" I asked.

"Yessie."

I set him down on his bed and opened up one of his drawers. There was no way any of these clothes were going to stay on. But I pulled out a shirt and a pair of pants anyway. I turned back toward Jacob. He was smiling up at me. And this seemed like just as good of a time as any to talk about Matt moving in.

I sat down next to him on the bed. "How would you feel if Matt moved in here with us?"

Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

"That's not an answer." He'd just insisted that Matt needed to come home to hang out with us. And he'd told Matt that he loved him. I kind of thought Jacob would be excited about this.

Jacob just shrugged again and grabbed his shirt.

"Do you not want him to move in? You know you can tell me anything."

"I want him to." He looked down at his shirt. "But only if he promises to never leave like Daddy."

God, the knife in my chest. "Hey, remember, what I told you?" I grabbed his hand. "Daddy didn't leave. He didn't leave us."

"But can Coach stay forever?"

I hope so. I nodded.

Jacob smiled. “Okay. But I don’t want to share my room. You’ll have to share yours.”

“I can do that.” Honestly, that made this whole conversation a little easier. “Now let’s get dressed and go visit him at work.”

Jacob threw the shirt on the floor and leapt off the bed.

I laughed and ran after him.

I was sweating by the time I opened the door from the stairwell. I really needed to somehow convince Jacob to try out elevators.

“Wow,” Jacob said as he looked around the reception area. He’d said the same thing when we’d walked into the building. The marble floors and tall ceilings somehow seemed more impressive up here though because of the view of the city. But my eyes were glued to the gold-plated MAC International sign on the wall. Matt had done it. He’d gotten everything he’d ever wanted. The only thing he’d dreamed of that he hadn’t achieved was a house full of kids.

I kissed the top of Jacob’s head. I’d tell Matt that I didn’t think I was able to have any more kids tonight. And then there wouldn’t be a single secret I was keeping from him. He’d know it all.

And I realized I probably should have told him about that before I’d gotten Jacob’s hopes up. I’d told Jacob that Matt would live with us forever. I really hoped I hadn’t lied to my son. But I didn’t think I had. I’d been so wrong about Matt. He was a good guy. And he wasn’t going to hurt us.

A receptionist told us to take the hall to the left. And that Matt's offices were all the way in the back. The center of the office was full of cubicles. But it all felt open and airy because the offices on the sides were made of all glass. The view could be seen from anyone's desk, whether they were in a cubicle or a fancy office.

Matt's office was in the back corner. His blinds were the only ones that were drawn. An older woman was behind a desk outside his office.

"Excuse me," I said. "We're here to see Matt."

"Well aren't you cute," the woman said and smiled at Jacob.

"You must be Jacob."

He ducked beneath my arm.

I smiled. I was glad Matt had told his administrative assistant that we were coming. "He's a little shy," I said. "I'm Brooklyn." I put out my free hand for her. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Mary," she said and shook my hand. "I've heard so much about you."

So apparently Matt had told her *a lot* about me. That made me smile even harder. Jacob squirmed out of my arms.

"He's in the middle of a call right now, but it'll only be a minute."

"Should we just wait out here if he's busy..."

But Jacob had already opened the door and walked in.

"Sorry," I said.

Mary just laughed. "It's fine. He'll be happy you're here."

I hurried after my son.

Jacob ran right up to Matt.

Matt was on the phone, but he smiled down at Jacob and picked him up. He plopped him down in his desk chair.

Jacob stood up on the chair and stared down at Matt's desk. He started opening up random drawers.

Matt kept talking on the phone as he grabbed a pen and a piece of paper. He put them in front of Jacob, like he'd balanced work calls and kids all the time. But...maybe he had. I knew how good he was with his nieces. Last night after he asked me to prom he'd run around the house playing cowboys and Indians with them for an hour.

Jacob grabbed the pen and started drawing.

Matt walked over to me, keeping a little distance because he knew Jacob could be watching. "Just a second," he mouthed silently to me.

I couldn't wait to tell him that Jacob wanted him to move in.

"It'll be done by tomorrow afternoon at the latest," Matt said. He watched me as I walked over to the shelves against one of his walls. There were pictures of the Untouchables on them. At different fancy events. And a few with his nieces and nephews.

"Sure thing," Matt said. "And when the paperwork is signed we'll handle everything from there. But I have to go right now. I have another *very* important meeting."

I turned around and smiled at him.

He winked at me. “Talk to you then, Simon,” he said and hung up the phone. He smiled at me. “Hey.” He closed the distance between us. “You’re sure everything is alright? Jacob had me a little worried.”

“Well, apparently he just wanted you to come home because he thinks I’m happiest when you’re there.”

“And is that true?” He raised his eyebrow at me.

“You know it is. And we actually had a long talk about that. We both decided it would probably be best if you moved in.”

“Yeah?”

“If you still want to. Jacob made it very clear though...he doesn’t want to share a room with you. He said I have to.”

Matt laughed. “He strikes a hard bargain.”

“He does.” I pressed my lips together as I stared up at him.

“Did you mean what you said earlier? That you love him?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, it just kind of slipped out...”

“He said it back.” I slowly exhaled. “I’m really glad you said it.”

“It didn’t take long for you guys to become the two most important people in my life.” He drew a fraction of an inch closer. “So in this talk you two had...did me kissing you come up?”

“One step at a time.”

“At least I don’t have to wake up at the crack of dawn anymore to sneak out of your room before he sees me.”

“Don’t pretend for a second you didn’t love sneaking around with me. It’s kind of your thing.”

He pretended to look shocked. “Teenage me, maybe. A lot has changed.”

It really had.

Matt reached out and ran his index finger down my empty ring finger. “Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

I nodded. “I know.” And I wasn’t necessarily ready to be engaged. But the constant pressure of Miller’s rings against my chest made me feel better.

“No one told me my grandson would be here,” Tanner said as he walked into the room. “How are you doing today, Young Jacob?”

“Abuelo look!” Jacob lifted up the paper in front of him. “I drew your castle!”

Tanner laughed. “It’s almost an exact replica, little man.”

I walked over and looked at the drawing. It was indeed a castle. It didn’t look like an apartment at all. “An exact replica, huh?”

“Yes, he’s very talented.” But then Tanner looked at me and cleared his throat. “I mean, it’s an exact replica of his imagination. Matt’s been to my place. And it looks normal.”

“But Abuelo.” Jacob stood up in the chair. “We walked through the secret door and you showed me...”

“Nonsense. We were playing make-believe, remember?”

“No.”

“We were definitely just playing. Keep drawing, little man.”

“The private island?”

“No, not that. Something else.” He turned back to me.

“Pretend you didn’t hear any of that. Speaking of art...I hear that the two of you had quite the artistic evening. Nigel framed a print of your pose, Brooklyn. I got to see it before he took it to his fourth home. Or is it his fifth? I can’t keep track anymore. But the portrait is exquisite.”

“Wait, Nigel did what?” Matt asked.

“Nigel wanted a copy for himself. Something about not getting the one he wanted or something. But I can see why. I might have him make me one too. I really need something in my billiards room.”

“You don’t have a billiards room.”

“Yes I do. It’s the twelfth door on the left. Right past the pool. My rooms are mostly alphabetical for organization, but Nigel was being basic and thought it was called a pool room instead of a billiards room. I’ll have him change it eventually, but he’s been quite busy. He’s very fond of my grandson and Brooklyn and asked for more time off to help them acclimate.”

I laughed. Is that what he called sitting naked on my counter? Acclimating?

But Matt glared at him. “You can’t have a nude portrait of Brooklyn above your pool table.”

“Why? Nigel’s putting his in his bathroom.”

“Is he really?” I asked.

“No, he’s not,” Matt said.

I laughed. "I'm honestly a little flattered."

"He knew you would be. Speaking of Nigel...I also need to apologize about the security cameras. It was my idea to install them for safety purposes. But I forgot to warn you that he can be a bit of a voyeur. I've spoken to him about it before, but let me know if you want me to speak to him again."

Matt groaned. "Whenever you talk to him on my behalf it just makes it worse."

"Nonsense, he always listens to me."

"I don't think he ever listens to you," Matt said.

Tanner laughed. "He has to. He doesn't have a choice. But it's an iffy thing when it comes to you since he's not technically your houseboy. It's a whole gray area and Nigel loves pushing boundaries. I've said it time and time again: if he's bothering you let him blend into the wall."

"It's a little hard when he put a door in the middle of my wall to his adjacent home I had no idea he was buying."

Tanner shrugged. "Well, it does make it easier if he has his own entrance."

"How? He could use the front door."

"Having many doors is important, you wouldn't understand."

"It's also hard to ignore him when he's ass naked on my kitchen counter."

Tanner laughed. "Why on earth was he naked on your counter? Did you tell him to do that?"

"Of course not."

I couldn't help it, I started laughing so hard. "He's a little competitive with Jacob. Something about being the most adorable boy in the room?"

"Ah, yes. I've heard him say that. He's on the search for his own grandson and that should fix it I think."

Matt sighed. "You can't kidnap a kid. We've been over this. And Jacob isn't your grandson. If anything he should probably call you Uncle Tanner."

"Nonsense. I'm his grandfather. Watch." He turned to Jacob. "Jacob, who am I?"

"My abuelo," Jacob said.

"See?"

I nodded.

Matt looked at me. "You agree with that logic?"

"I think Tanner is a great grandfather."

Tanner threw his arm around me. "She gets it. Get on our level, Matt. Now let's talk about prom. Do you know what you're wearing, Brooklyn?"

"No." I looked at Matt. "I was actually hoping Jacob could join you at practice while I go shopping."

"Don't worry about that," Tanner said. "I was hoping you didn't have a dress yet. I've got it covered. My treat."

"You've got my dress covered? I don't think..."

"Nonsense, I've got this. I'm the founder of Odegaard."

That wasn't possible. Odegaard was around when I was in high school. I'd gone shopping at their flagship store with

Matt's mom. And Tanner was younger than us...

He must have seen my face, because he cleared his throat. "I meant I'm the owner. Now. Because I bought it recently."

"You didn't buy it recently," Matt said. "I've been handling your finances for years and it was already an asset."

"Recently is different for different people. Two days, two decades. Potatoes *potahtos*. Go and have fun at practice. The more time the two of you have together the better." He winked at Matt.

Matt hit his arm and mouthed something to him that I couldn't make out.

I had no idea what was going on. But I hoped Tanner knew what he was doing. One of the first times we'd hung out, he mentioned that he wore eccentric suits. And I wasn't really an eccentric kind of person.

"Trust me," Tanner whispered, like he could tell I was hesitant. "I've got you." He dropped his arm from my shoulders. "Now what does my grandson want for lunch?"

"Cuppycakes."

"Cuppycakes and meat, I think. You're growing. You need protein, yes? So you can be as tall as me?"

Jacob nodded.

"Splendid. I'll let Mary know about the dessert and meat we require."

Why was everyone else so good at making Jacob eat a balanced meal?

Chapter 31

Wednesday

Matt

I wasn't sure how Jacob had gotten so dirty at practice. But there was even some mud in his hair. Actually, Nigel looked almost just as dirty. Had they been rolling around on the field while I wasn't looking? And why was Nigel still with us? I thought he'd head back to Tanner's after practice.

"Cuppycakes for dinner?" Jacob asked as we all walked inside.

I glanced at Brooklyn.

She shook her head.

Yeah, it was probably a bad idea after how much dessert he'd had for lunch. "We need to clean you up first, kiddo."

"Does that mean Mr. Jacob needs a bath?" Nigel asked.

"Yes, he absolutely does," Brooklyn said and rubbed some dirt off Jacob's cheek.

"I can bathe Mr. Jacob." He looked too excited for my liking.

"Actually, that would be great," Brooklyn said. She didn't seem to have any concerns like I did. "I really appreciate it, Nigel."

Nigel beamed up at her. "Anything for you, mademoiselle. Your word is my command."

Why did he listen to everyone but me?

“Come, Mr. Jacob. It’s bath time!” Nigel sprinted up the stairs and Jacob ran after him.

“You’re not at all concerned about that?” I asked as I kicked off my shoes.

“Concerned about what?”

“How excited Nigel is to bathe Jacob?”

She laughed. “Nigel is a bath enthusiast. I expected nothing less, honestly.”

I glanced at the stairs. “I feel like maybe we should go up there...”

“And here I thought you’d be happy to have a little alone time with me.” She looped her hands behind my neck.

“Hmm.” I leaned down, but stopped a fraction of an inch from her lips. “And what exactly did you have in mind, baby?”

Brooklyn closed her eyes, like what I said pained her.

I touched the side of her face. “What’s wrong?”

She slowly opened her eyes again and took a deep breath. “As much as I want you to just throw me over your shoulder cave man style and take me upstairs...I need to tell you something.”

I really liked the sound of that first thing. But the second part didn’t sound nearly as fun. “As long as you’re not sneaking around with James, we’re good,” I joked, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny.” But she was smiling again. “Could you imagine if I’d actually come back with the sole intention of stealing James for myself?” She laughed again.

I didn't find the idea super funny. But I was glad she'd laughed. I'd always thought there was something between them. But maybe they'd always just been friends. "So if this isn't about James..."

"It doesn't have anything to do with your friends. It's about me."

"Okay." She really wasn't giving me much to work with here.

"I'm thirsty, are you thirsty?" She unwound her hands from behind my neck and walked into the kitchen.

I watched her pour a cup of water for both of us, even though I hadn't responded. She set mine down on the counter.

"Brooklyn, just tell me what's going on."

"I love you."

"Good." I smiled. "Because I love you too."

She looked down at the counter and traced one of the veins in the granite. "Jacob was a surprise," she said. "A great surprise. I told you that I was trying to keep my promises to you..." her voice trailed off.

I knew she'd put off marrying Miller until she found out she was pregnant. "I know."

"Miller wanted lots of kids. You two actually had more in common than you probably realize." She looked over at the planters I'd built for her.

"Okay," I said. I wasn't really sure where she was going with this. "So..." my voice trailed off, but she didn't fill in the missing pieces. "So you didn't want to have any more kids with him? Because that felt like a betrayal to me too?"

Her eyes finally met mine. “No. I would have given Miller the world if I could have.”

I tried to not let her words sting. But they did. “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me. And I think maybe it’s best if I don’t take another guess.”

“I’m sorry, it’s not...this isn’t coming out right. I’m...I...” she pressed her lips together.

I rounded the counter to be closer to her. “Just tell me.” But I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. She wanted lots of kids with *him*. Which meant... *Fuck*. “Are you pregnant? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?” I wanted to be happy for her, but I really felt like I was going to be sick.

She shook her head.

I couldn’t help it, I breathed a sigh of relief. I did love Jacob. He was impossible not to love. But it would have been really hard to wait around for nine months, watching another man’s baby grow in my girl’s stomach. Knowing it should have been mine. Knowing that I’d have to wait.

“No,” she said. She stood up a little straighter and looked me right in the eye. “I...I don’t think I can have any more kids, Matt.”

I don’t know what I’d been expecting, but I hadn’t expected her to say that. “What do you mean you don’t *think* you can?”

“I tried to get pregnant again. And I had a miscarriage. It was...it was really hard for me.” She started blinking away tears. “It’s really hard for me to talk about...”

