



All I want is forever,  
is that too much to ask?

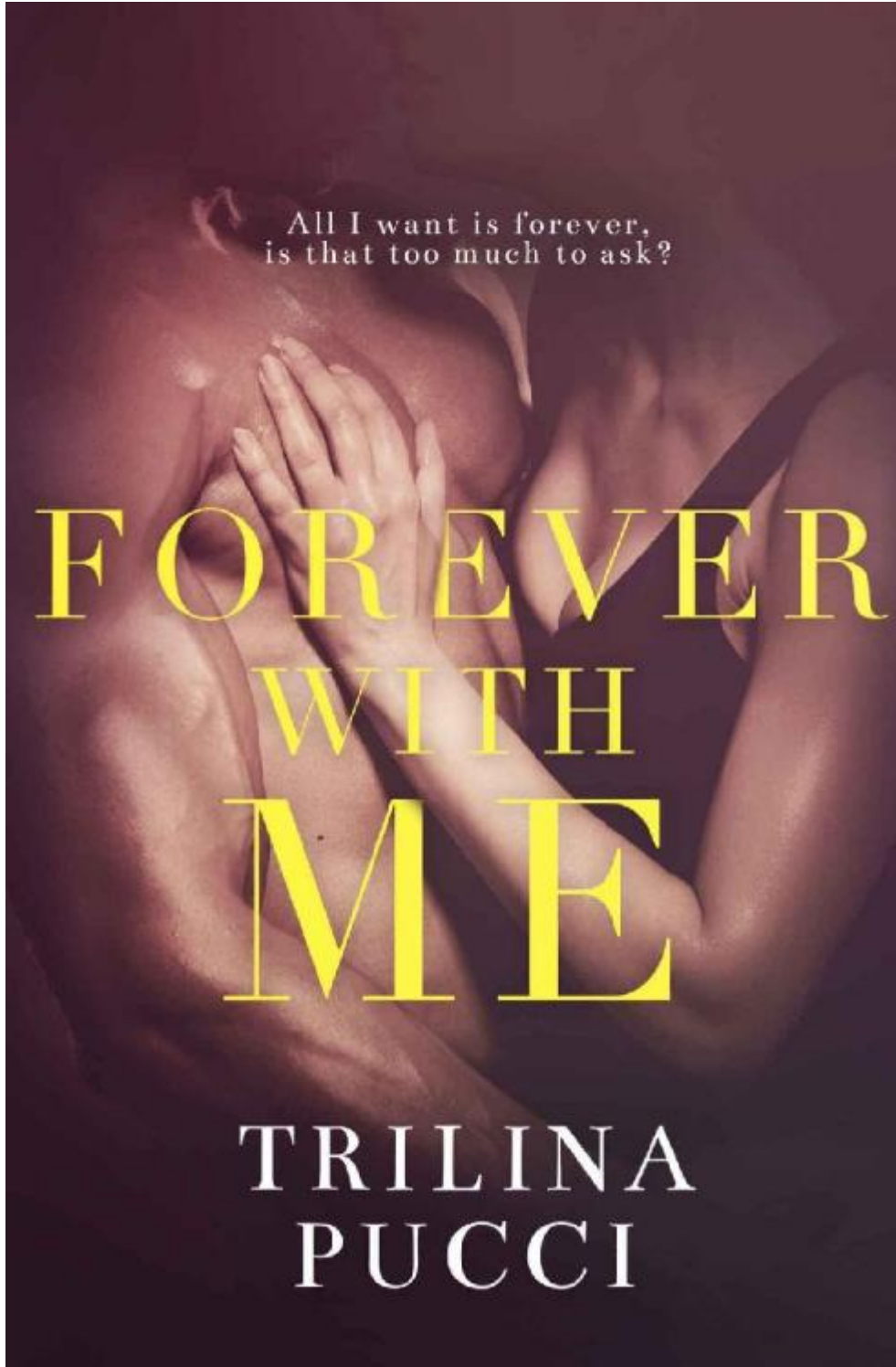
FOREVER  
WITH  
ME

TRILINA  
PUCCI

# Forever with Me

Trilina Pucci

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TRILINA  
PUCCI

Forever With Me

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Carter Williams is dead.

## CHAPTER ONE



“How the hell did this happen, Foster? Cole wasn’t anywhere near Carter. Did he die from something caused by Cole hitting him that night? I don’t understand.” My screeching increased. “I just want answers!” My heart is pounding as I grab clothes to put on. Just an hour ago, I was dressed in barely anything, waiting for Cole to come home and devour me, now I’m moments away from a full-scale panic attack.

“I’m operating on very little information. I need for you to call your lawyers because my hands are tied now. He is being questioned and held downtown. I don’t know how long I can keep it all quiet before the media gets a hold of it. The only Hail Mary is that all of this happened in the middle of the night. Once morning breaks, so do the stories...” *Media?!... I am not prepared for this.* I don’t even know how to navigate all of this. The momentary thought stops me in my tracks. What am I doing? Not only am I failing my husband, but I’m responsible for bringing this all on him. This is all my fault and I don’t even know the name of his fucking lawyers! I don’t know what to do. I feel my panic rise and my phone beeps. Pulling away, I see it’s my mom and just like that, my focus regains, because I know she will know what to do.

“Foster, I have to ring you back... Mom, please tell me you already know...”

“Yes, I’m coming up. Richard has reached out to the best criminal attorney in the city. He’s heading downtown now. Get dressed, if you aren’t already.” I hear the elevator doors open and relief floods my body to see her walk in. She looks beautiful and elegant, but most importantly she looks calm. I need someone calm, because I am all inner turmoil.

“Mom, thank you for coming over so quickly! I need you. I’m embarrassed to admit that I’m not sure where to begin with all of this. What do I do?”

“Honey, where else would I be? Now listen, you’re going to need to pull it together because this is what we do, Mia, as wives of very powerful men, we handle things with grace and most importantly composure.” My mother is a badass... if I’ve ever wondered, now I know.

“Okay.” Letting out a deep breath of determination. “I need to speak to the attorney, ASAP.”

After spending too much time on the phone with the attorney Richard retained, I understand that they are waiting to release Cole and he’s being held at the precinct. While listening to the attorney, Alex rushes in, yelling about photographers by the front entrance. I hang up the phone and immediately walk into

the living room to hear more, noticing that morning has apparently arrived.

“Grace! It’s unreal, they are everywhere, just waiting to nab a pic of Mia or Cole, it’s all over the news!” She waves her hands in the air and grabs the remote. As soon as the television comes to life, the headline reads ‘Communications mogul arrested for murder.’ Every channel she flips to there’s a headline reading something similar. Worse are the reports of his stock prices dropping. I’ve quite literally ruined his life. *I won’t do this to him. I will find a way to fix this.* I have no idea how, but I will figure out a way. My cell buzzes and I look down to see it’s Foster.

“Hey, tell me you have some good news.”

“I’ve got Cole. We are on our way to you.” Closing my eyes, relief floods my body.

“Foster, there are paparazzi and news crews all over the front. Come the around back.”

“On it,” and with that, we hang up.

Looking up at everyone in my house, I can see their eyes trained on me, wondering what my conversation is about.

“Cole has been arraigned and released. I love you, but everyone has to go. I need some privacy with my husband.” I realize I seem cold and removed, but I don’t care right now. “I need to have some hard conversations with Cole and I do not need an audience.” I hug everyone and reassure them that I’ll keep everyone posted as I walk them to the door.

The minute everyone is gone, I feel a sweeping sense of regret. The emptiness is almost unbearable, the waiting feels traumatic. When I hear the elevator ring, I begin a full sprint toward the doors. I truly have never had such relief mixed with agony. Cole looks up with his suit jacket in hand, tired and depleted. I leap at him wrapping my arms around his neck and sending him back a few steps.

“Shhh, don’t cry, I’m okay. I’m okay.” I don’t even register my tears; I can’t think of anything other than never letting go of this man.

“I’m so sorry, Cole. This is my fault. I caused this and I swear I’ll fix it! I’ve ruined your life!! I just love you so much and I’m so damned sorry!”

“Stop, Mia, don’t do that...don’t do that to us. We are more than stock prices. I’m okay. I didn’t kill him, so don’t worry.” I pull back to look him, in to those beautiful eyes and realize he might think I doubt his innocence.

“Cole,” I whisper letting him go and standing in front of him, “of course you’re innocent, but it wouldn’t matter to me otherwise. It wouldn’t matter if you did it. I’m here, for good. I don’t care if that makes me a crazy person. I’m here... no matter.” I don’t know how to express the depths of my love for him. I honestly wouldn’t care if he’d done it because I know that if he was ever forced to make a decision like that, it wouldn’t be because he was a monster, but because he was protecting me. I am his and he is mine, forever.

“You are amazing, Mia.” His eyes bore into my soul, down to the depths that are filled with an endless amount of love for this man. I hope that in this moment he can feel my dedication to him. Silently answering my question, he leans down and kisses me, lingering as he pulls back just enough that I can feel him start to smile.

“We have a conversation to have now that we’ve had our ‘love yous’”, he smiles as he brushes a stray hair from my forehead.

“I know, trust me, I have questions and I expect answers.”

His lips pressing into a hard line and nod is all the recognition I need as acknowledgment to the seriousness of this impending conversation.

We make our way to the couch and sit down facing each other. I usually loved when tensions built between us, but this kind of tension truly sucks.

“Go first. Honestly, I don’t even know where to start,” exasperated breath.

Looking directly at me, Cole takes a deep breath and opens his mouth to speak.



“Wait,” I interrupt. “How? Why do they think you’re responsible? Start there. Explain why your name is even in the mix. I just don’t get it, Cole, I know you lost it when they arrested him at the hotel, is that why? Did you hit him so hard that it caused his death later? I mean, you’re strong, but that’s Hulk-like strength. Besides it appears too much time would have passed. I feel like there’s a piece I’m missing. Explain this to me, tell me I’m crazy and that you had nothing to do with his death. I mean—” I am cut off mid panic by hot and tender lips, my eyes close and I feel exactly what I need. Cole. We linger in the moment allowing ourselves to connect. My body needs him, I need to feel this tether. Without it, I’m lost and panicked and clearly, Cole could feel and see it too.

## CHAPTER TWO



Pulling away Cole runs his thumb across my bottom lip and smiles, “Sorry, I had to pull out the big guns to make you calm down. Take a breath, baby. I don’t have anything to do with his murder. But, and this is something you need to stay calm for even though I didn’t kill him, I’m not innocent of wanting or almost actually taking his life.”

Fuck. There it is. The words I was hoping wouldn’t come out of his mouth. I feel numb and I’m waiting for the panic, or maybe the fear to come over me, but all I feel is rage. I’m so damned mad at him. I can feel the distinct need to choke him to death!

“Goddamnit! Cole! You are a son of a bitch. I can’t believe you! If I didn’t love you so much, I would kill you. Choke you to death right now. I mean, what the hell were you thinking, because going to jail and leaving me a sad little, lonely wife is NOT an option!” I realize that I’m yelling when I see the look on his face and feel my arms waving around.

Sitting with his hands raised and his eyebrows paired to match, he frowns. “Baby, I’m sorry. Please understand, I was filled with rage after he hurt you again and I will not apologize for protecting you. I went to the hospital with the intention to take his life, but I couldn’t go through with it. I couldn’t do that to us; become that kind of monster. Risk that kind of future for us. I’m sorry, Mia, but I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

Closing my eyes, I lean my head back and try to steady my mind and let what he’s saying sink in. The reality is I believe I would’ve probably done the same thing in his shoes and I can’t expect him to behave any differently than I would. The truth is that Carter was a monster that tried to take my life from me twice, I have zero sympathy for his death.

I open my eyes with a steadying breath and say, “Me neither, and you don’t owe me an apology. I’m sorry I yelled, but I am so overwhelmed by this shit! I feel like I’m losing my mind, Cole.”

“I know, when it rains it really pours. I promise we’ll get through this. Trust me?” Holding his hand out toward me, he shrugs his shoulders and I can see he needs me to reassure him that we’re okay.

“Always,” I promise, taking his hand.

For the next hour, Cole tells me how the hospital video from his aborted attempt on Carter’s life was the karmic assbite that the police used to link him to Carter. Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of our attorney, who, once settled explains that the case is so circumstantial that he feels incredibly secure in saying that Cole will not be charged with murder. Although, the publicity caused by this has already done its damage. I leave them while they continue to talk about strategy. My head is spinning and I just need to catch my breath. Walking out to the terrace, I place my hands on the railing and take a deep breath. I can’t make sense of it all. Why is this craziness happening to me? Seriously, all I want is to live my life with Cole and do some basic shit. Maybe have a couple of kids, get a job, go on vacation. *Jesus, Mia, stop feeling sorry for yourself, you act like someone is out to get*

*you*. The minute I process the thought, I turn on my heels and head back into the den where Cole is sitting with the lawyer.

“Sorry, did the police discover the tape themselves?” Both men stare at me processing my interruption. “The video of Cole at the hospital,” I continue. “I just, I mean, it seems strange that they would go back so far past when he died to look for links. Why that particular day and footage?”

Cole looks to the attorney and raises his brows and I can see that he understands my train of thought.

“Yes, Mrs. Parker, you are correct. It states in the report how they were notified.” Sorting through all the paperwork laid out in front of him. “Here we are, -anonymous tip, that’s unusual.” Cole and I lock eyes.

“So, there *is* someone out to get us,” I whisper.

Cole picks up the phone and I know he’s calling Foster. Standing, he walks over and kisses the top of my head as he walks out of the room. I look at his attorney and smile, knowing that Cole walked out because his plans are not for anyone else’s ears but his and Foster and honestly, I’m okay with it. I know he’ll tell me, but they probably aren’t to be shared with the lawyer.

“He’s lucky to have you on his side. You two are a good support system for each other.”

“Thank you. I’m the lucky one. He is everything to me and I expect that you will do everything within your abilities to protect him and break him free from this insanity,” I end, smiling, only to keep our conversation on a friendlier note. He might think I was crazy if I started demanding all his certifications and college transcripts.

“Yes, we are committed to that exact purpose. This was very premature and they will never get this to trial. I’m pretty confident that charges will not be filed and we can put this to bed in a week or so.”

“Oh, I thought when he was arrested he was also charged? These legal terms are tricky when you aren’t very well

acquainted with the law.” I respond with a small laugh. “But wait, why would the police rush to arrest Cole?”

Leaning in conspiratorially, “Word on the street is that Carter’s parents called in a favor. They’re incredibly upset, understandably, and I can only assume, but I think they blame Cole because of how badly beaten Carter was after your attack. His parents have blinders on. They don’t believe their son was a monster. They believe he was sick.”