I pulled her into my arms. “It’s okay.” It wasn’t. I hated seeing her cry. I ran my hand up and down her back. “That won’t

happen again here. We can go to the best doctors. We can..."

"It wasn't anything we did wrong." She pushed against my chest so she could take a step back from me. "I'm a good mom, Matt."

That wasn't what I'd meant. Not even in the slightest.

"We had access to good doctors..."

"I didn't say you did anything wrong. That wasn't what I meant. You're a great mom, Brooklyn. I know that. You're so great with Jacob."

She wiped away her tears. She wrapped her arms around her stomach, blocking herself from me. "You don't understand." She closed herself off even more when she took a step back from me.

I didn't understand. I had no idea what losing a baby would feel like. But I couldn't understand if she wouldn't talk to me. "Are you scared to try again? Is that what you're saying?"

"It broke me. I'm still broken. And I've tried so many times since then. The tests are always negative. Every month. My heart can't take it anymore. I can't..." She shook her head. "I can't do it anymore. My body won't do it."

It didn't sound like she couldn't. It sounded like she didn't want to try. "So you don't want any more kids?"

"I *can't* have any more kids."

"That's not what I asked, Brooklyn. Do you *want* more kids?"
With me?

"Of course I want more. All I want in the whole world is to fill our house with kids. I wanted that back when I was 16. I want

it all with you.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We can go to specialists. We can...”

“Matt, that’s not what I need from you right now.”

“Then what do you need from me?” I closed the distance between us and wiped her tears away with my thumbs.

“I need you to tell me that I’m enough. That Jacob and I are enough for you to be happy. That you’ll be happy even if it’s just the three of us.”

I stared down at her. It wasn’t going to be just the three of us. We both wanted a house full of kids, so it was going to happen. I’d make sure of it.

She took a step back from me. “I think it’s best if you go. I’ve already confused Jacob enough. I can’t do this to him.”

“You didn’t give me a chance to respond,” I said.

Brooklyn shook her head. “Yes I did. And you didn’t say anything at all.”

“I was thinking.”

“It’s okay, Matt. Really. I know you want lots of kids. And all I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy. I don’t even know what we’re doing. We’re not 16 anymore. Really, it’s fine.” But there were tears streaming down her face. “Seriously, please, can you just go?”

Was she insane? I took a step toward her and she closed her eyes tight.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I can’t do this, Matt. I can’t do this knowing you’re going to leave. I’m already so broken.” Her voice cracked.

“Nothing about you is broken.” I cradled her face in my hands.
“Look at me.”

She opened her eyes and the tears fell faster.

“You and Jacob are enough.” I meant it. I’d always wanted a family. With her. I’d gotten one overnight. Of course they were enough.

She shook her head.

“Yes. You are. You were always enough for me. I swear to you. Of course I’m not walking away. But you also have to know that if you still want a house full of kids, I’ll do anything in my power to make it happen. I’m okay with it just being the three of us. You guys are the family I’ve been dying for. But you also have to be okay with still trying. With seeing some specialists. For me. For us. Please.”

She nodded. “But you won’t leave if I can’t?”

“What about everything you learned about me in the past couple weeks has given you the impression that I can live without you?”

She laughed and threw her arms around me.

“I’m sorry that you lost a baby.” I held her tighter. “I’m sorry you haven’t been able to get pregnant again.” I was. If she’d shown up with 10 kids I would have loved all of them. But I wasn’t giving up on the future we wanted. Maybe she hadn’t had any more kids because the next one was supposed to be mine. Because *she* was mine. But I didn’t say it out loud.

Because I couldn't hear her tell me again that she'd wanted these same things with another man.

She kissed the side of my neck and I felt her tears fall on my shoulder.

"You know," I said and pulled back so I could look down at her. "It just so happens that one of my favorite things is trying to get you pregnant."

Brooklyn laughed even though there were still tears in her eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," I told her again.

"Good. Because I told Jacob you were staying forever."

"Speaking of Jacob...they've been up there for a long time. We should probably go check on them."

"I'm sure Nigel isn't doing anything weird." She wiped the rest of her tears away.

"Yeah...I don't think you know him very well yet. I'm gonna go check." I went up the stairs. I pushed open the bathroom door. There was a lot to unpack in the bathroom. But most alarming was the fact that Jacob and Nigel were both sitting in the tub.

"Nigel, are you wearing clothes?!" Was he seriously butt naked in that tub with Jacob?

"I'm wearing swim trunks," Nigel said. "But if you'd prefer I showed trunk, I can do that instead." He stood up and grabbed the sides of his swim trunks that had rubber duckies printed all over them.

"Stop."

He froze. “No trunk?”

“Absolutely not.” And that was a disgusting way to refer to his dick. Although...it was kind of the size of an elephant trunk.

Nigel splashed back down into the tub. “Now where were we.” He grabbed one of the dozens of rubber duckies floating on the top. “One duck.” He squeezed it to make it squeak.

“Un,” Jacob said.

He grabbed another duck. “Two ducks.”

“Deux.”

Another duck.

“Trois!”

Nigel clapped, splashing bubbles out the side of the tub.

“Cheers, Mr. Jacob.” He grabbed the champagne glass that was sitting next to him.

Jacob lifted a cup filled with a deep amber liquid that was balancing on the edge of the tub.

I quickly grabbed it out of his hand. “What is this?” I asked.

“It’s not a snifter of cognac like I prepare for you, Master Matthew. It’s just a sparkling apple cider. Mr. Jacob is a boy. And he can’t drink that until he’s 18.”

“Not until he’s 21, you mean.” I handed the glass back to Jacob.

“I don’t think so. It’s 18 for hard liquor and 16 for wine, right? But actually, it’s all up to a parent’s discretion. Or a grandparent’s. I’ll consult Tanner to see if he’ll allow it.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

Jacob quietly sipped his glass of sparkling apple cider with his pinky out. Nigel must have taught him to do that too. And why were there so many bubbles? It seemed like there were more bubbles than water. And where had all those ducks come from? I jumped. Had one of them just flapped?

“Aw look at the two of you,” Brooklyn said. “Are you both cleaned up for dinner?”

“Sí!” Jacob yelled.

“Mr. Jacob,” Nigel said. “Use the world’s most sensual language for your gorgeous mother.”

Excuse me?

Jacob nodded. “I meant oui!”

Brooklyn laughed. “Okay, both of you out before you start to shrivel.” She wrapped a towel around Jacob’s shoulders and then did the same to Nigel.

Nigel gave her the most flirtatious smile I’d ever seen as she rubbed his shoulders with the towel.

How was Brooklyn okay with any of this?

“There,” I said and stuck the last star to the ceiling above Jacob’s bed.

Jacob smiled up at the stars.

“Wait, it gets better.” I jumped off the bed and hit the lights.

The stars glowed lightly.

“Wow,” Jacob said. “I can see Daddy in my room, Mommy!”

I smiled and ignored the way my chest hurt. That's what I'd wanted. To give him the stars. I cleared my throat. "I'll give you two a minute."

"Wait," Jacob said. "Can you read me my bedtime story?"

"You want me to do it?"

"Oui."

"Let me turn the lights back on," Brooklyn said.

"I have a better idea." I pulled out my phone and hit the flashlight feature. I sat down next to Jacob on the bed and took the book he handed me.

"This one is my favorite."

"It looks like a good one." I turned to the first page and lit it up with my phone.

Jacob snuggled into my side to stare at the page.

I looked at Brooklyn who was sitting on the other side of him. She smiled at me.

This felt so...normal. And I'd meant what I said. They were enough. I cleared my throat and looked back down at the page.

"And the duck goes..."

"Quack," Jacob said.

I smiled and kept going. "And the lion goes..."

"Roar."

"And the turkey goes..."

"Gobble gobble. Can you do the monster one?"

“The monster?” I skipped a few pages ahead. And then a few more. I didn’t see anything but normal animals.

“Daddy always does the monster.” He stayed snuggled into my side. “Can you do Daddy’s part?”

“Oh...um...” I skipped more pages. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what he wanted me to say. But I wanted to do it right.

“And the monster goes...” Brooklyn said, saving me. “Rawr!” she tickled Jacob’s side and smiled at me.

Jacob giggled until she stopped her tickle attack. “Now I want Coach to do it,” he said to me.

“And the monster goes...rawr!” I tickled his side, sending him into another fit of giggles.

Somehow we all started rawring and jumping around the bed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d smiled so hard.

Chapter 32

Friday

Brooklyn

Matt pulled the car over to the curb. “We’re here.”

I stared at the entrance of Mason and Bee’s apartment building. And by apartment I meant...hotel. She and Mason lived in a freaking 5-star hotel. I was already nervous enough to hang out with her. She was going to be my future sister-in-law. And I’d shown up to her 5-star hotel dressed in worn yoga pants.

“You okay?” Matt asked.

I stared out the window. “You didn’t tell me they lived in a hotel.” When I’d agreed to get ready for the prom with everyone, I wasn’t expecting this. It felt like I was in high school all over again. Like I was standing on the outside looking in. Dating Matt meant I’d be thrust into the world of the elite again. I hadn’t fared well the last time that had happened.

“It’s just a normal apartment. Or maybe it’s technically a condo? I’m not really sure.” He smiled at me.

“But it’s in a *hotel*.” I knew everything was different this time with Matt. We were both adults. But I still didn’t feel like I belonged in this world. Penny and Daphne had been lovely the other night. And the one time I’d met Bee, she had seemed nice. But I’d been so distracted at that football game.

What if Bee didn't like me?

What if I didn't fit in?

What if I lost everything again?

"Maybe I should just get ready at home," I said.

"I thought you'd be nervous." Matt unbuckled his seatbelt.

"Which is why we actually came an hour earlier than everyone else."

"Wait, you're coming in with me?"

"Just until the girls get here. I thought it might be fun for us to hang out with just Mason and Bee beforehand. And I may have another surprise up my sleeve." He climbed out of the car and opened my door for me.

I grabbed his hand and immediately felt a little better. "Is the surprise that they live in a hotel?"

Matt laughed. "No."

I felt a little ridiculous walking into the posh hotel dressed the way I was. But Matt fit in. He'd fit in anywhere. And it was hard to feel like I didn't belong when I was on his arm.

"You're sure Ellen will be able to handle all the kids tonight by herself?" We'd dropped Jacob off at Penny and James' apartment before coming here. Jacob was excited for a night with his new friends. But it made me a little anxious to leave him.

Matt pulled me onto the elevator. "I have no doubt that Ellen can handle it. But James called in reinforcements anyway."

"Who?"

“Well, he’ll leave two of his security detail there for starters. And I know James’ dad is coming too. The adults will still be outnumbered four to six, but Scarlett can only get everyone in so much trouble.”

I stared up at him. “I thought James and his father didn’t get along?” I remembered being in James’ room back in high school. Neither Rob nor James had anything good to say about either of their parents.

“They didn’t. But they’ve gotten closer after the divorce.”

“James and Isabella’s divorce?”

“No. James’ mom and dad got divorced.”

“Really?” There was no out in my father’s family. And for some reason I kind of thought that extended to most of NYC’s elite.

“Some people really can be redeemed,” Matt said as we stepped off the elevator.

I was happy that James had a relationship with his father. But... “Why do I feel like we’re talking about my dad right now?”

Matt laughed. “I definitely wasn’t talking about Mr. Pruitt. Just Mr. Hunter.”

“It’s kind of cute that you still call James’ father Mr. Hunter. And my dad Mr. Pruitt.”

“Well, I can either call your dad Mr. Pruitt or ass hat.”

I laughed. “I prefer ass hat.”

We stopped at one of the doors and Matt knocked.

There was no answer.

“Are you sure they’re expecting us early?”

“It was Bee’s idea.” He knocked on the door again.

No response.

Bee had invited us over early? I don’t know why I was so nervous. Bee seemed excited to get to know me too.

“They probably got held up at work. Luckily I have a key.”

Matt unlocked the door.

He opened it a crack before it was slammed shut in our faces.

“Just give me one second, man.” Mason’s muffled voice came through the door.

I stared up at Matt.

He shrugged. “It’s probably a sex thing.”

“What?”

But he didn’t have time to respond because Mason opened the door. He was wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and no shirt, the same outfit he’d usually worn around his house back in high school. I swear it was like no time had passed at all.

“Sorry about that,” Mason said. “We lost track of time. And I keep losing the keys.”

“To your door?” Matt asked.

“Ha. No. Hey, sis.” Mason pulled me into a hug.

Why was he so sweaty?

Matt tried to walk around him, but Mason let go of me and stepped in front of his brother to block his path.

“One second. You good, babe?” Mason called over his shoulder.

“No! Damn it, Mason, I can’t unlock them myself!”

Mason laughed. “If you’ll excuse me for one second. I left my wife in a bit of a bind.” He walked down the hall and turned into the open kitchen.

“Um...what is happening?” I asked.

“This should be entertaining.” Matt grabbed my hand and pulled me after Mason, instead of giving him a few seconds like he’d asked.

My eyes grew round as we turned into the kitchen.

Bee was sitting on the counter in a short, silky black dress. It would have been a pretty normal sight. Minus the fact that her hands were above her head, some kind of leather shackles strapping her to the cupboard above her.

Mason grabbed the key from her hand and put it into the side of the shackles.

Bee’s hands fell free and she wrapped them behind Mason’s neck. “How many times do I have to tell you that I can’t get free by myself?”

“That’s kind of the point, baby.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Hmm.” He grabbed behind her knees, pulling her to the edge of the counter. “You know what else you said was impossible? Making you come three times in three minutes. And I just proved you wrong.”

Oh my God.

“Told you it was a sex thing,” Matt said.

Bee yelped and slid back from Mason. “Oh, hey guys,” she said. “I didn’t realize Mason had already let you in.” She hit his shoulder and then tried to fix her hair.

As if fixing her hair could erase whatever we’d just seen.

Mason laughed. He grabbed Bee around the waist and pulled her off the counter. “Welcome to our home. You guys want a drink?”

“Yes, get them something to drink,” Bee said. She opened up the cupboard she’d just been tied to and pulled out some wine glasses. “You guys handle that while I go talk to Brooklyn.” She looped her arm through mine and pulled me out of the kitchen and into the family room. If you could really call something with a perfect view of Central Park a family room. The sun was just starting to set and the sky was turning pink. It was breathtaking.

“Sorry about all that,” Bee said as she plopped down on the couch. She rubbed her wrists that were red from the shackles.

I laughed. “It’s fine.” Actually...all of that somehow made a lot of sense. Mason always seemed so...in control.

“Right.” She waved her hand through the air. “You know how the Caldwell men are.”

“Mhm.” Matt had never tied me up before. But after the other night in the shower...I wondered if maybe he did like that. I crossed my legs. I kind of wanted to find out.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it the other night when Penny and Daphne raided your house. I had a meeting run late. But

Mason has filled me in on a lot. I'm so happy you're here. But so sorry about the circumstances that brought you back."

"Thank you." That was a really nice way of putting it.

She looked over her shoulder at Mason and Matt laughing in the kitchen. "He's really happy. You did that."

I smiled. I hoped that was true. I hoped Jacob and I really were enough for Matt. He wanted to keep trying to have kids. And I was worried what would happen after months of negative pregnancy tests. I wondered if it would break him too. But all I could do was hope for the best and believe he'd stay. Believe we were enough.