Before I can stop myself, I spit out, “I guess our definitions of sick are different. He was a monster, but I can’t imagine losing a child, so I won’t even go there.”

I stare off as he starts to clear his things and packs up. A part of me feels for the Williams’, he was their only son and even though I hate him, it wasn’t always that way. *What drives people to become monsters?* I remember Carter when we were younger and he was quiet and nice, just always a bit on the awkward side. I would have never considered him dangerous. I met him my senior year in high school when my mother married Richard. She met and fell in love with Richard during her divorce from her second husband. He was her silver lining. I had only met and been in the same room with Carter three or four times when I was being forced to attend some party with my mother. The only time his behavior gave me pause was when we both went away to college. It was during the summer when we were back home and an old friend threw a party. I remember him asking me to dance and just being so incredibly pushy and handsy. After I pushed him away, he said something so hateful that I couldn’t shake the creep factor for quite some time.

“Ahh!” I yell when I feel hands on my arms. Cole’s return brings me back to the present.

“Hey, you okay?” he asks, rubbing his hands up and down my arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

“I am, I love you. I’m just tired,” I press up to my toes for a kiss granted.

“I know it’s been crazy, but can I ask a favor?”

“Anything.”

“I just ordered lunch for us, but I was really hoping that the little number laying on the floor in our room, could make its appearance.”

*Is he kidding, he has lost his mind. We are in the middle of a crisis and we haven't slept all night and he wants to have sex. I swear this man will be my death.* My eyes grow even wider as the attorney walks back in the room briefcase in hand and looks between the two of us.

“Have you lost your mind? Please tell me you aren't serious,” I whisper, pushing past him to walk toward the waiting lawyer.

Cole lowers his mouth to the back of my head and stops me in my place, and in a very low and husky voice growls, “I am deadly serious, I have been inside a police station for most of the night when I just wanted to be inside my wife. I'm not asking, I'm telling you, I would like to fuck my wife. I would like her to put on the tiny lingerie set and let me rip it the fuck off with my teeth before I bury my cock inside her.” Pulling away from the back of my ear, he reaches past me saying goodbye to the attorney and thanking him again for his prompt service.

As he escorts the man to the door, I stand in soaked panties, breathing heavy with eyes closed. I swear I almost came from his words alone. As I hear the door click, I open my eyes, knowing that the only thing stopping Cole from attacking me was the presence of the lawyer and now it's on. A smile breaks across my face and I run, not walk, to the bedroom, throwing off my clothes to put on the lingerie as fast as possible. I trip getting out of my pants and tumble to the ground, giggling the whole way down and freeze when I see him in the doorway.

“Ummm, hi... you aren't supposed to see this part! I'm supposed to be all sexy and vava voom when you get here. Get out and come back,” I laugh, while I struggle out of my pants.

His laugh booms and he is immediately stalking toward me. “You look damn sexy as you are and frankly, I don't want any vava voom anything. I want you naked. Now.” His voice is barely above a growl.

I start laughing harder when he starts pulling at my clothes with me, unable to release me. I'm in full hysteria when he starts cursing at my pants.

"Mia! What the fuck. Did you tape them on? Why is this so hard?" he asks as he finally frees me from them.

"Shut up, you fool. I thought you had big plans for me?" I question with a sly smile.

"Oh, I have plans for you, sweetheart." Pulling me to my feet, he bends and throws me right his shoulder. Slapping my bottom, he walks us to the bed and flops me down on the mattress. Reaching behind him, he grabs his shirt, pulling it over his head, chucking it to the floor. He stands, staring at me all male and gorgeous, with his contoured abs and broad shoulders. I can see his jaw tick as my eyes make their way up his body. Feeling hunted by this beast of a man, I start to scoot back, feeling as if I'm the prey.

"Freeze. Don't you fucking move back, scoot your gorgeous ass to the end of this bed and spread your legs. NOW!" he commands as he yanks open his fly and removes his pants. He grabs himself and pulls long strokes as he approaches me. Without stopping, he takes his left hand and grips around my waist, pulling my hips off the bed and thrusts inside of me in one motion.

"Ahhhhh," is all I can yell out, my body feels like it's exploding and I can honestly say this is the closest I have ever been to an out of body experience. We stay like that for what feels like an eternity and then he begins to move punishingly slow and sensual. Every receptor in my body is lit like a Christmas tree.

Cole makes love to me that way through the morning, and each time I'm caressed, cared for and worshipped. When we finally sleep, I dream of our life together and our babies, it's the kind of dream that makes you keep your eyes closed long after you've woken.

Waking, I realize that we've slept through the afternoon into the evening. Padding into the living room, I grab the delivered lunch. *Thank God for concierge!* I bring it back into the

bedroom. Nudging Cole, I wake him gently, “Baby, you should wake up and eat.”

“No, I want to sleep,” he pouts grumpily, rolling over and putting the pillow over his head.

“Stop being adorable and wake the fuck up.”

“If I open my eyes, Mia, those noodles aren’t the only thing that I am eating.”

“Oh, my God! Cole, if you think threatening me with oral sex is a deterrent, then you really don’t know how amazing you are at it. Get up!”

With an exaggerated groan, he opens his eyes and smiles dreamily. Wrapping both arms around my waist, he pulls me close to him and buries his face in my lap and mumbles, “food smells great.”

I laugh and smack his back, “Eat this, you fool.” Playfully handing him the container of Lo-Mein we ordered earlier.

Cole and I sit in bed enjoying our food and chatting about how jail is not as romantic as any of the television shows we watch. After finishing our meal, he lives up to his promise and makes me his dessert. Holding me tight we fall into our second slumber of the harrowing day. I don’t think he could have held me closer to him and I was happy for it. The reality of having him taken away from me has only cemented me to him more.

## CHAPTER THREE



Sitting at the island in the kitchen, I sip my coffee with a satisfied grin. Cole nuzzles my neck and kisses it, sending a delicious chill down my spine.

“Thank you,” he winks with a smile and licks his lips.

“Mmmm, anything for my gorgeous husband,” I reply sexily. I was more than happy to wake him up this morning with a reminder as to why women should always be on top. Reaching for me, he pulls me off my stool and flush to his body while he nips, sucks and kisses my neck more.

“Cole!” I giggle.

“What?” he asks lazily. “You taste incredible.”

A loud throat clearing accompanied by a sound of disgust catches our joint attention. Cole grumbles something into my neck and releases me. Laughing, I turn and see Foster standing uncomfortably next to Alex, who is smiling, big and bright. *A little too bright for her normal demeanor.*

“So, are you trying to traumatize us?” Alex motions back and forth between her and Foster. “Or are you just trying to make up for lost time? I hear time in the big house can be super hard on a relationship.”

“Alex!” I yell, suppressing my smile. It was only an evening, but her humor could go south.

“Fuck you, Alex, did you bring coffee? Mia always massacres it.”

*What! These two are treacherous friends and I’m glad they are both on my side.* I jump off my stool and slap Cole’s arm and point my finger at him to let him know I heard him and he will pay. He responds back with a wink as Alex puts the coffee in front of him. She walked past to hug me and to throw her stuff on the couch.

“Hey, do you have my phone?” Alex asks, looking up and I draw my brows together wondering why she is asking me until I realize she is looking past me at a very embarrassed Foster. *Um, what in the world?* Cole must be just as interested as I am in the answer because he comes to stand by me and gawk at Foster.