"It all makes sense now," Bee said. "The way Matt has been."

"And how has he been exactly?"

"Destructive. You're lucky he's still alive. There were a few times where I thought James might kill him."

I laughed. "Because of the crush on Penny thing?"

Bee nodded.

"I kind of want an example of one of those times." I was so curious. The way everyone described Matt when I was gone... It wasn't the Matt I knew.

"Oh, I have a good one! At Rob and Daphne's wedding, Penny and Matt were paired up to walk down the aisle together. And they had to enter the reception together too. We were all supposed to do a fun dance on the way in. And Matt went under Penny's skirt and lifted her over his shoulders..."

"Can we maybe not talk about that?" Matt asked as he handed me a glass of wine. "In my defense...I was drunk."

“We were all really drunk that night,” Mason said and plopped down between me and Bee.

“No, I want to hear the rest,” I said. I peered around him to see Bee.

Bee laughed. “When it came time for Penny to dismount, Matt got down on his knees and just kept his head under her skirt for like...at least 30 seconds. James grabbed him by his lapels and shoved him. I think he mentioned something about killing him...”

“If I ever see you with your head up my wife’s skirt ever again, you’re dead,” Mason quoted.

“Yup, that was it! I thought they were going to fight in the middle of the dance floor.”

“Not my finest moment,” Matt said. He grabbed my hand.

“But nothing happened. I was just messing around.”

“You are such a great friend,” I said. I tried to keep a straight face but I laughed.

“Oh!” Bee said. “And then there was the time Matt drugged James at his bachelor party. Apparently. That was pretty shit.”

“Are you serious?” I glared at him. What happened to the caring guy who’d been worried about James’ addiction problems? Actually, I knew the answer. I broke him. I shook away the thought. “Well...too bad it didn’t somehow stop him from marrying Isabella.”

“Oh no, this was right before James married Penny.”

“Seriously?” *Matt. How could you?*

“Do you know what we used to do back in high school that was fun?” Mason said, trying to distract us. “When Brooklyn lived with us, sometimes we’d make her play video games. She’s actually pretty good. Much better than you, baby.”

Bee shoved his arm.

“That sounds great,” Matt said. “Let’s do that.”

“I feel like we kind of need to talk about this sabotaging James thing,” I said.

Matt grabbed me and pulled me onto his lap. His lips traced my ear. “I’m sorry. I was fucked up. I was barely breathing without you.”

I knew that. I did. I knew how much he’d been hurting. I melted into him.

“I wasn’t myself. I’m not me without you.”

Oh, Matt.

“I apologized to James too. We’re good. I promise you. Everything is good now. You’re back.” He exhaled like he hadn’t breathed so deeply in ages.

“I love you,” I whispered.

He kissed me behind my ear.

“Get a room,” Mason said.

Matt laughed. “We should be saying that to you two. We walked in on Bee tied up in the kitchen.”

“Well every inch of this apartment is *technically* our room,” Mason said.

“Gross.”

I laughed as Matt leaned forward to grab us each a controller.

“Wait, so you’re good at this?” Bee asked me. “Because I’m terrible.”

“No, I definitely wouldn’t say I’m good at this. Matt and Mason had a bad habit of teaming up against me in any game I’d played with the two of them.”

“Psh. Well now we can team up against them.”

I smiled. I had a feeling Bee was going to be a great teammate, because she was the only one capable of distracting Mason.

There was a knock on the door.

“Someone else is early too,” I said as my character hid behind a bush.

Mason laughed. “Why are you hiding? I’m right there. I can see you.”

Damn it. Bee was a fun teammate. But we were terrible at this game.

“I’ll get the door,” Matt said. He hit the pause button on the game.

Why was he answering their door?

But my train of thought ended as soon as he left the room because Bee grabbed Matt’s controller and un-paused the game.

“Now’s our chance!” she said. She hopped out of the bush beside mine and started firing.

“Cheaters!” Mason tried to pause the game again but Bee tossed Matt’s controller across the room.

Mason got up to go retrieve it, but Bee tackled him on the couch.

“Get it!” Bee yelled to me.

I jumped off the couch and grabbed the controller just in time to prevent Mason from getting it.

“Put it down,” Mason warned as he unwound himself from Bee’s tackle.

I went to throw it over Mason’s shoulder to Bee, but he grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder instead. “Drop the contraband, sis.”

“Never!”

“What the hell?” Matt said as he walked back into the room.

“Now you know how James probably felt.” He slapped my butt. “You have a great ass, Brooklyn.”

I hit Mason’s arm. “Put me down.”

Bee laughed.

“Wait...” someone said. “Brooklyn?!”

No, not someone. I recognized that voice.

Mason turned slightly so I could see upside down who was standing next to Matt.

“Justin?” My voice cracked.

Mason set me down and I ran over to Justin. I threw myself into his arms. I thought he was so shocked that he wouldn’t catch me. But as soon as I launched myself at him, he held on

to me so tightly it almost hurt. Like he was scared I would slip away again. I hugged him back.

“Why wouldn’t you prepare me?!” he shrieked and slapped Matt’s arm while he was still holding me tight. “How? How is this possible?”

“Justin, I can’t breathe.”

He laughed and released me. But then he grabbed both sides of my face. “You’re alive.”

I nodded.

“I’m so happy I could...I might...oh, what the hell?!” He slammed his lips against mine.

“What the fuck?” Matt said.

Justin laughed and pulled back. “Nope, still gay. But if I had to marry a woman it would definitely be you.” He patted my cheeks. “God, why do I want to kiss you again? I can’t keep my lips to myself!”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Matt said and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Oh.” Justin’s eyes grew round. “Please tell me it’s finally happening! You promised me 16 years ago that I could plan your wedding. Promise me again right this instant!”

“I mean...we’re not engaged...” I started.

“Of course, Justin,” Matt said. “Just don’t kiss her again.”

“I’ll leave the bride kissing to you, big boy.” He squealed.

“What is my life right now?! Brooklyn I have so much to tell you.” He grabbed both my hands. “I did it. I did what you knew I could. I’ve planned so many weddings.” He pointed to

Mason and Bee. “I planned their wedding! I have the most successful wedding planning company in the city. Because you believed in me. I owe everything to you.”

I wasn't sure that was true. But I still jumped up and down with him when he grabbed my hands and started leaping around the room.

“You did that all on your own, Justin. Because you're amazing.”

“No, you're the only one who believed in me. The only one. You're the only one that even asked me what I wanted to do. You don't understand how much that meant. You actually talking to me instead of pretending I didn't exist. Meeting you changed my life, Brooklyn.”

I started crying. I couldn't help it. I thought I'd ruined everyone's lives. That's why I'd stayed away. But standing in this room surrounded by family and friends? God, I was such a fool.

Justin grabbed both sides of my face and kissed me again.

I laughed.

“Seriously, everyone stop inappropriately touching my girl,” Matt said.

“Oh, honey, jealousy doesn't suit you. And you have it all wrong. This is my girl. And she's fucking back, New York City!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Chapter 33

Friday

Matt

“So...this is it,” I said, as my friends walked around my place. *Me and Brooklyn’s place*. I’d told them to come here to get ready. It was about time they saw my home.

Rob hoisted himself up on the kitchen counter and sat on the edge, his feet dangling off the side.

I hid my smile. Brooklyn had cleaned the counter. But it was still funny that Nigel’s ass had been right there.

“Huh,” Rob said. “This wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“It’s kind of exactly what I was expecting,” James said and sat down on one of the stools at the island.

Mason was staring at the painting of Brooklyn in the hall. A little too long for my liking. He turned to me. “Is this why you didn’t let us come?” He pointed to the painting.

“No, that’s new.”

Mason shook his head. “I meant the rest of them.”

“What?”

“The closet full of portraits of Brooklyn.” Rob lifted the top off a container of cupcakes and grabbed one.

“Wait, how do you guys know about that?”

“We came over to your parents’ house all the time,” James said. “I can’t remember if it was me that needed to borrow a

shirt? Or maybe it was Rob?"

"It was me," Rob said.

James shrugged. "We saw all the paintings in your closet."

I'd painted Brooklyn when I still lived with my parents too. But I didn't realize that anyone knew. Had everyone known?
"Why didn't you guys say anything?"

"You asked us not to," James said.

Rob nodded.

Mason nodded too.

I sighed. "I really am sorry, guys. For all of it. I shouldn't have made you keep that a secret from your wives. We should have talked about everything that happened ages ago."

Rob took a bite of his cupcake. "It all worked out. Sophie was right, Brooklyn makes great cupcakes. They're almost as great as her tits." He pointed the cupcake at the portrait.

"Okay, stop staring at that," I said. Maybe hanging it there wasn't such a great idea...

"Where does that door lead?" James asked and pointed to the huge door in the middle of the living room.

"A sex lair?" Mason asked.

"No. I wish." Ew, honestly maybe it was Nigel's sex lair. I shook away the thought. "Nigel moved in next door and put that door in."

Rob laughed. "Wait, you're serious?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I'm going to put drywall over it. Or lay some bricks. I haven't decided yet."

“Solid,” Rob said. “Also, thanks for not inviting Tanner to get ready with us. He would have ruined the vibe.”

I had invited Tanner. But he said he had too many last minute things to do to get everything ready. “Mhm,” I said.

“So what’s the plan for tonight? I was thinking we recreate that homecoming when Brooklyn was there. Really make her feel nostalgic before you pop the question.”

“What part exactly are you thinking we should recreate?” I did not remember that night fondly. But I had been pretty drunk. Maybe I had actually missed something noteworthy?

“So we can start with James kissing her. And then we can all get in a brawl...”

Nope, Rob was just being an ass.

James laughed. “As much as Matt deserves that, it’s Penny’s birthday. And I don’t think she’d like it if I kissed Brooklyn.”

He didn’t say he wouldn’t like it though... But I was pretty sure he was just being an ass like his brother. “Yeah, that’s a no go,” I said.

“You didn’t let me finish.” Rob slid off the kitchen counter. “That was just the beginning. To set the stage. Then it’s time for the big show. I was thinking maybe we can get Poppy or someone to kidnap Brooklyn. But instead of Brooklyn running naked into James’ arms, we can force her to run to you. So you can be her knight in shining armor or whatever. And then you propose.”

James laughed again. “I like that we have to *force* Brooklyn to run to him instead of me.”

“Right, because naturally she’d run to you,” Rob said. “It’s a classic Hunter Sanders mess around.” Rob smiled. And he got that glint in his eye that meant he was up to no good.

“What?” I asked. “What is that look for?”

“Nothing. I just remembered something important.”

I waited, but he didn’t elaborate. I just shook my head. “Forget about homecoming. I don’t want to recreate that shit night. This is supposed to be the prom Brooklyn never had. And the prom Penny never had. We’re not bringing our pasts into it.”

“So what’s your plan?” Mason asked.

“I already talked to Penny and she gave me the okay to have me and Brooklyn announced as prom king and queen at the end of the night. When we’re having our dance I’m just going to get down on one knee and ask.”

“Solid,” Mason said.

Rob shrugged. “I don’t know...my idea was pretty good too. And it didn’t involve rigging the results of prom king and queen.”

“I think Matt’s plan is great,” James said. “Brooklyn will really like that.”

I glared at him. Why did he think he knew what Brooklyn liked?

James laughed and lifted up his hands. “Okay, I’m done messing with you now. I couldn’t help myself. I like how you’ve been fucking with me for over five years but you can’t handle five minutes of pay back. I promise I’m not going to try to steal Brooklyn away from you.”

“But I probably will try to get her topless,” Rob said. “I honestly actually already tried to. We were playing shirt vs skins in family room soccer, but she refused to take her shirt off.”

“You can just look at the portrait,” Mason said.

“Ah, right.” Rob turned his attention back to the entranceway.

“They’re great tits, man.” He lifted his hand for a high-five.

“*Almost* as perfect as Daphne’s.”

I lightly punched his stomach instead of high-fiving him.

Rob leaned over like I’d hit him really hard. “Equal to Penny’s, I think.”

“You haven’t seen Penny naked...” James’ voice trailed off.

“Oh, yeah. I guess you have.” He lowered his eyebrows. “A couple times actually.”

Rob laughed. “And I walked in on Mason and Bee once too. She was tied up to an end table or something. Completely exposed to me. She definitely scores a ten for both comfort and speed.” He lifted his hand for Mason.

Mason shrugged. “You got that right.” He high-fived him.

“We all got really lucky huh? Now let’s get dressed so we can get Matt’s ring back on Brooklyn’s finger where it belongs.”

He nodded to me.

“Thanks, man.”

“And then I can be your best man. And Tanner can rot in hell with his man bun and elf shoes.”

God, not this again...

Chapter 34

Friday

Brooklyn

I was used to living in isolation with Miller. It felt odd to be in a room so full of other people. And also so normal at the same time. I still barely knew any of these women, but they already felt like family. And it was silly but...I could picture doing this all again soon. But for a wedding instead of prom.

I touched the center of my chest and felt Miller's rings.

"What are you doing over here all by yourself?" Kennedy asked and sat down next to me.

I laughed. "I didn't realize I was being weird." But I guess I probably was. I wanted to join in on the conversation. Instead I'd found myself slipping away to the side to observe. I was uneasy tonight. But it had nothing to do with Matt's friends. It was because my father kept texting me. And every time I thought about him I felt...scared. Scared for myself. Scared for my son. It felt like I was back in high school all over again. Especially since we were getting ready for a dance.

"Seriously, are you okay?" Kennedy asked. "You look a little pale."

"Don't tell Justin that. He'll think you're insulting his makeup skills."

She laughed. "But really, Brooklyn. If there's anything you need to talk about...you know I'm here. I don't want this to be

weird between us because of the Matt thing.”

“It’s nothing to do with that, I promise. I just...” my voice trailed off as I took a deep breath. “The last time I went to a dance, Isabella kidnapped me and tried to kill you.”

“Luckily she’s dead.”

“Yeah, but my dad’s still alive. And I have this really uneasy feeling in my stomach.”

“Club Onyx is a secret club. No one’s getting in without an invite.”

“Well, that’s good to know.” But it didn’t make my stomach settle. I stared at Justin and Bee laughing about something. I wanted to be that carefree. I just wasn’t sure I knew how. “I’ve never told anyone this but...whenever everything seems to be going well, it never feels permanent to me.” I touched the center of my chest again. “There always comes a point when I start to hear this clock ticking down in my head. Like I know I’m running out of time.” I started blinking fast. “And I started hearing it in my head this morning.”

“Hey.” Kennedy grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “Nothing bad is going to happen tonight.”

“I know but...I’ve never been wrong. I heard it before my mom died. And Uncle Jim. God and I felt it at the lake house.” I closed my eyes, begging the tears not to fall. “I felt it and we stayed and...”

“Well your clock is wrong,” Kennedy said. “You only just got back. And I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

I laughed. “Are you hiding a gun somewhere in your camera bag?”

“No, but maybe I should get one.” She smiled. “Really, everything’s going to be fine. And if you think Matt is going to lose you again, you’re crazy. I’m surprised he even let you out of his sight for this long.”

I laughed. “You don’t think we’re moving too fast?”

“Matt has been in love with you for 16 years. If anything, you’re moving incredibly slowly. I’m surprised you’re not already married and pregnant again.”