We turn and look at each other and he waggles his eyebrows, looking back at Foster, “Do tell, Foster. Do you have Alex’s phone? Was it left in the back of the car or at your place?”



I giggle, my eyes big, leaning closer toward Foster listening for his answer.

“Back of the car,” Foster spits out through gritted teeth as he holds the phone out toward Alex. Narrowing his eyes as Alex approaches, I notice a glint in his eyes and watch as his grimace becomes a full-blown smile when she reaches to take it from his hand.

“Don’t worry, grump, I’m sure nobody will believe that we are sleeping together.”

*I’m going to have a heart attack!*

“Uh, what, Alex! Seriously, you are incorrigible,” he turns to Cole. “I’ll be downstairs if needed.” Shaking his head as he walks away.

“Sure, no problem,” Cole sounds just as amused as I am from their exchange. “Text me if you come across any additional information regarding our conversation earlier.”

Foster nods as he leaves.

I look at Alex. “Spill!”

“What? What do you mean?” She feigns innocence, touching her hand to her chest mimicking shock and awe.

“Don’t you dare! Alex, spill! Are you sleeping with Foster?”

She looks between me and Cole. I can tell she’s debating whether to tell us a juicy story.

“He won’t care,” I smile, motioning to Cole. “You’re always saying that Foster is too tightly wound and he should get laid, right?” I ask, looking at Cole.

“I couldn’t care less what he does in his spare time so long as he does his job. Alex, are you what he’s doing in his spare time?” He questions laughingly and I join him.

“A lady does not speak of such things,” she answers.

I pinch Cole before he can say what I know he’s going to say.

“Ow! Damn, woman! I wasn’t going to call her a woman of the night!”

I just shake my head as Alex tosses a napkin toward us. No matter how hard we try to pull it out of her, it seems that whatever is happening between them is going to remain between them. After chatting for a bit, Cole excuses himself to his office to make calls and dive into damage control, leaving Alex and I to sit and talk.

“How are you holding up?” she asks, concern etched on her face.

“I mean, I think pretty well. We seem to be a magnet for trouble,” adding more melodrama than needed.

“Stop it, you know that isn’t true. You two are stronger together and you will weather this storm. I’m sure you could use a break, though.”

“I just want to chill with my husband and do normal stuff. I hate that Carter has still found ways to hurt me, even from the grave.” I close my eyes feeling the weight solidly landing on my shoulders.

Reaching out to take my hand, Alex nods understandingly. “I get it. I wish I could help.”

“You are, just by hanging out with me. I’m also thankful that you were able to make light of all of this and allow Cole to laugh.”

“No worries, he’s my homie.”

“Homie? Seriously, you are such a nerd.”

“Whatevs, I’m down with the kids!” *Only she could use a Twilight reference for real life!*

At that, we start laughing, the kind of laughter you only share with your best friend. The kind where you are doubled over for absolutely no reason at all. Taking deep breaths to try and calm ourselves, I stand to get something to drink in the kitchen.

“You want something?”

“Nah, I’m good. You know what I was thinking about? Do you remember that night at the Sigma Chi House when we ran into Carter? You were so creeped out after that, I wish we

would've known what a monster he was then, it would have saved us some serious trouble!"

"I was thinking about that night today, actually. In school, I never really had too many instances with him. I didn't really know him. When we met at the party, I honestly didn't remember him."

"Totally! I remember he was such an asshole in college. Every girl that I knew that dated him said he was a douchebag." She shivers as if the memory grosses her out.

"Well, I guess karma is a bitch."

Silenced stretched between us and I regretted my callousness, but I just couldn't get past my hatred for him.

"I'm sorry, that probably sounded callous and cruel."

"No, I wasn't thinking about that, I was thinking about that dorky friend he had that was always following him around. Do you remember that guy? Horrible acne, kind of heavy, super socially awkward? He got a boner every time you walked into a room?"

I stood in between the two rooms, shaking my head. "I don't. I really don't remember much of anything other than studying," I laugh, but I'm still stumped.

"Hmm, anyway. Coke, grab me a Coke, please."

"K," was all I said as I walked into the kitchen.

"So, did you guys work out a game plan with the lawyers?" Alex yells to me.

"Yeah, I mean, they pretty much think the case will either be thrown out or be dropped, because apparently, it is only really being pushed because of Carter's folks," I yell back, rummaging through the fridge for snacks.

"Yuck! That makes me sick, as if they could bury their head anymore!"

"Right!" I nod, coming back into the room with a Coke and some grapes in hand. "I know they believe that he was 'sick' but he attacked me and I just can't feel bad for him!"

Alex sits, staring at me shaking her head with a small smile.

“What?!” I ask, feeling self-conscious.

“Nothing, it’s just weird to be having this conversation, I mean like a year ago, you tried to off yourself, Mia. Now, though, you have had a cavalcade of effed up situations happen and you seem so strong, so solid. I’m just happy, impressed and really grateful to have you back, babe!”

I smile back at her, understanding exactly what she means. A year ago, I was broken, so broken and unable to see past my pain. Not really understanding why I felt so damn alone and fragile. I couldn’t have known it then, but I needed Cole like I need him now. I didn’t know I was missing a piece until I lost him, and the absence of that piece almost shattered my life. I am glad that I could crawl out of the abyss on my own, because I’m stronger for it. But needing Cole and wanting Cole are intertwined and equal.

“I’m happy to be back,” is all I can muster, feeling overwhelmed by the moment. Really, it’s the only truth that is needed. So many people stood by me and helped me put myself back together, but I know that I’ve never been more together than I am now.

“Welp, now that *that* is out of the way, I have Sunday errands to run. I would love to hang out all day, but it’s my only day off this week and I need to do a thousand things before I go back tomorrow.” With that, Alex stands and goes for her purse.

“Call me tomorrow. Maybe lunch later this week?”

“Totally!” She smiles and waves over her shoulder.

“Tell Foster we say ‘hello.’” Cole smiles as he passes her, Alex’s wave turns to the bird. I giggle. Turning back around to Cole, he’s gone. Well, I guess more work beckons.

We tried to pretend we were just hanging out at home for the afternoon, but we were both tense from being locked away in our tower, hiding from the flashing bulbs and reality. I couldn’t help but notice that Cole had been hidden away in his office for most of the day and while I didn’t have my interview until next week (or ever, now with all the publicity, I wouldn’t

be surprised if they passed on me), I was starting to run out of windows to look out of. Fuck this, I needed to get out of this house. How hard could that be, right?

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Hey!” I said, popping my head into Cole’s office only to be greeted by a grumble. “Come on, let’s escape. You have to be running out of people to yell at and I’m crawling up the walls. Last time I watched *Law and Order*, criminals are only restricted from leaving the country. Let’s call Foster and sneak away!” I smile, knowing I’ve made the best proposal.

The crack of his palms on the desk makes me jump and my eyes grow wide.

“Jokes aren’t welcome. Why are you making light of this, of everything? What the fuck, Mia!”

Looking at him, I don’t even understand what the hell is happening. What could he be mad about? I’ve barely spoken to him since Alex left.

“What the hell, Cole, why are you yelling at me?”

“Forget it, sorry, whatever, just forget it.” Obviously, something is going on that he doesn’t want me to know, which just serves to light a serious fire under my bum.

“No, no, no. You started this shit with all the pounding and yelling. Don’t backtrack and act like nothing is going on. This is just as much my problem as it is yours and last time I checked, *Cole Parker*, there aren’t any secrets between us, so spill.” Boom. I cross my arms over my chest, narrowing my eyes at him.

Shaking his head, he rubs his chin that has a sexable amount of stubble. He levels his eyes at me, “Here’s some truth, Mia. When were you going to tell me you tried to kill yourself?”

Never? In the future? I mean, you would think that a truth of that size would be something I would know.”

Oh Jesus, realization dawns on me that we have never had that conversation and he must have heard Alex and I talking. I uncross my arms and walk over to where he’s sitting and straddle his waist.

“Cole,” I urge, putting my hands on the sides of his face.

“Look at me, I’m fine. I guess it just didn’t come up because honestly I was just so caught up with how happy we are and I haven’t thought about that time in my life.”

Grabbing my waist, he heaves me up and onto his desk and stands, backing away from me. Confused, I look at him, trying to look him in the eyes, all the while he avoids my face.

“Cole. What are you doing? Let’s talk about this, let’s go somewhere and hide away and really talk about this.”

“No. Foster will be here in five minutes, pack what you need and go with him. I can’t do this. I won’t.”

Time literally feels like it’s stopping. “What are you talking about? You are what, exactly? Sending me away? Breaking up with me?” I yell as I jump off the desk and walk to get in his face.

“I just need you safe, Mia, you don’t need this shit.

None of it! It was my fault we went to the party in the first place. I’m the one who wanted to keep the wedding private because of a business deal that I wanted to close before my announcement. I was being a selfish ass and I ruined your whole life. And now, now I know that because of me, you almost took your life, too!” His voiced is laced with frantic energy and he wipes his hand through his hair with a look of panic. My instinct is to make him happy, to calm him. I can do that for him. I can give that to him, even if it breaks my heart. I mean we just started...

“Okay. You’re right, I’ll go. Please Cole, please just calm down. You don’t need this stress. Will you call me later?”

“Yes,” he breaths out, taking a long breath in. “I just need to know that I can make it all clean for you. I don’t ever want

you to hate your life so much that you wouldn't value it."

If ever I had an opportunity to make him understand, now was it. Slowly, I walk over to him, taking his hands and staring into his eyes. This was my home and I'll be damned if his fear would cause us to separate.

Considering my words carefully, I begin. "The day I did it was particularly difficult. I was struggling with just assimilating back into my life. School was a disaster and graduation seemingly grim. My days seemed to run together and I had been tuning people out for months. The depression was evident, but being inside was different. I didn't see the sorrow, I just welcomed the silence. I was so tired of talking about it, so tired of hearing the sympathy in everyone's voices. Everyone just seemed to look at me with pitiful eyes and I honestly just felt like I would never be able to feel what it was like for someone to really see me again. Like *me*, the *real me*, deep inside. I was afraid I'd never be seen again. It felt worse than what I considered death would be like, so I took a handful of pills, immediately panicked and puked, called Alex... and lived. Even after all of it, I wasn't truly alive until a year later, until you looked at me again. I'm only alive because of you, Cole, please don't make me go back to living without you."

He just stands, looking into my eyes, looking into my soul.

"You aren't crying," he cocks his head to the side as if he's trying to figure me out.

"Nope, because I'm not fragile, so long as I'm with you," I grin up at him.

"That sounds very anti-feminist," he says. *God, I love that sideways grin.*

"I know how much power I have, I know I could make it through anything alone, but together... Cole, together, we are limitless. I'm truly frightened by the depth of my love for you, but I'm more afraid to live without it."

"Mia." His lips move in a whisper as he pulls me into his arms. We stay like that for what seems like eons while he whispers regrets and wishes into my lips, my neck and any

other part of me he can kiss. I listen and accept it all, giving back as much as I get. This is our real moment, the moment of our commitment to each other. Absolutely no man can, or will, ever put asunder. Cole and I commit in that room to never separate. As crazy as it seems, amid all the dramatic situations surrounding us, we found our path.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Pulling us from our bubble is the constant buzzing from Cole's phone. Looking down, he tips his head to the side and puts the phone to his ear, never letting go of me.

"Foster, plans have changed. I will be with Mia. Let's plan for the cottage. We will pack and meet you in a half hour. Inform the shark pool and I will handle the rest."

Without a goodbye, he ends the call and kisses the top of my head and I squeeze his waist harder.

"Cottage?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Surprise," he laughs. "My plan was to take you there Friday night before everything happened. I bought you a present." His eyes twinkle with delight.

"Wait, when? You bought me a cottage? When were you going to tell me this news?" I ask in disbelief, pulling back to look at Cole's face.

"If you were listening, you would have heard me say that I was planning on surprising you last night. I was going to take you for the weekend, but then I got sidetracked with being arrested for murder and all." Grinning, he grabs my hands and kisses them.

I start to bounce a little and without being able to control myself, I squeal.



“This is the best present ever! Where is it? What should I pack?” I lurch myself forward and plant a huge kiss on his lips and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’d buy you a million houses if they make you this happy.”

“I love you, Cole Parker.”

“Right back atcha, Mrs. Parker.”

Taking my hand, Cole leads us back to the bedroom to pack. I walk into my closet and grab my luggage and begin searching for all the perfect cottage outfits. After shaking his head for the millionth time at my two bags, he sandwiches his small bag in between mine and picks all of them up without struggle, leaving his free hand to wrap around my waist.

Foster meets us on the bottom floor and takes the bags from Cole. They exchange some words while I text Alex to tell her I will be out of town.

Mia: He bought me a cottage

Alex: as in cheese?

Mia: No, lol like as in a small house in the woods

Alex: Shut up! I can’t even get anyone to buy me a drink

Mia: I’m dying of excitement. Favor?

Alex: Maybe....

Mia: Don’t tell anyone where we are...I just need to get him away and be away.

Alex: Haha, jokes on you, I don’t even know where you are going! Have fun in Neverland mwah

Mia: Be nice to Foster...he might be lonely for the next few days...

Alex: \*Middle finger\*

Mia: Lol, you can just insert the emoji, dummy

Alex: I won’t do that update...I read that people’s phones caught fire afterward.

Mia: I can’t even with you! \*rolling eyes\*

Alex: Bye bitch

Mia: Bye xoxo

Putting my phone away in my purse, I turn to Cole and smile. I pause, watching him speak to Foster, watching his face go through different expressions ending with a wide smile. I love that gorgeous man. Anyone that looks at him would want to love him. He is tall and lean, broad shouldered and 100% male. He wasn't an asshole though. So many guys that have what Cole has are egotistical and self-centered. That could never be him. His heart was huge and he always thought of me. I never worry or have to wonder what Cole's number one priority is, it's always me.

Smiling at him like the lucky fool I am, he turns to me and winks and I swear time stands still for a moment. He and Foster walk toward me and Cole opens my door first, allowing me to scoot across the back of the black SUV, Cole following. Situating myself in my seat, Cole begins returning phone calls leaving me to my thoughts. I watch the landscape blur and change, wondering what the rest of the world is doing at this moment.

For the last few months, Cole and I had either been immersed in some drama or just immersed in each other. Looking out the window made me realize how myopic we've been. I guess it's natural for new or old/new couples. The thought made me laugh a bit, calling Cole's attention to me.

"What's going on in that beautiful head of yours? You've been so quiet for the last half hour."

"Geez, have I really been zoned out for half an hour?"

Looking down at my watch, I realize it's not an exaggeration.

"I would've interrupted, but I had too many fires to put out."

"Oh God, how's that going?" I give a "yikes" look as if to exaggerate my understanding.