I nodded. I hadn’t told Kennedy about my fertility issues. And now I was just hoping I was wrong about all of it. Maybe Matt did have access to better doctors. Maybe he could make our dreams come true after all. But my hope was shrouded by the sound of the ticking in my head. I tried to push away the thought.

“And what about you?” I asked.

“What about me?” Kennedy grabbed her camera and took a photo of everyone getting ready.

“How are things going with Felix?”

She tried to hide her blush by staring down at her screen. But she wasn’t hiding anything.

“Things are great with Felix,” she said. “He was only supposed to be in the city for a few days, but he extended his trip indefinitely. So we could spend more time together.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. I think maybe he’d been avoiding the city just like I was. But now that you’re back...it feels weird that we weren’t all here the whole time.”

“Maybe he’ll move back too.”

She smiled. “I’ve actually been looking for my own place. Felix tagged along on my real estate hunt yesterday. We were kind of just joking around about the apartments being too small...but...I think maybe we might find something bigger together. Maybe. I don’t want to jinx it.”

I couldn’t help it, I squealed.

“Don’t jinx it,” Kennedy said with a laugh.

I didn’t think it was possible to jinx it. I’d known Kennedy and Felix belonged together back in high school. Nothing had changed.

“Ah, Hailey! You’re finally here!” Penny said and hurried over to the woman who’d just walked in.

Hailey gave her a hug. “Happy birthday!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I want you to meet some people.”

Penny grabbed Hailey’s hand and pulled her over to me.

“Hailey, this is Brooklyn and Kennedy. Guys, this is Hailey. Axel’s mom.”

“Oh, hi.” I gave her a quick hug. “I’m pretty sure Axel is Jacob’s new best friend.”

Hailey laughed. “I think Axel’s equally excited to be hanging out with someone who likes football instead of Barbies. Although he does have the biggest crush on Scarlett.”

“It drives James nuts,” Penny said with a laugh. “But it’s so cute. Scarlett insists that Axel is her boyfriend.”

I laughed. “I think Jacob has a crush on her too.” One of his favorite things was asking if he could hang out with Scarlett.

“Uh oh,” Kennedy said. “Not another love triangle.”

Hailey smiled. “Luckily they’re just kids. We’re a long way from that. But it is really fun to poke James about it.”

I laughed. I could definitely picture James being an overprotective father.

There was another knock on the door.

“Let me go get it,” Penny said and hurried off.

“I like your hideout spot over here,” Hailey said as she grabbed a drink off a discarded tray.

“We’re not exactly hiding out,” I said.

Hailey laughed. “Trust me, I get it. This is all a lot. It took me a while to get used to this city, let alone the huge friend group that comes with it. I lived in the middle of nowhere growing up and worked more than I ever hung out with friends.”

“I knew I liked you,” Kennedy said.

I smiled. I was thinking the same thing. “So you’re not from NYC?”

Hailey shook her head. “No, I lived in a very small, quiet town. I thought I’d live my whole life there. But I’ll be honest, I’d follow my husband to the ends of the earth. This was where he wanted to be. It was a big change. And I don’t think I ever would have adjusted if it wasn’t for these girls.” She pointed over her shoulder. “You can’t ask for better friends. So as much fun as it is to hide out over here...you guys need to come with me.” She grabbed my hand to pull me along with her.

Not that I was going to protest. I knew Hailey was right. I couldn't imagine a group of people more welcoming.

"Tanner's finally here with our dresses!" Penny said. I looked over to see Tanner directing several women who were pushing racks of dresses. There were way more dresses than required. But I was excited that there were some options.

Penny had let me know that Tanner was sending us all dresses. It was way too much. But he'd insisted it was his birthday present to her and his present to me for my "*big night*." I had no idea what he was talking about. This was a pretty big night for everyone. Prom only happened once. Or twice for some people attending, I guess.

Tanner quickly said hello to everyone and then made a beeline over to me. "You ready for your big night, gorgeous?"

I laughed. "Are you?"

"It's not my big night. It's all yours. Well, a little for Penny. But it's more about you, and Penny's fine with that."

Okay... "Well, you look great." He did. He was already in his tuxedo. It was a dark blue with some kind of finish that made it a little shimmery in the light. But I'd hardly classify it as eccentric. It just looked good on him. Was this what he'd been talking about when he'd mentioned his fun suits?

"Thanks, but you really gotta stop hitting on me. Matt gets a little jealous about these things, and I do worry our friendship will be on the rocks if you keep ogling me."

I laughed. "I'm not hitting on you, Tanner."

"It's fine, most people do."

“I’m in love with Matt.”

He put his hands on my shoulders. “Splendid.” He squinted his eyes at me like he was trying to read my mind or something.

“But really...are you good? Do you need to talk about anything at all? I’m here if you do.”

It was almost like he could hear the clock ticking down in my head. I shoved the thought aside. “I’m good, Tanner.”

“Good. That’s great! I just want to make sure tonight goes perfectly, and there’s already been a few hiccups at the venue. And this is all riding on me for some reason despite the fact that I’ve never even thrown a modern day promenade.”

I’d never actually heard anyone call the prom a promenade before. I didn’t even realize prom was short for something.

“I’m sure it’s going to be great.”

“It will be. I called my animal guy after the hiccup. He’s handling it.”

An animal guy? And handling what exactly? “There’s going to be animals there?”

“It’s a promenade, Brooklyn.” He laughed like I was the one being silly. “Now get naked and let’s try on these dresses.” He unzipped the first garment bag.

“Oh, I’ve got it, Tanner.”

“I told you, I’m good at this.” He turned around and saw that I was still completely dressed. “Brooklyn, we only have an hour before your limo comes.” He reached behind me and somehow unhinged my bra through my shirt.

I grabbed my chest to keep my bra in place. “You’re good at finding the perfect dress for customers? Or you’re good at undressing women?”

“Both, honestly.”

“Well if I’m being honest...you seeing me naked is the kind of thing that will make Matt jealous.”

“Really?” He seemed genuinely surprised by this news.

“Yes, really.”

“Huh. Okay. Weird. I’ll just turn around then.” He clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention. “Everyone start with garment bag one. Then do number two. And save three for last. Trust me, you’ll want to do them in order.”

Each girl had their own assistant and dress rack. Yeah...this was all a lot. But I was grateful.

Tanner handed me a dress over his shoulder. I was pretty sure it was made of diamonds. And since there was barely any fabric, it was virtually see-through.

Ummm...I can't wear this.

“It’s from next spring’s collection,” Tanner said. “Have you changed yet?” He started turning around.

“Nope!” This dress was pretty much the same as him seeing me naked. But somehow having a dress on seemed like a better option. I quickly changed. God, you could see my nipples through this thing.

Tanner turned before I covered them. His eyes went straight to my breasts. “I think Matt will like this one best.”

Yeah, he was probably right about that. I put my hands over my chest. "I can't wear this in public."

"Why? You look amazing, Brooklyn."

I could feel my face turning red. I looked over at my friends.

"Wait, why is Bee's dress a normal ballgown?"

"Because it's in garment bag one."

I didn't know what he meant by that. Bee twirled around in front of the mirror. She looked great. And not at all naked. But she looked as confused as I was about her first dress. I had no idea why though. It looked great on her.

"You're sure it's not the one?" Tanner asked.

"Positive."

"Very well." He unzipped the second garment bag. "Next!" he called to everyone.

And then he handed me a dress that looked a little more similar to Bee's first one. Although again, the bottom of the ballgown was sheer somehow. Even though there were so many layers.

"Hmm." Tanner folded his arms as his eyes trailed down my body. "Turn for me."

"You'll see my butt."

He shrugged. "I really don't see the harm in that."

I threw the hanger at him.

He caught it and laughed.

"Tanner, I can't wear something sheer like this." I looked over at Penny who was wearing a two piece dress. She was

covering her stomach with her hand. She had a newborn baby. And it was clear she was disappointed with garment bag number two. Was Tanner purposely trying to make us all uncomfortable in these dresses?

I heard Kennedy laughing. She was wearing a short dress that was really cute. But it was hot pink, which was definitely not a color Kennedy would have chosen.

Daphne was in something that looked like a fashionable burlap sack.

Hailey was in a denim romper.

And Bee was in another gorgeous gown. *What the hell?!*

“Tanner, why did you bring us *these* dresses?”

“There’s still one more.” He handed me the zipped up garment bag.

I eyed him skeptically.

He stepped closer to me. “Honestly, all the dresses I’ve sent are perfect,” he whispered. “Bee looks amazing in ballgowns even though she prefers to show more skin. Daphne needed something unflattering in order to be bold enough to choose something skin tight and sexy. Penny is self-conscious about her stomach when everyone else here can see she’s already shed the baby weight and looks amazing. Hailey needed to see something casual to know she needed diamonds. And Kennedy looks amazing in that color. I was hoping she’d be able to see that, but I knew if not she’d settle for a lighter version that will look just as good.”

I looked over at my friends. Wow. He’d really nailed that.

“And I’m all for a big reveal. Everyone will fall in love with the dress in bag number three.”

“So why did I need the first two dresses?”

He pulled the third garment bag off the rack. “You’re a little nervous that Matt fell in love with you when you were 16. That he envisioned you frozen in time and that he won’t love your body just as much now. But Brooklyn, you looked stunning in that first dress.” He walked behind me. “And your ass looks perfect in this one.”

I put my hands over my butt.

Tanner laughed. “Matt loves you for you. Not just for your body that is probably more curvaceous and sexier than it was at 16. But for your heart. And your soul. And I have a feeling this dress will be a little more you.” He handed me the third garment bag. “It was always all about dress number three.”

I pulled the zipper down. And stared at the blue dress. A dress that looked like a more modern version of my mother’s blue dress. The one my father had given her. The one she’d danced around with me in the kitchen. The one I’d worn to homecoming. “Tanner...how? How did you know about my mom’s dress?”

“I saw a picture of you in it framed on your father’s desk. So I asked him about it.”

My hands froze. “What? Why were you with my dad?”

“I probably should have led with that tonight. I have great news. My source was having trouble verifying your father’s story. His and Poppy’s story. So I decided to go straight to the source myself...”

“I don’t want you getting in the crosshairs of this, Tanner. I don’t want to put you in danger too.”

Tanner waved his hand through the air. “I’m not scared of Richard Pruitt. If anything he should be scared of me. And you, my best friend’s beautiful girlfriend, have nothing to fear either. He was telling the truth. Poppy and him had nothing to do with the explosion. They weren’t trying to kill you. Or Miller. Or my grandson.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. “But...how do you know? If you just spoke to him how...”

“I didn’t just speak to him. I also talked to Poppy. Although that conversation was much more hostile than the one with your father...”

“Tanner, you could have been killed!”

He laughed. “No. Definitely not.”

“But if you only spoke to them...how do you know they’re telling the truth?”

“I have my ways.”

The way he said it made me believe him. “You didn’t like... torture them or something?”

He laughed but didn’t respond to my question. “Brooklyn, you can trust me when I tell you that your father doesn’t want you dead. I would never do anything to put you in harm’s way. And if anything, your father wants you very much alive. He told me he’s been trying to call you. Why haven’t you answered?”

“Because I thought he killed my husband.” Had he really not? Could I really believe this? I stared at Tanner. I trusted him. I knew I could.

“I swear he didn’t.”

“But he’s still dangerous. Matt told me he stepped down. But...that doesn’t just make his enemies disappear. I don’t want to be part of his world.”

Tanner nodded. “Sometimes we don’t choose our circumstances though. Just because he’s stuck doesn’t mean he wants to be. And if I learned anything over our dinner...”

“You had dinner with him?”

“I had a lot of questions. That’s not important. What’s important is that he’s not a patient man. And if you’re worried about your safety, I’d think it would be better to answer him when he requests an answer.”

“I’m not going to be at his beck and call after everything he did to me.”

“Trust me, I understand completely.” His eyes searched mine. “You know, you can just say the word and I’ll take care of him if you wish.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that. And I realized that I knew very little about Tanner. Not much at all really. Was he... was it possible that he was a mobster too?

Tanner cleared his throat. “Enough about this. It’s getting late. Put your dress on.” He turned around to give me my privacy.

Tanner’s words should have made the uneasy feeling in my stomach disappear. My father hadn’t ordered the hit. He didn’t

kill Miller.

But my heart was still broken. Maybe when it was beating a little better, I'd be able to forgive him for everything. One day. But that day wasn't today.

I just wanted to enjoy prom. I smiled at the thought. *Prom.* Matt was amazing.

I changed into the dress that looked like my mom's. It was more sheer in places than the original. And a little tighter. But after Tanner's assessment of me, I felt more confident in this one than the other two. I felt like me.

Tanner turned around and smiled. "Just right?"

I nodded and looked over at my friends. Bee was smiling ear to ear in a very sheer dress. Kennedy was wearing a short dress that was such a light pink it almost looked white. Her smile was just as big as Bee's. Penny was wearing an emerald floor-length gown with a little ruching in the middle to hide what she didn't need to hide. Daphne was wearing a tight midnight black dress that was the complete opposite of the burlap sack. And Hailey's dress was dipped in diamonds and made her look like a million bucks.

It was all just right. Tanner was magical. He'd pushed them and they all looked amazing.

Justin whistled. "I've never been surrounded by such hotness."

"See..." Tanner said. "Nailed it."

"You really did. Thank you. For all of this."

He winked. "The best is yet to come. Your big night has only just begun, Brooklyn. Speaking of which..." He glanced at his

watch. "I must be going. My carriage will be arriving any second."

"Right, you don't want to turn into a pumpkin," I said with a laugh.

"What?"

"Like in Cinderella."

"Never heard of it."

How had he never heard of Cinderella? "You didn't watch Disney movies when you were little?"

"No, I didn't have a TV growing up."

How was that even possible? Surely he at least knew someone with a TV.

He shook his head. "I mean, because I was abroad. TVs existed when I was a youth."

I was pretty sure they had televisions overseas. But I didn't get a chance to ask him any more questions because his phone rang.

"Nigel, what is it now?" he said with a sigh. "Damn it. No, it has to be bigger than that. I need it to be to scale. And yes, I told Claude he could go right up." He looked at me and silently mouthed, "My animal guy."

Well, of course.

"No, Nigel. Absolutely not. I said to cancel the human cages."

What?

Chapter 35

Friday

Matt

My eyes were glued to Brooklyn as she walked out of the hotel. She looked beautiful. Tanner had somehow found her a dress that looked like the one she'd worn to homecoming. And as bad as homecoming had gone... Brooklyn had looked amazing that night. And she looked even more amazing now.

I'd been nervous all night. But seeing her put my mind at ease. She'd say yes to my proposal. She had to say yes.

"Our girl is back," Justin said.

I nodded. Justin refused to be paid for tonight. He insisted he just wanted to join in on the fun instead. I would have invited him either way. Brooklyn would want him here for this. I wanted all our friends here for this.

Justin patted my back and climbed into the limo.

I'd proposed to Brooklyn the first time in my bedroom back home. When she'd stumbled upon the ring in my nightstand. It wasn't grand. It was spur of the moment. And I was pretty sure she'd thought I was joking.