"Well, the good news is that I won't be fired," he smirks. "Or broke," he replies with a grin.

"Ha! I would still love you if you got fired. Now broke is a whole different story."

“I knew it! Gold digger,” he yells as he reaches out to tickle me.

Feigning shock I grin, “I’ve got my own money. I just don’t want any dead weight.” Ending with a sly grin, I add, “Hey, how long until we get there?”

Putting his phone down on the seat, he turns his body so he is facing me. “About two and a half hours. It’s the cutest little town upstate, lots of antiques and it has a gorgeous lake.”

“I can’t believe I’m being surprised with a cottage! I don’t care what it looks like, I will love it!”

Cole leans over, kissing my forehead and turning away all too quickly to look back at his dingy phone. “Hey, Richard says your mom is having those books delivered to the penthouse tomorrow, I’ll arrange for them to be put upstairs.”

“Great, I barely remember talking to her about that. Glad she remembered.”

“What did you want them for?” he asks absentmindedly while looking through some paperwork.

I realize at this very moment I could tell them they held the secret to the cure for cancer and he won’t even hear me, but I tell him the truth instead. “I’m just exploring my inner *Murder She Wrote*. I just wanted to look through some old photo albums from college, hoping something or someone would jog my memory about Carter’s cousin.”

“Mmmm, that’s great, sweetheart.” Like I thought, totally checked out! I don’t know how much I love this, I feel like that needy girl that I usually think is ridiculous, but I hate that he is so immersed in something else right now. I should quit, this is dumb. I know I’m heading down a road that should be left untraveled, but I’m starting to worry that our time away won’t really be *away*. Before the thought gets too worrisome, I remind myself that I am married to a fucking mogul. He can’t just work part-time from our study. *What the hell, Mia!* I need to get a grip and stop this madness.

## CHAPTER SIX



For the next few hours, I alternate my stare between the landscape, which has become more about trees, and Cole. He wasn't lying when he said he had fires to put out. Watching him work and occasionally rub my thigh or kiss my hand has gotten me fairly worked up. He is no less powerful in his professional life than he is in the bedroom. My man takes no prisoners, but right now, I just want to be imprisoned by his body. Licking my lips, I rest my head on the back of the seat and close my eyes and begin to imagine laying under Cole and all the delicious things he would do to my body. I don't know when he noticed my daydream, but I feel his lips on my neck.

"Baby, if you keep looking like that, we will be giving Foster one helluva show."

"Right now, Cole, you could fuck me in the middle of Times Square and I wouldn't care," I lick my lips as I pull one side of my maxi skirt up to reveal my leg.

Grabbing my chin and angling it so I'm staring at him, "Watch it, Mia, I don't enjoy the idea of anyone getting to see your gorgeous body, but I'm so fucking hard right now that I'm not sure I could control myself." He pulls my face toward him and begins to kiss me slowly and deliberately, exploring my mouth and leaving me a bit breathless. He tastes of mint and his lips are cool from the ice in his water.

Pulling away, I keep my eyes closed, not ready to open them and watch him pull away and back to work. When I open my eyes, Cole is staring at me with a sexy grin, head tilted to the side like he is enjoying the show.

"What?" I whisper, feeling self-conscious, feeling the blush creep up into my cheeks.

"What, what? You are *fucking* sexy, you know that?" As if to punctuate what he is saying, he licks his bottom lip and lets his eyes wander down my body. How does he do this? Make me

hot just by looking at me, I swear I might come right now with just the heat stirring between us.

“You make me feel sexy. I want to be sexy for you. Tell me what you want.” I can’t believe I’m being this forward, I can’t seem to control my libido, but I don’t care. I know what I want, and I know what I need! Cole doesn’t take his eyes off me. His outward appearance doesn’t change, but the grip on my bare leg starts to tighten as if he could rip the rest of my clothes right from my body. God! I wish he would.

“Foster, how much time until we arrive?”

“About three minutes until arrival.”

This is going to be the longest three minutes of my life. We sit looking at each other, and I know he is making a playbook for how he is going to destroy my body and I feel giddy. I swear I almost rip off my seatbelt when the car stops. Thank God Foster gets out to get the bags because I launch myself onto Cole’s lap. We start tearing at each other, kissing, rubbing, caressing and it isn’t until he rips my top open that I become aware of my surroundings.

“Holy Shit! Foster.” I squeal as I hunch over to not be seen.

“Mia, he isn’t in the car. I wouldn’t expose my wife to anyone! I can control myself a bit more than that, though clearly, you little horn-dog, have a harder time. I mean, I’ve been told by others that I’m irresistible, so I can understand the difficulty.” Smiling down at me with that ridiculous grin and rubbing his chin, he laughs at me.

“Others? What others? I’ll have them killed,” I wink, trying to straighten out my shirt as to not flash anyone.

“Baby, the only opinion that matters, is yours. However, I do like to make the twins happy,” he reaches out to caress my breasts. I respond with a giggle and look out the window to make sure the coast is clear.

“You may have to give me your jacket so that I keep them hidden.”

“Honey, we are alone. Foster has already left with the other car.”

“Another car? What other car?”

“That’s what we were talking about before we left, I had the other security team escort us so that he could ride back. We are alone, completely and totally alone. Don’t worry though, the team isn’t too far away if needed.”

Taking my cue, I take off my shirt completely exposing myself and arch my back slightly. Pulling the chopstick out of my hair, I let it fall down my back in the most seductive way possible and purr, “Well then, are you going to fuck me in this car or what?”

Before I finish, Cole grabs my waist and pulls me into his lap, bending me forward, forcing me to grip the front seats to stabilize myself. Holding one large, warm hand in the middle of my back to keep me leaned forward, he pulls up the skirt I am wearing until it is bunched at my waist.

“Mia, you are being a very needy girl right now, I can feel how much you want me,” he croons as he pushes my underwear to the side and draws his fingers through my wet folds. The feeling is so intense that I try and arch my back, only to be met with the force of his hand holding me in place.

Grinding his cock into my backside, he leans forward and kisses my back and grabs a fistful of hair at the base of my neck, pulling my hair back. It leaves just enough pain and pleasure.

“Ahhh, that feels so good, baby. Your ass is my kryptonite,” Cole growls as he grinds his hard length into me. I can feel his fingers gripping my waist and pulling me into him for what is the sexiest dry fuck I’ve ever experienced. Reaching his hand back down to my wetness, he grips the lace panties and pulls harshly, ripping them from my body, the sting causing me to jump and let out a gasp.

“Is this what you want, Mia? Do you want me to fuck you bent over in this car?”

“Yes, Cole! Fuck me hard.” I barely make out the words through my stuttered breaths.

I hear the zip, the rustle of his pants as he pushes me forward farther toward the front of the car, only to be pulled back just as quickly and impaled by his cock.

“Ah,” I scream. “Yes!”

“Hold the seat, sweetheart,” he dominates through gritted teeth and I do as I am told as he begins to buck wildly, fucking me so hard that my body starts to feel like jelly.

“Fuckfuckfuck, Cole! I’m gonna come, omg, yes!”

“Wait for me baby, just hold still.”

I try to grind back meeting his thrusts with my own, but the sensations have taken over and all I can think about is the burning sensation ripping through my body as Cole literally fucks my entire body into a numbed state of bliss. Just when I feel like I can’t hold on any longer, I feel him grip my shoulder and lean into my body grinding in with such force that my arms give and he alone is holding us up.

“Now, Mia, come with me.”

I swear I see stars as blinding light rips through my body with so much intensity, making my entire body soar as I let out a guttural, feral scream, “Cole!”

Following me, I can feel Cole’s growl against the back of my neck as he pushes once more and releases himself inside of me. We are so connected that I can feel his cock twitch as we hold still and try to regain ourselves through harsh breaths, our chests heaving. His hands still digging into me, not ready to let go.

“Holy fuck.” He smiles against my back, gently bringing us back to a seated position, with me on his lap and him still inside of me.

“Yep. There is a good chance that I broke a rib,” I feel my sides laughing. Cole responds by kissing my back and down my arms. I feel him twitch inside of me. Smiling, I look over my shoulder and ask, “Are you already set for round two?”

“I’m always ready for you, baby, but I would prefer if round two was inside of our house, not in the car. You know, for the

sake of your ribs and all.”

I pull myself up, releasing him from me and try and right myself next to him. He grabs my hands and kisses the backs after buttoning his jeans.

“Wanna see your present?”

My present! I had almost forgotten. Sex with Cole has a way of making me forget that anything else exists.

“Yes!” I squeal, feeling like a little kid at Christmas.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

We exit the car, Cole first and then with his help, me. Looking up, I see the most breathtakingly beautiful gift. The house is a one story, shingled cottage, although *cottage* isn't really the right word. It's bigger than a cottage but doesn't lack the charm. It has a large porch with a swing and four steps that lead up. The double glass door entry is framed by the honeysuckle that grows along the overhang of the porch. I run-hop from excitement to the door followed by a laughing Cole who proceeds to pick me up and wink before he carries me over the threshold. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I whisper, “I love you,” and he smiles at me one last time before setting me down and turning me around to take in, what is now easily considered as my dream house.

“Oh, my goodness,” I gasp, cupping my hands over my mouth. It's hands-down gorgeous. The entry opens to a foyer that opens to a study with French doors on the right and a few more feet down to a large formal dining area, past that a huge great room with tall ceilings and glass accordion walls leads out to an outdoor patio equipped with a built-in fireplace and kitchen, all framed by a large expanse of grass leading to a dock that sits on the most gorgeous glass-like body of water.

“Cole, it's perfect,” I breathe out.



Cole walks up behind me and whispers into my ear, “I want to have babies with you here. I want us to raise our babies here.” He wraps his arms around my waist, kissing the side of my head.

I feel my throat constrict, making it hard to swallow as I try and hold back my tears. I can picture it. I can see our children running around in the grass doing cartwheels and our friends sitting outside on Adirondack chairs as we watch them play. I want all of that, except currently, our lives are at a standstill because Cole is being charged with a heinous crime and the fallout from this may ruin us, but I can’t say that.

I won’t ruin his hope, so I say the next best thing, “One day, baby, one day.”

We stand silently, looking out at our view when he finally speaks again. “Let’s make one day, this day.”

Caught off guard, I turn to look into his face. “Cole, you can’t be serious.” I thought this was going to be the end of it, I am shocked at his denial or straight up delusional state right now. “You can’t actually be serious... with everything going on, you want to knock me up?”

Moving away from me, he waves his hand dismissively in the air saying, “Forget it, sorry I brought it up. If you don’t want kids you should have just said so.”

What the fuck. First, we fight, then we fuck. So now we fight again? I will not do this with him again today.

“Don’t you dare. Have you lost your mind? I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but I want to go back to that happy moment, the one that happened three minutes ago. Of course, I want to have your babies. I just don’t want to be knocked up during all this stress and frankly, I’m pretty fucking shocked you would want that for me,” I huff, crossing my arms across my chest readying for the fight.

“Fuck, Mia, I’m sorry. Of course, we wait, of course. I’m just grasping for some happy in the middle of all this shit. Can we just pretend, for this weekend, that I am not a murder suspect?”

Can we just jump into our future, without actually knocking you up?”

My heart almost melts at the look of need on his face. He needs a break. My poor sweet husband has opened his heart up and laid it out. If he needs to pretend for three days, then I will be the best fucking actress of all time.

Walking over, I kiss his lips and say, “Are we having a girl or boy first?”

Smiling, he answers, “Twins, one of each.”

“Omg, Cole! You are a psychopath. No way, that isn’t a fantasy! I’m tired just thinking about it!” I laugh, swatting his arm.



After having a conversation about our future kids, Cole shows me the rest of the house, including our bedroom. We become intimately introduced to that room specifically, leaving us famished, so we sit outside by the fire, drink some wine and fill our bellies with the pasta made by my delicious husband.

“I know I gave you attitude about your phone earlier, but I want to check in with Alex. I texted her earlier to tell her about the books. I want to know if she had a chance to swing by,” I smile sheepishly as I grab my phone from my purse.

Taking a drink from his wine, he smiles and shakes his head. “It will be hard, but I can be the bigger person...”

I roll my eyes knowing that he is really going to let this live for a bit. “Oh, thanks. You are such a good person,” I snark as I toss a pillow his way.

I shoot off a quick text and toss my phone on the table.

“What were you saying earlier about Sherlock Holmesing it?” he asks with a mouthful of pasta

“Gross.” I laugh. “It was Murder She Wrote. Get your shows straight.”

“Clearly, you are passionate about your Angela Lansbury trivia.”

“HA! She is bomb!”

“I won’t disagree, but what were you talking about?” he asks, setting his plate aside to give me his full attention.

“It’s nothing, really, I just had this thought that has been bugging me ever since Carter was bailed out by his cousin. I didn’t really know Carter and his family well, but we knew some of the same people, so I was hoping that maybe I could find something in one of my scrapbooks that would make sense. I don’t remember him, but I mean, I’m sure he had some friends and maybe they could help us out. I just wonder who would have bailed him out, especially considering the charges and the fact that his own parents want him put away in a hospital. Alex remembers he used to hang out with some sad guy and I don’t, so... I was just, I don’t know... trying to connect some dots.” I’m not sure why, but I feel embarrassed or self-conscious once I say it all out loud. I mean, what do I think I’m going to find. I feel like a child, naïve and silly. I look away, not wanting to see Cole’s reaction.

“What are you looking away for, don’t be like that. I think it’s cool that you want to help. Can I look, too?” His voice is soft as he sweetly pulls me closer to him.

“Don’t make fun of me!” I spit out pushing back against him.

“Mia, baby, I’m not... swear. I totally get it, you want to feel like you’re doing something to help rather than feeling helpless. I get it and frankly, it’s a great place to begin. I bet we can find something in those books.” His voice is sweet and understanding, serving to help me accept him at his word.

“Thank you.” I smile and nestle my head on his shoulder, snuggling closer because it was getting colder outside and because I love him.

“You want to make the fire bigger, sweetheart?” Cole asks, standing and walking toward our outdoor fireplace.

“Yes, please.”

“Anything for my baby.” He winks, looking back over his broad shoulders.