This time I'd do better. The ring was in my jacket pocket. I felt it pressing against my chest. I'd feel a hell of a lot lighter as soon as my ring was back on her finger.

Brooklyn stopped in front of me.

I just stared down at her. I still couldn't believe she was here.

“Say something, Matt. Do you hate it?”

“What? No. You look amazing. I was just thinking about how damn lucky I am.”

She smiled up at me. “You look amazing too. I like this.” She straightened my bowtie. I knew it was straight. Rob had just adjusted it in the limo. And I was glad that she just wanted an excuse to touch me. I had a hard time keeping my hands to myself around her too.

“I have something for you.” I grabbed her wrist to put her corsage on.

“This is so corny and I’m absolutely obsessed.”

I leaned down and kissed her. “Oh, I’m doing all of it. When we get there we’re doing pictures. The funny posed ones where I’m holding you from behind.”

Brooklyn laughed. “Do you think you’ll get lucky tonight too? Isn’t that a prom thing?”

“That’s definitely a prom thing. And I know I’m getting lucky. I scored us a room at the hotel and everything.” I hadn’t. I was taking her somewhere much better than a hotel room. Not that there was anything wrong with the hotel Club Onyx was in. After all, Mason owned it.

“As long as I end up in a hotel room with you instead of a different Untouchable, I’ll be very happy.”

“I am definitely not sharing you with James tonight.” My hands slipped to her ass. “Did I tell you how sexy you look in this dress?”

“Hey, lovebirds!” Rob said. “Get in the limo!”

Brooklyn grabbed my hand and pulled me into the limo. She sat down in the empty seat next to...James. *Damn it.* I put my arm around her shoulders. But I knew I didn't have anything to worry about because James was oblivious to Brooklyn's presence. Since he was currently making out with Penny.

I heard the laughter all around us. But all I could do was stare at Brooklyn. In just a few hours, she'd be my fiancée again.

"A toast," Rob said. "To Penny. Happy birthday you sexy MILF."

Penny stopped kissing James just long enough to laugh.

"And to Sanders. The oldest and newest addition to our family. Let's party like it's the early 2000s!"

Everyone cheered.

"Time for shots!" he said.

Yeah...now it felt a lot like our first prom. But I wasn't planning on getting shit faced tonight. I wanted to remember every second of this.

Brooklyn nestled into my side and looked up at me. "You know, I never really pictured our prom. I was so focused on our wedding. What do you think our prom would have looked like?"

"A lot like this." I gestured to our friends. "Although, it probably would have been my parents taking pictures of us tonight instead of the photographers I hired."

She laughed. "Yeah, I can definitely imagine your mom wanting a thousand photos."

I saw the unasked question in her eyes. Had my mom done that before? When I went to prom without Brooklyn back in high school?

“I barely remember prom,” I said. “I had too many shots in the limo with Rob. And spent part of the night sobbing in the bathroom.”

“No.”

“I wish I was kidding. I had to throw out my tux.”

“What do those things have to do with each other?”

“It was... wet.”

She laughed. “That makes it sound like you pissed yourself.”

“It was a lot of tears.”

“Maybe this one will be a bit better than that,” she said and smiled up at me.

“Just a bit?” I shook my head. “This is going to be a thousand times better than that. A night to remember for sure.”

The limo pulled to a stop in front of the Caldwell hotel.

Brooklyn looked out the window. “Why doesn’t Mason live in this hotel if he owns it?”

“The maids are always way too busy here,” Mason said with a laugh. “They’d never have enough time to clean my apartment too. My wife is filthy.”

“Hey!” Bee said with a laugh.

“What does that mean?” Brooklyn whispered to me. “That the maids are too busy?”

“Club Onyx isn’t usually a prom venue,” I said. I didn’t really know how Brooklyn would feel about a sex club. But honestly, there were a few things that had surprised me recently. I pictured her crawling to me in the shower.

She stared at me. “So...what events does it usually host? Like...business events?”

Oh God. That would end in an expensive lawsuit. “Definitely not. You know what...let’s just go in and see it. I have no idea what it’s like. I haven’t seen it since it was being constructed.” Tanner was always trying to get me to go here. But I’d been a little put off by the weird true love aspect of his sex club. I didn’t mind going in there now though. Because I had my one true love on my arm.

And tonight Tanner had promised me it wasn’t going to look like a sex club at all. He’d finally seemed to understand what a prom was after hours of brainstorming ideas. Although, he hadn’t been able to wrap his head around some stuff. Like how there usually weren’t giraffes at proms.

I helped Brooklyn out of the limo and she laughed as the cameras started going off.

We did the classic ridiculous pose with me behind her holding her waist. And then I grabbed Felix and Kennedy for a picture of the four of us. And just like always, Rob photobombed it.

We got several photos of the whole group. And then Brooklyn insisted on one of just the Untouchables.

I smiled at her as Rob jumped on my back, almost knocking me over.

I had a feeling we'd be framing a ton of these. And we needed some more pictures. Because as much as I loved the portrait of Brooklyn in our entranceway, I didn't love my friends seeing my girl's naked body.

"Just one more," I told the photographers and grabbed Brooklyn's hand. I dipped her low and the camera flashed just as she erupted with laughter.

That was the one I wanted in the entranceway. We'd move her portrait to our bedroom instead.

We were just about to head inside the hotel when a horse drawn carriage arrived. Nigel leapt out and helped a tall blonde down from the carriage. She looked eerily like a super tall version of Brooklyn. A few weeks ago I would have done a double take, wishing it was her. Why would Tanner bring a girl that looked so similar to Brooklyn as his date?

But then Nigel put his arm around her waist. She leaned down and kissed his cheek right as Nigel grabbed a handful of her butt.

What the...

She laughed but didn't swat him away.

Was that Nigel's girlfriend?

Tanner walked out of the carriage with a tan brunette on his arm. Actually I think I recognized her from his binder full of women. I was really glad I hadn't gone on a date with any of them. I had a feeling they were all women he'd slept with, and this pretty much confirmed it.

"Sorry we're late," Tanner said. "I couldn't forgo the carriages Nigel booked. You know how I hate wasting money. And the

horses stopped twice to relieve themselves. How was your mechanical beast?"

"The limo was great," I said. "Who is Nigel with?"

"His date."

"Why does she look like me?" Brooklyn asked.

I was glad I wasn't the only one that saw it. Brooklyn finally seemed slightly creeped out by Nigel.

"Oh, Nigel's quite fond of you, Brooklyn," Tanner said. "He dated Cleopatra a few years ago but cut it off when she got a little clingy. Nigel's not one to settle down. He's a lad's lad. A bit of a womanizer, really."

Brooklyn nodded like that made perfect sense.

It did not. Not at all.

"But he called Cleopatra up a few days ago and they've rekindled the spark I believe. Love is in the air."

Wait...he called her back up because he wanted to fuck someone that looked like Brooklyn? What the hell? I watched as Cleopatra ran her hand down the front of Nigel's tux in an overtly sexual manner. Her hand paused at the waistband of his tuxedo pants.

"Not right now, Cleopatra. Come meet my friends." He escorted her over to us. "This is the lovely Brooklyn I was telling you about." He dropped Cleopatra's hand and grabbed Brooklyn's. "Mademoiselle, you look exquisite. Belle femme."

"Thanks, Nigel."

And that was the end of that. Apparently Nigel only wanted to introduce his date to Brooklyn. And his date looked equally annoyed by all of it.

“Baby,” Cleopatra said. “Do you want a photo?”

“Great idea,” Nigel said. He pulled Brooklyn in front of the cameras.

“See,” Tanner said. “He’s a lad’s lad.”

“That’s not what a lad’s lad does,” I said. “A lad’s lad means putting your friends first.”

“Yeah, he’s friends with Brooklyn. And he wanted a friendly photo with her.”

Was Nigel touching Brooklyn’s butt? Why did all my friends keep touching her ass? I needed to seal up Nigel’s secret door into my house. And hide all my portraits of Brooklyn immediately. And find the copy he’d made of it for his bathroom and burn it.

“Let’s get inside. The promenade has already begun.”

“Prom,” I corrected.

“Yes, promenade.” Tanner winked at me.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. It’s a normal, basic ass prom like you requested. Nigel, stop fondling your friends and let’s go inside.”

It looked like Cleopatra’s head was about to explode. Maybe she’d kill Nigel and I wouldn’t have to.

I grabbed Brooklyn’s arm. “Sorry about him.”

She laughed. “Sorry about what? Nigel really is so charming. And so thoughtful. I had a piece of lint on my dress and he got it off for me.”

Is that what he’d told her so he could touch her ass? I took a deep breath. I was not going to get in a fistfight at this dance. Tonight was going to be perfect.

We walked into the hotel. There was only one elevator that had access to Club Onyx. So it was just Tanner, Mason, Bee, Brooklyn, and I on the first trip up.

We were greeted by the coat check guy. Even though none of us were wearing jackets.

“May I check your dress?” he asked and put his hand out. There was already a sparkly dress draped over his arm.

“Check my *what*?” Brooklyn asked.

Bee shrugged and started to pull off her dress.

“No,” Tanner said. “Ignore him. Trent, cut it out.”

The guy looked very confused.

“We talked about this. Clothing is required tonight.”

“But it’s Friday night, which means...”

“No it’s *prom* night. Which means it’s *prom*. So shoo. And go find whoever gave you her dress and give it back!”

He walked away still looking confused.

“Sorry about that,” Tanner said. “We have a pretty good routine and you know how hard those are to break.”

Brooklyn stared at him. “I’m so confused. What usually happens on Fridays? Do people run around without clothes?”

Tanner turned to me, like he wanted my permission to tell her we were standing in the middle of a sex club.

“Don’t look at me,” I said. “I’ve never been here.”

Bee laughed. “It’s no secret that Club Onyx is a sex club. I mean, the club itself is a secret.” She tilted her head to the side. “So, I guess maybe that is a secret then. Huh.”

I was staring at Brooklyn to see her reaction. She remained completely composed, except for the fact that her cheeks grew a little rosier. I wasn’t sure if that meant she was embarrassed by the idea of being in a sex club. Or embarrassed by the idea that she *liked* being in a sex club.

“It’s not a sex club,” Tanner said. “It’s a club to find true love. We’ve been over this. You signed off on the business proposal.”

“That was just clever wording for legal purposes,” Mason said. “This is definitely a sex club. You have dozens of rooms specifically designed for different...”

Tanner laughed. “I’m not having this discussion again.”

Someone walked by pushing an ice sculpture of a woman on her knees giving head to a very well-endowed ice sculptured male.

“If you’ll excuse me for one moment.” Tanner ran over to the ice sculpture and pushed it onto the floor. It fell and shattered into a million pieces. He cleared his throat and turned around. “Now, where were we? Right this way.” He gestured toward the staircase.

I kind of couldn’t wait to see what was up there.

But before we took another step, the elevator doors opened again behind us.

Penny and James walked out first, and the attendant immediately asked for Penny's dress.

James took a step forward. "What did you just say to *my wife*?" He looked like he was about to murder him.

"Trent! What did I just tell you?" Tanner stepped in front of him. "Sorry, James. Sorry, Penny. Please go up the stairs and have fun at *prom*." He emphasized prom and turned to glare at Trent.

"But..." Trent started "...it's Friday..."

"Son of a bitch. Where is Nigel when I need him?"

Nigel stepped off the elevator just as Tanner called for him.

"Yes, Master Tanner?" he asked. "What do you need?"

"Take care of this please."

"I'll collect the dresses, yes."

"No. What? No, Nigel. Never mind. Everyone please just go up the stairs." I was pretty sure Tanner was close to losing it. I'd never really seen him so agitated, unless he was talking about Rob.

"I'm sure everything up there is great," I said and slapped him on the back. I knew he was just nervous about tonight going well. Because he cared about me. "Show us the way, Tanner."

Tanner leaned closer to me so he could whisper. "I should probably stay here to make sure no one goes to prom naked. I'll be up in a bit."

“It’s fine. Really. Come on. Trent can handle it, right Trent?” I had no idea if that was true. He seemed pretty adamant about checking dresses at the entrance.

But Trent nodded.

“If you’re sure,” Tanner said. “I did want to see your reaction to everything. And if you happen to change your mind about how you want the night to go, just let me know. I can turn it back into a normal Friday night here like that.” He snapped his fingers and all the lights went out. “Sorry”, he said with a laugh. “Nothing makes hearts race more than being scared in a dark room. And racing hearts means true love is near.”

There was a loud roaring noise and Brooklyn clung to me.

“Oh and that helps too,” Tanner said.

Damn it, he brought animals. But he did kind of have a point about the darkness thing. I held Brooklyn a little tighter.

Chapter 36

Friday

Brooklyn

Tanner snapped his fingers again and the lights came back on. But I still stayed tucked into Matt's side. Because it wasn't just the lights going out that had scared me.

"Is there a lion in here somewhere?" I whispered. "I overheard Tanner talking to his animal guy earlier."

"Honestly? Probably. He'd never heard of prom before. Can you believe that?"

"No prom *and* no TV growing up? Is he really religious or something?"

"I don't think so. One time Nigel mentioned that Tanner was at worship. But Nigel confessed that he was lying about the whole thing."

There was another roaring noise as we made our way up the stairs.

"Huh," I said. "Well, we should have brought Jacob then, he loves the zoo."

"But it's a sex club."

I laughed. "I wasn't sure if everyone was joking or not. So like...what do you think normally happens here on Fridays?"

Matt smiled down at me. "Why do you ask? Do you want to find out?"

“Do *you* want to find out?”

“I asked you first, baby.”

I focused on the velvety red carpet on the staircase before looking up at him. “I really liked what we did in the shower the other night,” I whispered. I liked when he told me what to do. When he told me exactly what he wanted. When he was rough with me. “And after we walked in on Bee and Mason tonight, she kind of eluded to the fact that it was a Caldwell thing.”

He raised his eyebrow at me.

“Is that true?” I asked. “Would you like tying me up?”

We stopped at the top of the staircase and he leaned forward to whisper in my ear. His breath was hot and my heart was still racing from being scared.

“I would love nothing more than to tie you up and have you completely at my mercy,” he whispered.

Jesus.

“If you wanted to try that, that is. And judging by the way you’re clinging to me...that’s a yes.”

I laughed and pressed my lips against his. “I think I’d like to give it a try.” I didn’t just think it. I wanted it right this second. The last time I’d seen Matt in a tux was at homecoming our sophomore year of high school. He’d looked handsome then. But he hadn’t filled out a tux the way he did now.

“I suddenly wish I’d just brought you here on a normal Friday night.”

I shoved his shoulder. “No. I wanted this. Maybe you’ll get lucky later.” I turned to see where the stairs had led. It seemed like we were in the heart of the club now. Everything was all gold, and leather, and wood, just like the foyer. It oozed wealth. And the balloons and streamers in Empire High blue and orange didn’t fit the atmosphere at all. But I loved it. All of it. Even the cages of lions in the corners somehow worked.

There was a squawking noise and I looked up. Were those eagles? I had no idea how Tanner had gotten those. I was pretty sure they were endangered, but extra props to him for getting our mascot.

The place was absolutely packed. I was pretty sure we were the last ones to arrive. Who were all these people? As far as I could see, everyone was wearing clothes. It was all fancy dresses and expensive tuxedos. There were numbered tables set up for a fancy dinner, but there also seemed to be some games and things set up in the corners. Wait, was that a ball pit back there? I smiled. It was kind of like if prom collided with the after prom party in the best way possible.

“This is amazing,” I said.

“Eh.” Rob shrugged. “He did okay.”

“Young Robert,” Tanner said. “I almost forgot that you were invited. But Daphne, you look amazing in the dress that I picked out to perfectly hug every single one of your curves. And you’re welcome here any time.”

Young Robert? I was pretty sure Tanner was the same age as us, if not a little younger.

“Thank you.” Daphne kissed his cheek.

Rob glared at Tanner. “Of course I’m here. Because I’m Matt’s best friend. I bet I was the first person he invited. And don’t hit on my wife, Tanner.”

That was very ironic the Rob was upset with Tanner about inappropriate flirting. Since he hit on pretty much every woman in his friend group.

“Anyway,” Tanner said. “Now that you’re all here...the promenade can officially begin.” He snapped his fingers, but the lights just dimmed this time instead of going out completely. And the lions roared. “We’re all at table one. Let’s eat, drink, and be merry.”

Matt twirled me around and then dipped me backward.

I’d forgotten how good Matt was at dancing. I remembered his homecoming float performance so vividly, but he’d purposely embarrassed himself on that for me.

He kissed between my breasts and I laughed. He pulled me back up, pressing me against his chest. We started slow dancing even though the music was still up-tempo.

I reached up, running my fingers through his hair. “Remember our one dance at homecoming?”

“I remember you dancing with everyone else but me. And me getting very drunk staring at you from the corner. But you know I don’t really remember our dance because I drank too much. I mostly remember the stuff you told me I said afterward.”

I laughed. “Like how you used to jerk off all the time to me?”

“Hmm. It’s present tense, baby. I still jerk off all the time to you.”

“Not for the past week you haven’t. Because I’ve been here.” I stared into his eyes.

“And you’re as insatiable as me.” He dropped his forehead to mine.

We’d slowed even more. We were barely dancing anymore, just standing in the middle of the dance floor holding each other.

“How early is too early to sneak off?” I asked.

He groaned. But he didn’t get a chance to respond, because Mason tapped his shoulder.

“Mind if I steal her for a second?” Mason turned to me. “I’m pretty sure I’m the only Untouchable that never got a chance to dance with you at homecoming.” He put his hand out for me. “You owe me, sis.”

I laughed and slipped my hand into his. The music had actually slowed down, so I put my hands on his shoulders and his fell to my waist.

“My dad would probably be so happy to see us dancing,” I said. I’d said it jokingly, but my smile faltered thinking about my dad. *Maybe I should call him back...* Maybe it would make the ticking in my head stop.

“Yeah, I’m definitely the better brother.”

I laughed.

“But I think we both know you’re perfect for Matt. I just wanted to steal you for a minute to say thank you. For coming

back to us.”

I nodded. Even though it hadn't really been my choice. Staying had been though. And I was going to stay. I needed Matt the same way he needed me. We were happier together.

“Am I also the only Untouchable that didn't kiss you?”

I stared at him. “I'm actually only two for four. And I plan on keeping it that way.”

Mason smiled. “I'm not trying to step on Matt's toes, I was just curious. But I am surprised that Rob never put one on you. I thought for sure he had.”

“No, definitely not.”

“Well, don't be offended that I didn't. I probably would have if Matt hadn't called dibs on you so fast. I've always had a thing for blondes.”

“I definitely wasn't offended.” Kissing Matt and James had proved complicated enough. I looked over at Bee who was dancing with Tanner. I was glad that the only way we resembled each other was our blonde hair, or I probably would have been a little weirded out. But dating a doppelganger of me was more of Nigel's thing. “I really like Bee.”

“That makes two of us.”

I laughed. “A blonde girl from Delaware though. Really?”

“Eh. What can I say? I missed you more than I realized. Meeting her kind of felt like...home.”

Mason always surprised me. When I first met him he'd seemed so cold. But I knew that wasn't true. “I missed you too, Mason.”

He smiled down at me.

“Can I cut in?” Rob asked.

Mason took a step back. “She’s all yours, man.” He dropped my hands and Rob grabbed them.

I looked over at Matt standing by the bar as Rob pulled me closer.

It suddenly felt a lot like homecoming 16 years ago. And I was pretty sure that was a bad thing. I stole another glance at Matt. He didn’t look upset. But my heart started racing thinking about how that dance had ended. God, what if Kennedy was wrong? What if this club wasn’t as private as she said? What if anyone could just walk in and...

“You’re not going to have another panic attack on me, are you?” Rob touched the side of my face so I’d look at him.

“Take a deep breath.”

I stared up at him and exhaled slowly.

“And another.”

I laughed. “I’m okay. But thank you.” It was easy to not panic when I was around Rob.

“You know...I’ve been thinking a lot about when we used to hang out back in high school.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Specifically whenever it was just the two of us.”

I stared up at him. “I remember dancing with you at homecoming. Just like this. But we mostly hung out with other people around.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“It definitely is. I remember being in class with you and Matt. And in your treehouse with James.”

“Right. But that wasn’t what I was referring to. Think, Sanders. Think real hard.”

“We were never alone.”

“I mean Matt was close by. Come on, I know you remember. When I pushed you into Matt’s bedroom and held the door shut.”

“Oh.” I definitely remembered that. God, I’d been so mad at him.

“If I recall correctly, you screamed my name....”

Ooooh. Oh, no. Shit. He wasn’t seriously going to...

“You still owe me a favor, Sanders.”

“Rob, I definitely do not.”

“You absolutely do. You screamed my name. We had an agreement. You’re at my mercy.”

“I pulled that prank on Isabella. That counted.”

He shook his head. “No, we agreed that didn’t count. Because you wanted to do that. You wanted revenge.”

“I did not want to do *that*.”

He laughed. “I’ll admit, you weren’t privy to all the details. But you loved it. I mean...up until Matt lost it. And you died or whatever.”

“Died or whatever? *Rob*.”

“Sanders. Come on, remember when Wizzy started farting? You could barely hold back your laughter. And when she fell through the ceiling? Ah, remember the carving knife hitting the portrait? And Mrs. Pruitt slipping in what she thought was shit? It was the best Thanksgiving ever.”

That was pretty funny... “Rob, that day was the worst. And I’m done owing you favors. I just got back. I don’t want to mess everything up again.”

“Yeah but we haven’t had a classic Hunters Sanders mess around in years.”

“Technically my last name is Miller.”

He smiled down at me. “And it’ll be Caldwell soon enough. But I’m always going to call you Sanders, Sanders.”

I laughed. “I don’t owe you another favor.”

“But Thanksgiving is coming up and I have a really great idea for a prank to play on Matt.”

“Absolutely not. No pranks.”

“But you do agree that you owe me?”

I sighed. “I guess...yeah. I owe you a favor.”

“Actually, you owe me whatever I want.”

Damn it. “Yeah. That. But not a prank. Please, Rob.”

“How about a threesome with Daphne?”

I laughed. “Wait, are you serious?”

“I’m not *not* serious.”

“I don’t think Daphne would appreciate that.”

“So you would appreciate it? Nice. I’ll go ask her.”

I laughed again. “Please don’t.”

“Well, that brings us back to the prank then.”

I groaned.

“Just wait for it. I have a month and a half before Thanksgiving to change your mind. Think about it. It’ll be epic. And so will this.” He nodded to Felix walking over to us. “It’s like homecoming all over again. Hopefully James and I don’t have to kick the Caldwell’s asses this time.” He took a step back and handed me off to Felix.

Yeah, this definitely felt like homecoming again.

And when I put my hands on Felix’s shoulders, Matt didn’t look quite as calm.

Felix looked at where I was staring off. “Don’t worry, Newb. I have no intention of getting in between the two of you again. I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I know. I’m good.” I took a deep breath, pushing away the guilt for saying that. I was as good as I could be. “Kennedy told me you might be staying in the city for a while.”

“I actually kind of wanted to talk to you about that too. I know this is all weird. I was with you. Matt was with Kennedy. And now Kennedy and I are together. It’s...”

“It’s finally all working out the way it’s supposed to,” I said. “You know, when I was away, I always imagined the two of you got married and had a bunch of kids.”

“I don’t know...Matt’s not really my type, Newb.”

I laughed. “You know I meant you and Kennedy.”

“I really thought she hated me.”

“Yeah...I did too. But I was just a bad friend.” I sighed.

“You weren’t a bad friend.”

I shook my head. “I was so concerned with my own problems, I didn’t see it. I mean, I had my suspicions that she had a crush on you. Hell, even Rob told me that she did. But she denied it and I didn’t press it. And I really liked you, Felix.”

“I really liked you too.”

We were both quiet for a moment as we danced.

“It really sucked without you in high school,” he said.

I nodded. Yeah. It sucked not having him in my life too.

“But the way Matt was after your funeral...I knew you’d made the right choice back then. My life kept going. I missed you, and it sucked, but my life didn’t stop. His stopped.”

I looked over at Matt. He took a sip of his drink as he stared at me.

“I’m happy for you,” Felix said. “And I’m happy for him. Somewhere in everything that happened, Matt and I actually became friends. He’s a good guy. And I think the two of you are perfect together.”

He was going to make me cry. “Thank you. And thank you for being there for him when I couldn’t be.”

Felix shrugged. “You know I’d do anything for you, Newb. And I really hope the four of us can hang out like old times. I know Kennedy really wants that too.”

“That sounds perfect.” I stepped closer and hugged him. God, I’d really missed Felix. He’d been one of my closest friends. And it finally felt like that’s all it was. All it was ever meant to be.

Felix walked off to find Kennedy. I turned to go join Matt but Nigel blocked my path.

“If you’ll allow me a dance, mademoiselle.” Nigel put out his hand and bowed.

How was I supposed to say no to that? “Of course, Nigel.”

He pulled me in way too close. And since he was so short, his face was practically pressed between my breasts. The music was loud, but I could have sworn he made a noise with his mouth like a motor starting.

“Nope, no, stop it, Nigel.” Tanner picked him up and put him to the side. “Excuse him. I specifically told him not to motorboat you. And he’s breaking a promise.”

“I never agreed to that,” Nigel said.

“You nodded.”

“No. I did this.” Nigel turned his head in rapid circles. Almost like he was nodding and saying no at the same time.

“Go dance with Cleopatra. She’s scowling next to the third lion cage.”

“She’s always scowling. Brooklyn, your smile is lovely. You’re lovely. But you’ve been dancing for some time now. How about we go down the hall and I draw you a private bath?”

“Oh...um...”

Tanner grabbed my hands and put them on his shoulders.

“Ignore him.”

But it was a little hard to ignore Nigel in his dapper little tux.

Tanner turned us so that I couldn't see Nigel anymore. “How is your big night going?”

“This is all amazing,” I said. “It's fun getting to catch up with everyone. But it feels like I haven't danced with Matt in like an hour.”

Tanner laughed. “You're the belle of the ball. He'll have to wait his turn. Now tell me, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate this evening? I think I might throw another of these.”

“Definitely a ten, Tanner. Thank you so much for putting this all together. I always wondered what prom would have been like.”

“I'll tell you, I was a little worried about it. I wanted tonight to go perfectly and it's always iffy on a Friday in this part of the club. But reconstructing any other room so quickly would have been difficult.”

“Wait, this isn't the whole club?” *I guess Mason had mentioned some rooms...*

Tanner laughed. “No. This isn't really even where the real Club Onyx truly begins. The magic happens down that hall.” He nodded to an opening in the back of the room by one of the lion cages.

“And what exactly is down that hall?”

He smiled. “Well, aren't you and Matt both curious tonight? He just asked me the same question.”

“And what did you tell him?” The hallway looked dark and empty to me.

“I told him he’s welcome to go through. And to take you into the room with a mask on the door. I have a feeling you’ll both enjoy it.” He pulled out an old-fashioned key and slipped it down the front of my dress.

Just the way James had slipped a keycard down my dress 16 years ago.

I looked back over at the hall. “So this *is* a sex club?”

“Not at all. Is there sex in most of the rooms here? Of course. All good relationships need that foundation. Intimacy is a vital part of being in love. But look.” He pointed to the wall behind me. “See those portraits? Those are couples that met here.”

There were tons of happy couples smiling in the portraits.

“You got all those people together?”

“Just like I got you and Matt back together. And got Kennedy and Felix together.”

“So you’re a matchmaker? Not a mobster?”

“If only.” He stared at the wall with a frown.

I didn’t know what that meant. But he was staring at the happy couples and he looked so...sad. I understood that feeling. “It’s going to be okay, Tanner.”

“Maybe one day.” He cleared his throat and looked back at me. “I also have an odd sense that your father and Kennedy’s mother may have a sexual connection.”

“Ew, what? Don’t tell me that.”

He laughed. “You’ll see.”

“I really don’t want to see that.”

“Everyone deserves happiness, Brooklyn. Life is so fleeting.”

I wasn’t sure my father deserved happiness. And I wouldn’t wish him upon anyone. Especially someone as kindhearted as Mrs. Alcaraz.

“Ah, and here comes your match runner-up.”

“What?” I turned to see James standing there.

“Match runner-up?” he asked Tanner.

“If Matt and Brooklyn weren’t a perfect match. It would have been you two.” He took my hand off his shoulder and handed it to James. “In another lifetime, I think.”

James laughed as Tanner walked away and looked down at me. “You and me in another lifetime? Do you think that’s true?” He put his hand on my waist and stepped forward so that I’d step back to the music.

“I honestly can’t imagine you with anyone other than Penny.”

“Well, you and I certainly would have fared better than me and Isabella.”

I laughed. “Definitely true. And you did propose to me.”

“I did.” He smiled down at me. “My first proposal. But not yours.”

I shook my head. “Matt beat you to it.” I looked over at Matt at the bar. He downed his glass and put it on the bar top. This dance probably made him the most angry. Because maybe there was some truth in what Tanner had said.

“I thought about you over the years,” I said. “I hoped you were better. I hoped you found someone that was happy. So you didn’t have to be miserable together with someone.”

James laughed. “Ah, such a good proposal I made. Miserable together. In another lifetime, I think Tanner’s right. We would have been happy together. I definitely would have been happier if you hadn’t died.” He lowered his eyebrows as he stared down at me.

“I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “I’m glad you were happy while you were gone. But I’m even more glad you came back. Because Matt needed you. And I really missed you, Brooklyn.”

I blinked away my tears. “I missed you too, James. You know...I never really got to thank you for that night at homecoming. For helping me. Even though you were mad at Matt.”

He smiled. “That was definitely a fun homecoming. Minus Rachel biting me.”

I laughed. “Definitely not a highlight. The fist fight wasn’t great either.”

“No, that was fun.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

He smiled down at me. “I was drunk most of high school. But there are three things I remember vividly. Your memory haunted me. But mostly the good things. You in my treehouse rejecting my proposal. You locking eyes with me while Rachel was giving me head.”

I felt my cheeks turning red.

“And sitting with you in that shower after homecoming. Do you remember that?”

“Yeah. I remember. I really appreciated that too.”

“If you ever just want to sit in a shower and cry fully clothed...I can still be there for you.”

I laughed. “Thanks, James.”

“And screw any other lifetime. We only have this one. And I’m really glad you’re happy, Brooklyn. I’m really glad we get to be friends. And I’m really glad you’re back.”

He leaned down and kissed the top of my head. I’d seen him do that to Scarlett and it was oddly comforting.

Maybe in another lifetime we would have been together. But I was really happy with what we had. And I knew if I ever needed him, he’d be there. Holding me in the shower while I cried.

The music stopped and someone tapped on the mic.

I turned to see Tanner standing there holding two envelopes.

“It’s time to announce prom king and queen!” he said.

“Oh, that’s definitely going to be you and Penny,” I whispered.

James shook his head. “I think I’ve worn enough crowns.

Hopefully it’s someone more deserving.” He winked at me.

Me? I didn’t think so. I barely knew anyone here. And I hadn’t even seen a place to vote. But if I had I would have voted for Kennedy and Felix.

Tanner lifted the mic again. “But first let’s all wish the beautiful Penny Hunter a very happy birthday!”

A spotlight hit Penny. Bee and Daphne both hugged her as everyone shouted, “happy birthday!”

Penny turned her head while still in her friends’ embrace, to try and find James in the crowd. They locked eyes and James winked at her. Her face flushed. They were freaking adorable together.

“Now without further ado,” Tanner said. “The Empire High prom king is...” he tore open the envelope. “Matthew Caldwell!”

James started clapping.

“Ow ow!” Bee yelled.

“And the Empire High prom queen is...” he tore the envelope.

And I have no idea why. But I had the oddest sensation that he was about to say Isabella Pruitt.

I heard the ticking down in my head louder than ever. A chill ran down my spine and I looked over my shoulder. But there was no one there.

Chapter 37

Friday

Matt

I stared at Brooklyn looking around the room. Like she was expecting someone to be called other than her.

Didn't she realize it yet? There was no more perfect match than us.

"The Empire High prom queen is...Brooklyn Sanders!"

Tanner said with a big smile. "Both of you please come up to the stage and get your crowns."

Brooklyn still didn't move. She was staring behind her.

James whispered something to her and it was like the words finally clicked in Brooklyn's head. She smiled and made her way to the stage. She climbed up the opposite set of stairs as me and we met in the middle.

"I'm pretty sure this was rigged," she said and smiled up at me. "I barely know anyone here."

"Me either." I grabbed her hand and pulled her closer. "But you're definitely the most beautiful prom queen ever."

"I couldn't agree more," Tanner said as he placed a tiara on her head. He put a crown on mine. "Now the prom king and queen will have their first dance!"

Everyone parted as Brooklyn and I made our way back down to the dance floor. I pulled her in close. "You always dance with everyone but me."

“Definitely not true.”

“Nigel tried to motorboat you.”

Brooklyn laughed. “Is that what that noise was? I did not ask for that.”

“I know. At least, I hoped that was the case.”

“I kept trying to get back to you,” she said. “I was a little worried you were getting very drunk over at the bar, just like at homecoming.”

I shook my head. “Believe it or not, I was only drinking one drink that whole time.” And I wasn’t getting drunk tonight. I wanted to remember every second of this moment. I lifted her hand in the air and twirled her around before pulling her back in close.

“That’s a shame. I kind of like how honest drunk Matt is.” She reached up and straightened my crown.

“I can be honest completely sober too. What do you want to know?”

She smiled up at me. “Were you upset that I was dancing with our friends?”

“No. I know they all missed you. Not as much as I missed you though.”

She stood on her tiptoes to whisper in my ear. “Don’t tell any of them, but I missed you most too.”

I laughed.

“One more question. Was this better than your first prom?”

“A thousand times better.” I stared down at her. I’d thought about what I wanted to say to her tonight. But staring down at her and the nerves in my stomach made me forget all of it. The music was going to switch soon though. And I needed to get this out before it did.

I cleared my throat. “You know...for part of the time you were away, I tried to convince myself I hadn’t loved you. That true love didn’t exist. That love was for idiots.” I took a deep breath. “But as soon as I saw you again up in the Empire High stands? I knew it was a lie I’d been telling myself. Because I love you, Brooklyn. I’ve always loved you. And I couldn’t help falling in love with this new version of you all over again.”

There were tears in her eyes. “I tried to convince myself the same. That we were young. That it wasn’t real. But I was so wrong. And I couldn’t help falling in love with you again too, Matt. The new version. But it’s a lot like the old version and I loved you so much then too.”

God, she was going to make me cry. And that was definitely not part of the plan. I leaned down and kissed her.

A few people watching us whistled.

I laughed and pulled back just a little. “I made so many mistakes over the years,” I whispered against Brooklyn’s lips. “One of the biggest was when we first started dating 16 years ago. I didn’t love you out loud. And I know why you stayed away from me. I understand, Brooklyn.”

“Matt.” Her voice cracked. “That’s not...”

“It is. You had doubts. Because I gave you reasons to doubt me. We promised each other we’d never walk away from a discussion. And I walked away. I shouldn’t have left you with your father.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

It was. She’d never be able to convince me otherwise. I was glad that she’d been happy while we were apart. But I was a hell of a lot happier that she was here with me now. “Do you remember when you found my aunt’s ring in my nightstand? You told me that it was hard for you to love people. Because everyone you love leaves you.”

She pulled me even closer.

“And I told you that I’d never leave you. That I wasn’t going anywhere. That you belonged with me.”

“I remember,” she said. “I remember all of it. But Matt... nothing’s changed. Everyone I love does leave. Every single person I’ve loved has died. I’m cursed. I’m bad luck...”

“Every single person?” I shook my head. “What about my parents? They’re still here loving you. And what about Mrs. Alcaraz?”

She pressed her lips together. “I didn’t really think about that before.”

“And what about me?” I reached out to wipe her tears away. “I’m still here loving you. I’ll always be here loving you.”

“But aren’t you scared? That something terrible will happen if you’re with me? I’m scared of that. I’m so scared that you choosing me will put you in harm’s way. My dad...”

“Brooklyn,” I said, cutting her off. “The only thing that scares me is living one more second without you. And don’t you think the terrible thing already happened? I had to mourn you for 16 years. I lost you. Nothing is worse than that hell.”

She pressed her face against my chest and held me tight.

“I’m still here,” I whispered in her ear. “I’m still here and I’m not fucking going anywhere. Do you understand me?” I touched the bottom of her chin so she’d look up at me. “I waited half a lifetime for you to be in my arms again. No one will ever keep us apart. I dare them to try.”

The music changed to *My Dirty Little Secret* and Brooklyn smiled.

“Our song again?” She smiled up at me. “I think this might be Tanner’s favorite.”

“No. I asked him to change the music halfway through our dance.”

“Are you about to break out in song? Because I love you, but your singing voice isn’t the best.”

“You wound me.”

She laughed.

“No, I’m not going to start singing.” I took a deep breath.

“Brooklyn, I know you once promised I could be all your firsts. But I can’t be your first husband. I can’t even be your only husband. But I’m your last, Brooklyn. It’s you and me and Jacob against the world now. And I’m ready for the next step. One step closer to our happily ever after. I just never thought it would take so long.” I dropped to one knee.

She put her hand over her mouth and the tears started falling faster.

“I fell in love with you when I was 16 on a fall day just like this. The autumn breeze reminds me of you. But I’m so ready to experience every season with you. If you’ll do me the honor of being my wife.” I pulled the ring box out of my jacket pocket and opened it. “Will you marry me, Brooklyn?”

Chapter 38

Friday

Brooklyn

I knew you were only supposed to experience this feeling once in your life. But this was my third time.

I'd felt like this the first time Matt proposed.

I'd felt this when Miller got down on one knee.

And I felt it now.

The ring I'd once worn was shining back at me from the box.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I was scared of loving Matt.

It almost felt like I loved him too much. That I'd never be whole again if I lost him. And I was so scared of losing him.

Because I did lose people I loved. It happened too many times.

I wanted to say yes. But at the same time I wanted to cry for what I'd lost with Miller. I wanted this whole room not to be hushed and staring as I slowly fell apart. As my heart ripped with grief but felt so happy at the same time.

I closed my eyes for just a second and remembered staring up at Miller under the lights he'd strung in the trees. But I wasn't picturing him down on one knee. I pictured him touching the side of my face. I pictured his smile. I pictured him telling me the words he'd written out loud: "*Keep living, kid. Promise me?*"

I opened my eyes and stared down at Matt.

Matt's smile faltered.

And the crowd was no longer hushed. They were whispering. Waiting for me to say anything at all. But I was frozen.

I was surprised Matt didn't stand up. But he stayed there on one knee and stared up at me.

"Brooklyn, I'm not getting up until you say yes. I've waited my whole life to be with you. And I will wait down here on one knee for another lifetime if that's what it takes. But I'm really hoping you won't make me do that."

I laughed through my tears.

"This ring belongs with you. It always has. I've loved every part of you, baby. I loved you when you were a Sanders. I loved you when you were a Pruitt. And I love you as a Miller. But it's about damn time you become a Caldwell, don't you think? Marry me." It wasn't a question now. It was a demand.

I looked down at the ring. He was right. That belonged to me. It belonged on my finger. "*Keep living, kid.*" I was going to do just that. I kept my promises to the people that kept theirs. And I once promised Matt I'd be a Caldwell one day. It was about time I made good on that promise.

I wiped away my tears. "I always thought Brooklyn Caldwell had a nice ring to it. I certainly doodled it in my notebooks enough at Empire High."

Matt smiled up at me. "Is that a yes?"

I threw my arms around him, almost knocking him backward on the floor. "Yes," I whispered in his ear as he held me tight. "Of course I'll marry you, Matt."

He stood up and twirled me around as everyone started cheering and clapping. I stared down at him. It felt like I was flying.

“She said yes!” he yelled, even though everyone already seemed to know.

The cheering grew louder.

“One more thing,” he said and set me down on my feet. “I believe I have something that belongs to you.” He grabbed my hand and slid my ring back onto my finger. I looked down at it. I’d forgotten how beautiful it was. I’d forgotten how perfectly it fit. How perfect Matt and I fit.

I smiled up at him. How had I ever doubted the boy I fell in love with 16 years ago? He’d never stopped loving me. I was never going to doubt him again. And I’d never stop loving him either.

I went to hug Matt, but someone lifted me off my feet. I laughed as Matt was lifted up too. And our friends carried us through the crowd and unceremoniously tossed us into the ball pit.

I laughed as I came up to the surface.

They all jumped in around us, cheering. It was a blur of hugs and tears and primary colored balls.

I finally found myself in Matt’s embrace again. We stood in the middle of the ball pit amongst the pandemonium, just staring at each other.

I breathed in his exhales. “Thank you for being patient with me. Thank you for loving me after everything. Thank you for loving my son.”

“Thank you for giving me a second chance.” Matt smiled. “Or maybe it’s more of my third or fourth...”

I laughed.

He silenced me with another kiss. Everyone cheered again as he dipped me back.

I grabbed the lapels of his tuxedo and pulled, making us fall backward beneath all the balls. He kissed me hidden below the surface just like he’d kissed me above it. Like he couldn’t keep his hands to himself. I remembered when we use to share kisses in private. I remembered the good times. The bad times. And I was grateful for all of it, because it had led us here.

He groaned. “I’m a few seconds away from taking you right here in the ball pit.”

I laughed. “As fun as that sounds...when I said you might get lucky, I didn’t mean in front of all our friends. And there’s no way I’m leaving before we go down the big slide. Race ya.” I pushed him off of me and tried to fight my way through the balls to the edge of the pit.

But he grabbed me from behind and tackled me.

I laughed as we wrestled in the balls. Eventually he slipped and I was able to climb out of the ball pit. I only made it a few feet before he grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder.

I laughed and stared at his perfect ass in his tuxedo pants. A week ago, I thought we were strangers. That there was no way we’d ever fit again. But that wasn’t the case at all. Our love brought us back together. He’d fought to make it work. And God, I never wanted to be apart from him ever again.

He put me down at the bottom of the steps up to the slide. And immediately started climbing.

“Cheater!” I yelled as I climbed up after him. By the time I reached the top, he was already halfway down.

I hiked up my skirt and jumped down on the slide. I screamed when I was near the bottom and Matt didn’t move out of my way.

But he caught me in his arms. “Now do I get lucky?”

I laughed and pressed my lips against his. “Do you think maybe we should go tell Jacob the news?” He was supposed to sleep over at James and Penny’s place. But I knew he’d be excited. He loved Matt. And he knew Matt could make me keep smiling. Matt was piecing our family back together one day at a time. We were going to be okay. All of us.

“I have one more surprise first.” He pulled me a little closer. “There’s a helicopter waiting for us on the roof. But I think that can wait if you want to do a bit of exploring.”

“Exploring?” I smiled up at him. I was really curious about where the helicopter was going to take us. But I was also excited to explore a bit too. Because I knew exactly what he was talking about. That dark hallway. Where the fun at Club Onyx really began. “I did hear a rumor that more happens at Club Onyx than just dancing.” I looked over at the entrance to the hallway. Mason and Bee were walking through.

Matt laughed. “I guess we’re not the only ones that want to explore.” He turned back to me. “I also heard a rumor that there might be a room that’s exactly what you requested.”

“What *I* requested?”

His lips traced my ear. “I seem to recall my fiancée wanting to be tied up.”

“Fiancée. I can get used to that.”

“Don’t get too used to it. You’ll be my wife soon enough. But back to the exploring thing...”

I laughed and pulled the key out that Tanner had given me.

“That room wouldn’t happen to have a mask on the door, would it?”

Matt smiled. “Let’s go find out.” He lifted me into his arms and jumped off the bottom of the blow up slide.

I laughed as we crossed the threshold into the hallway. It was like he was carrying me into our house after our wedding day. Only...our home looked nothing like this. Although the doors lining the walls looked eerily like the one Nigel had put in our living room.

Matt stopped in front of one of the heavy wooden doors. There was a tablet on the wall next to it with a glowing red outline of an apple.

“Hmm...” he said. “What do you think is behind there? Tanner said that your wildest fantasies come true as soon as you step into the hall.”

“My fantasy involves less food.”

“I don’t know...you looked pretty good covered in paint. I bet you’d look equally amazing covered in chocolate syrup.”

I laughed. “But not apple sauce. Why is it so quiet back here? I thought I’d hear more...moaning.”

“I think the club is closed tonight because of the prom. Which is probably why this room is open for us.” Matt kept carrying me down the hall. He turned a corner. And then another.

How big was this place? I was all turned around. “Which room do you think Mason and Bee went in?”

He laughed. “I really don’t even want to know. All I care about is that his one is all ours.” He’d stopped in front of another door. This tablet had a masquerade mask on it. He slipped my key into the door and it opened.

It was pitch black in the room but when Matt closed the door behind us, the room lit up. Or more specifically...the four poster bed in the middle of the room lit up. And a wall full of what looked like torture devices.

“This is definitely going to be fun,” Matt said. He set me down in the middle of the bed and walked over to the wall. He started unchaining things.

“Are you sure you haven’t been here before?”

“I’m sure.”

I pushed myself up so I could stare at him. “Maybe I should be the one tying you up.”

“I don’t think so, baby.” He walked over to me and tossed some leather shackles onto the sheets. “Were you thinking here or suspended against the wall?”

I wasn’t sure what that entailed exactly. And these sheets were sinfully soft. “Here.”

He nodded as he pulled off his tuxedo jacket.

I watched him as he rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt.

“Take it off,” he said. “All of it.”

I moved to my knees and pulled off my dress.

“All of it,” he said again.

His tone had completely changed since he'd taken off his jacket. Deeper. Darker. More in control. And I was already soaked.

I unclasped my bra and slid my thong down my legs. I went to unstrap my heels but he caught my ankle.

“Actually, those can stay. Now put on the mask.”

“What?”

He nodded to the pillows behind me. I turned to see a single masquerade mask on the bed. But there were no holes in the eyes for me to see. “Why is there only one?” I picked up the mask.

“I have a feeling this room is usually used for strangers.” He lifted the mask from my fingers. “Strangers who want to have sex with someone whose face they've never seen. No consequences. Just passion.”

But I wanted to see him. The way he was staring at me made me feel so desired. “But we're not strangers. Which means I can look.”

“Trust me, not seeing me will heighten every sensation.” He placed the mask over my eyes and tied the ribbon behind my head. “Now lie back.”

He was right. Even just hearing his voice now made me want him even more.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, baby. Unless you don’t want to be able to stand in the morning.”

I let my back hit the sheets. Even though I *really* wanted to know what he meant by that.

He trailed his fingers up my stomach and between my breasts as he circled the bed. “Arms up, baby.”

I lifted my hands above my head.

His fingers trailed up the insides of my bicep and up my forearms, sending chills down my spine. He strapped something around one of my wrists. And then the other. His hands fell from my skin and then my arms lifted. I tried to move them, but I couldn’t.

My heart started racing. I think I’d made a mistake. I didn’t like feeling trapped. “Matt...”

“Do you trust me?” His thumb brushed against my left nipple and then I felt his warm breath against my breast. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

He blew on my nipple, pebbling the skin.

I moaned.

“You asked to be at my mercy.” His hand trailed down my stomach. “So I’m going to do everything to you that I’ve been dreaming about.” His hand dipped even lower, stopping right above my pussy.

I lifted my hips but he pushed them back down against the mattress.

“Do you think I’ve just been jerking off to thoughts of you on your knees in the shower?” His hand shifted away from where

I wanted and trailed down the inside of my thigh.

Why was he going in the opposite direction? “Matt...”

“No, I pictured you like this too.” He shackled something to my ankle. And then the other. His hands fell from my skin and my legs lifted slightly.

I tried to move but couldn't at all. It felt like my heart was pounding in my throat. A mix of fear and excitement.

“All grown up,” he said, his voice tight. “And spread for me.” The bed dipped slightly. “I pictured my cock down your throat. You begging me for more.”

Desire flooded through my body.

“Have you ever played with any toys?” he asked.

I pictured Jacob's toys strewn on the floor. But I knew that wasn't what he was talking about. I shook my head.

“I love stealing your firsts. And just so we're clear...all the rest of them are mine.”

I swallowed hard.

“You definitely need to be restrained for what I'm about to do to you.” He tightened the shackles on my wrists even more.

“Open your mouth, gorgeous.”

I parted my lips slightly. I don't know what I was expecting, but I didn't imagine the cold, hard metal.

“Not that it really needs to be lubricated. You're fucking soaked, baby.” He pulled it out of my mouth. And before I even realized what was happening, he slipped the cold toy inside my pussy. It started vibrating.

I arched my back. It was the only movement my body could make. I tried to reach out for him. I needed to touch him. I wanted to run my fingers down his six pack. And dig my nails into his back. *Oh God.*

He chuckled.

“Matt...I...I need...”

“You seem perfectly content. And I like watching you squirm. I’m so hard, baby.”

Fuck. “I need you.”

“What do you need exactly?” The bed dipped again. “My tongue?” His tongue slowly circled one of my hard nipples.

I moaned and tried to move again, the shackles digging in to my wrists. “I want to touch you.”

“That’s not how this works.”

“Let me see you.”

He bit down on my nipple.

I moaned.

“Can’t you picture me staring down at you? My cock in my hand?”

I moaned again. I wanted to see. The shackles bit at my skin as the vibrations became more intense. “How did you do that.”

“There’s a remote control. Do you want more?”

“No, I can’t...”

He made it start going faster.

“Matt,” I moaned. My back arched again.

And he immediately turned off the vibrator.

Chapter 39

Friday

Matt

Her agitated moan made me even harder. *Fuck*. I'd wanted this to last a lot longer. But I wasn't lying when I said I'd pictured this countless times. All I wanted to do was explode all over her. I needed to calm down.

I pulled out the vibrator.

"No...please..."

"Baby, I'm not letting a toy have all the fun. I've been craving you all night." I thrust my tongue deep inside of her, tasting her juices.

She moaned in pleasure.

I knew her hands would be buried in my hair if she'd had the choice. And her thighs would be tightening around my head. She'd try to set the pace. She'd try to get me to make her come. But I was only just getting started. I slowly circled her wetness. "My favorite dessert."

Her body started to shake. I grabbed her ass in my hands and pressed my mouth harder against her, feasting on her as she came. Apparently she wasn't the only one having a hard time staying in control. I placed one last long stroke against her pussy and stared at her chest rising and falling in the dim light.

She was still so sweet. Still so innocent. Still mine.

"Let me see you," she said and pulled on the shackles again.

I moved to straddle her face. I ran my thumb down her chin to part her lips. "Taste me instead." I thrust my length into the back of her throat. "Fuck."

She gagged when I filled her mouth, but then her lips tightened.

I put one hand on the headboard and grabbed a fistful of her hair with the other. I started guiding her mouth. "Do you like that baby? Having my cock down your throat?"

She moaned something unintelligible around my length. But I'd take that as a yes. I guided her faster.

Shit. I pulled out a second before I would have exploded in her mouth.

"Please." She pulled on the restraints again. "Let me see you. Let me touch you."

"Just focus on the sensations." I kissed down the front of her chest and sucked on one of her nipples. I needed a second to calm down. But this wasn't helping. Her tits were perfect. Her mouth was perfect. Her pussy was perfect.

I wanted to drench her pretty face. But I needed to feel the warmth of her cumming around my cock even more. Despite what she thought, I was going to put a baby in her. And it would be a great story if we knew our kid was conceived with her tied up in the middle of a sex club.

I licked down her breast and stomach, stopping right at her clit.

"Matt." She just sounded frustrated now.

I laughed against her skin. "Beg me for it."

“Please.”

“You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Please, Matt. I need you.”

“What do you need from me, baby?” I rubbed her clit with my thumb. “My fingers? My mouth?” I placed a kiss against her clit and she squirmed. “You have to be more specific.”

“More.”

“Then say it. Say you want me to fuck you. Say you need my cock. Say you’ll lose your mind if I don’t claim your pussy.”

She moaned at my words.

God, I loved that sound. “I did warn you to not make me repeat myself.”

She gasped as I unshackled her ankles. She immediately wrapped her thighs around my waist. *I don’t think so, baby.* I loosened the tension of the shackles around her wrists and flipped her over.

I slapped my hand against her ass.

She moaned.

I thought she’d cry out. But my dirty fiancée loved it. I spanked her again, harder this time. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want your cock so deep inside of me that I scream.”

Fuck. I slammed into her.

“Matt!” she moaned.

My fingers dug in to her hips. I was holding her too tightly. Fucking her too hard. But I couldn’t even help myself.

She tried to move, but her hands being in the air made her lose her balance. She fell forward, her ass jutting higher in the air.

I spanked her again and she started to clench around my cock.

Fuck. I came hard. Filling her pussy with my cum. Every last drop.

“That was very dirty. Shall I draw you both a bath to clean up?”

I jumped and turned around to see Nigel standing there staring at us. “What the fuck, Nigel? How long have you been standing there?” I pulled my pants back in place. And then realized it was more important to cover Brooklyn. I still had on all my clothes, but she was completely naked. I moved in front of her.

“I wanted to make sure no one saw what you two were up to,” Nigel said. “It’s my job to protect you from prying eyes. Now let me see what I need to protect.” He tried to walk around me.

“That is absolutely not your job. Get out!”

“But...”

Brooklyn started laughing.

But this shit wasn’t funny. Brooklyn’s body was mine. And I didn’t want anyone else seeing it. I grabbed Nigel by his lapels and carried him out of the room.

“A bath is great after coitus,” Nigel said. “I think Brooklyn wants it.”

You little bath pervert. It was bad enough when he hit on me. I couldn’t handle him hitting on my fiancée too.

Chapter 40

Friday

Brooklyn

I laughed as the door closed with a thud. Honestly a bath didn't sound that bad. My back was sticky with sweat. And I felt Matt's cum dripping down my thigh.

God, I'd loved every second of that. I tried to unshackle my wrists, but it was impossible with my mask still on. I couldn't see a thing.

But I was able to feel the ring on my finger. I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. Everything about tonight was perfect. The prom. The proposal. Being at Matt's mercy. I bit my lip.

I tried to unhook the shackles again, but couldn't find a latch.

The door opened behind me.

"Matt, how do you unhook these things?" I kept fumbling with the shackles.

He ran his hand down my back, cupping one of my ass cheeks.

I laughed. "Matt, seriously, unhook me. I want to see you."

His hand fell from my ass and I heard him round the bed. He touched the side of my face so I'd look up at him. Even though he knew I had a mask on and couldn't see him. His hand fell from my skin as he untethered the shackles from the bedposts.

I caught myself before my face hit the pillow.

But then he flipped me over and hooked my wrists together. And then my ankles. I tried to prop myself up, but fell back on the bed.

“Matt, I’m not sure how much more I can take.”

“Brooklyn Pruitt,” said a deep voice. A voice that was not Matt’s. “I’m a King. But I’m not your prom king.”

What the fuck?! I tried to move but he put his hand on the center of my naked chest, pressing me hard against the mattress.

“And who knew my job would be so easy? You’re already all tied up for me. And naked. What a treat.”

“Don’t touch me!” I tried to roll away, but he caught me around the waist, pulling me back against his hard chest.

“You’re not going to want to try and get away again, Brooklyn. Or else.”

Or else what? He’d take me? That seemed like it was already happening. And I wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Matt!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. I tried to kick backward, but my ankles were bound together and it just set me off balance. “Matt!” He’d just left the room for a second. He had to be out there. “Matt!” I choked on my tears.

“Don’t make another sound,” he said.

Screw him. I wasn’t a sophomore at Isabella’s mercy anymore. And I wasn’t about to be left naked in the middle of the city again. I wasn’t fucking leaving New York. Or Matt. Not again. “Matt!” I screamed even louder. I reached out to try to hit the stranger, but my hands came up empty.

“Did I not make myself clear?” He put his hand over my mouth.

I couldn't scream even if I wanted to.

“Good girl. You're so good at obeying. Maybe if you keep behaving I'll let you live.” He removed his hand from my mouth and lifted me in his arms.

Fuck you. I pulled up my arms, hitting him hard in the bottom of his chin with my fists. But he didn't even grunt.

“Matt!” I screamed again. “Help me!”

“Make another sound and I'll take your son too,” he said.

No.

My cries died in my throat. Not Jacob.

Never.

I pressed my lips together and felt the tears streaming down my cheeks. The door opened and I didn't hear Matt coming after us. I didn't hear anything but my blood pounding in my ears. I'd known something bad was going to happen tonight. I knew happiness was fleeting. I knew I was bad luck.

“Good girl,” the guy whispered. “I'm definitely keeping you.”

Nunca.

* * *

Oh no! Someone needs to save Brooklyn. But who will it be?

Find out in Book 8 of Empire High, coming soon.

But in the meantime, you can see how James and Penny's daughter reacts to Jacob. Spoiler alert – she thinks he's hot.

[Click here to read all about their high school love story in Scarlett and the Kiss Thief!](#)



I've never been kissed.

I know...it's a huge problem.

It all started because I fell in love with my best friend, Axel Stevens. I decided to save my first kiss for him. But...he didn't fall in love with me back.

For the first time in years, he's finally single though. And I have the perfect plan.

I reinvented myself over the summer. I've ditched the glasses, upgraded my wardrobe, and I've finally mastered the perfect strut in heels.

I'm going to walk into Empire High on my first day of senior year and win him over once and for all.

My plan is flawless. You have my word – I'll be wearing his varsity jacket by the end of the day.

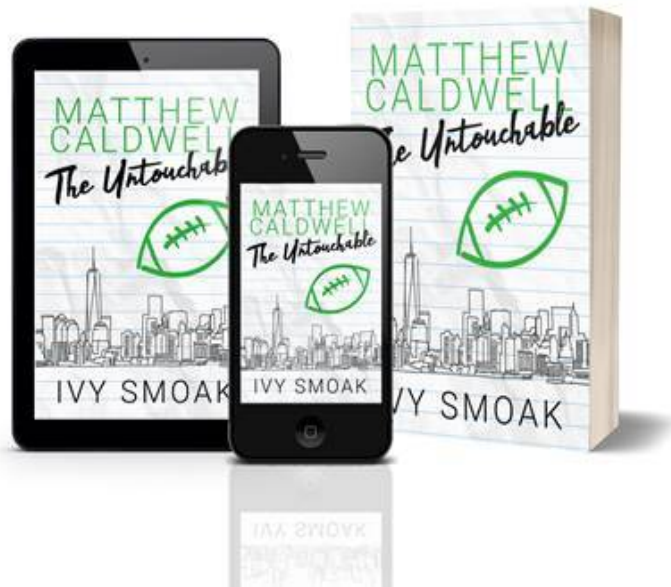
Fingers crossed I can seal it all with my first kiss.

[Click here to read Scarlett now!](#)

Matthew Caldwell - The Untouchable

Want to know what Matt was thinking when he first met Brooklyn 16 years ago at Empire High? Well now you can!

[CLICK HERE](#) to get your **free** copy of Matt's point-of-view in *Matthew Caldwell - The Untouchable*.



The Untouchables. That's what everyone called us. The nickname had followed us around since we were kids. I wasn't sure who started it, but the premise behind it was simple. My friends and I could get away with murder. Literally. That's what happens when your parents own the two biggest companies in Manhattan.

We were untouchable. And I was...sick of it. I was sick of the lies and the secrets. I was sick of the pedestal we had to stand on. And I was sick of the girls throwing themselves at my feet like I was some sort of god. I was tired of being untouchable. Especially when all I wanted was someone who would never belong in my world...

[CLICK HERE to get your free copy!](#)

A Note From Ivy

Move over Isabella. There's a new villain in town. The only question is...who?

I hope you cried happy tears with me in this one! I set out to write a second chance romance to end all second chance romances. And it's not over yet.

There are so many more moments that I've been looking forward to writing. And I'd never cut these characters short. If you love them as much as I do, I know you understand. I know you understand my heart. And I'm so glad you trust me with yours.

But before we reach the happily ever after...who the heck just took Brooklyn?

Will Matt save her? Will her father? Will...James?

It's like homecoming all over again. But this time the stakes have never been higher.

The end is coming. I'm excited, and sad, and grateful. So so grateful to every reader who has picked up each book in Empire High and gone for the ride. I write for you.



Ivy Smoak

Wilmington, DE

www.IvySmoak.com

Before You Go

Please consider leaving an honest review.