We stay outside until late into the night, drinking wine and laughing. It's a perfect night and I'm sure we have drama waiting back home, but right now, right here, we are perfect. Cole carries me into the house as the fire dies outside. He made love to me three times tonight. We stay up until the early morning just worshipping each other's bodies. Wrapping ourselves in blankets, we walk out to the deck at the end of the property line where the grass meets the lake. Cole sits me in his lap and wraps his blanket around the both of us, and we sit and watch the sunrise in silence.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Alex*

“Shit!” I think I missed Mia’s call last night. I’m sure she was just calling to brag about her new lake house, I mean, what the fuck! I need a rich husband, or maybe his head of security. I shake the thought off as soon as it settles in. I cannot keep making a fool of myself. No matter how hard I pursue Foster, he treats me like a stupid girl with a crush. Ugh! I can’t even really talk to Mia about it, because she would kill me if she knew how forward I’d been. He’s just so sexy and serious and forget about the fact that he looks like he could rip your head off with just his pinky. *Get a grip, Alex!* My phone dings pulling me out of my daydream and I pull it out of my pocket to see it’s a text from Mia.

Hey, those scrapbooks and old yearbooks are being left at my place today...you totally don’t have to but if you get a chance, I left your name with the front, they will let you up... please don’t feel obligated.

Love you

*Sweet, maybe I can get Foster alone.* OMG! I seriously cannot get my downstairs lady to chill out. How horny am I, he is just a guy... who has zero interest in me... or her!

I try to focus on work and the rest of my day, but I pretty much just keep thinking about different scenarios where I find myself alone with Foster. I'm ridiculous and I know it. My co-workers are going to start to notice me lost in a dream world, especially since I'm known for being so focused. I shake my head to re-start, and dive into my paperwork. Busy work is the best part of working at the magazine. I love the high energy and pace, especially on days like today.

Heading home at the end of the day, I start to send off a text to Mia to let her know I am going to run by her place tonight when BAM, I run right into someone.

"Whoa! Buddy, watch where you're going!"

Looking up I am stunned into silence because lo and behold, Jack, of all the assholes to run into.

"Wow, sorry, so sorry... wait a minute, Alex?"

All I can do is shake my head because I'm sure as hell not shaking the creeped out feeling that is taking over my body. I'm sure I watch way too many *Criminal Minds* shows, but this feels strange. I've never seen him by my building, never around here. I'm sure I'm just overly paranoid given all the things that have happened to my best friend, but he is weird.

"Wow, I can't believe I'm running into you." *Really? That's all you've got?*

"Yeah, wow... are you stalking me? You should know that Mia isn't with me," I deadpan.

"Jesus, well I guess I know whose side you're on," he laughs out.

Realizing that I'm the one coming off as crazy, I try and smile, shaking my head as if to say, "no worries." Honestly, I hope I do offend him. The guy was a total douche to Mia, what kind of best friend would I be if I didn't give him shit.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but I’m a little weary... I mean, you guys ended pretty badly and honestly, she *is* my best friend, so I’m always on her side. Duh!”

“I get it, I was just being polite. I was always cool with you, so I have no reason to be rude to you in the middle of the street, ya know?”

*All right, dickhead, you don’t have to pretend you’re a nice guy.*

Jack looks down the street as if he’s looking for someone and then back to me. “Well, sorry again. It was nice to see you again. Out of curiosity, you heading to Mia’s? I mean, I just assume since her place is this way. I mean, thank goodness she moved out of her old place, what with all the drama there...”

“What drama? The robbery?”

“No, I mean obviously, there is that, but that girl that was killed downstairs. I heard her body was there for a while until the smell gave it away.” Tilting his head, he takes a step closer, lowering his voice. “I’m surprised the police haven’t talked to you guys about it with you being young girls living in that building. I bet you had zero idea you were at such risk. That could’ve been you, Alex.” His voice is just a level above a whisper and something about his eyes look too distant.

*Welcome back crept out feeling.* Seriously, I knew he was a weirdo.

“Yeah, sooo, I’m going to go now...” my skin crawling, I take steps backward to increase my distance from freak ass Jack.

“Good to see you, Alex.” His disdain evident in his tone.

As I walk away, I can’t help but look over my shoulder. I’m not sure how Mia talked to this guy for as long as she did. Talk about Dahmer vibes. Taking out my phone, I shoot a quick text to Foster about my run-in. I don’t feel bad, because I can easily convince myself this is pertinent info for him rather than just a reason for me to have contact.

I make it to Mia’s penthouse and wait at the front for a minute for someone to let me up. Spying an envelope with my name, I snatch it off the desk and open to find a card key inside.

Bingo! I leave the envelope with a written note, saying I got it and head up. As I walk in the door, my phone dings.

I'm heading back into town this afternoon, where are you? I don't want you around him. Stay public. I mean it.

*Overreact a bit, Foster?* Lordy. I text back telling him not to worry, but I leave out the little bit about me being at Mia and Cole's. I would rather it be a surprise. If I can't get him alone, then I will surprise him into it! I'm a stalker. It's official! If I'm being honest with myself, I am over the moon that he is protective over me even though I know it's more about Cole and Mia than about me.

I walk into the house and scan for the books. Not seeing anything, I walk into the kitchen to grab a soda and see them sitting on the kitchen counter. I'm not sure what we are even looking for, but Mia is right, maybe someone's face will connect a memory and help us connect the dots between Carter and his cousin, but it's more likely that I will just end up going down memory lane and laughing at how dumb we were.

I mindlessly start thumbing through the scrapbooks as I drink my soda, laughing occasionally at pictures of our younger selves. It's hard to believe that Mia and I have been friends since eighth grade when my family moved to New York and we attended the same school. It really was love at first sight. We were instant besties and it's always been that way. I don't know what I would do without her and I'm fairly confident she would be a total nerd without me. I rifle through some of the other books until I see one peeking out from the bottom. I know exactly what's in this one! Ahhh, the college years, not too far gone, but they feel like eons ago. Opening the scrapbook, I laugh, because who seriously scrapbooks? Like ever? Gotta love Mia. I am flipping page after page until right there, in the corner, a little fuzzy, but there. *NO fucking way. No way!!!*

Reaching out for my phone, I try to connect the dots for what I'm seeing. This is so fucked; the implications are crazy. I need to take a picture of this and send to Mia. I zoom in on the picture and focus the camera on the page. As soon as I snap

the picture, I hear a noise, like a door closing. Thank God, Foster!

I pocket my phone and take off toward the front. “Oh my God, Foster, I have literally never been happier to see you! You will never believe what I just saw!” Rounding the corner, I feel dizzy, so dizzy. Stunned, I stop in my tracks. I’m so confused. Why can’t I focus? All I can taste is iron as I hear someone breathe in my ear.

“That’s it, just go. I want you to die knowing that you can’t help your friend. I want you to die knowing that everyone you love will suffer.”

## CHAPTER NINE



### *Foster*

I can’t stop checking my phone since getting the text from Alex. Fuck, this girl is the most distracting person. I can’t keep her out of my head no matter how hard I try. After dropping Cole and Mia off on Sunday, I’m heading back Monday afternoon to take care of some things in the city, but all I want to do is find that crazy girl and bury myself in her. I need to keep a clear head right now. I don’t have time to romance this girl when so much is on the line for Cole and I. I need to find answers and the end of this shit for him and Mia, so I can move on as well.

When Cole met Mia, it was my intent to start my own security company, but when everything went down I couldn’t leave his side. Cole has always been like a brother to me, we kind of came up together. He made himself into the man he is now without family to help or encourage him. I lost my family as well at a young age, so we’ve become each other’s family. I



owe my life to Cole, literally. I was all over the place after being discharged from the Marine Corps. I had zero focus and my head was all fucked up after three tours. I was a young scrapper getting into too much shit, and on one particular night, I was looking for a fight and found it in someone bigger and more ruthless. Cole had my back and stopped me from going down the wrong road. That was the night that I first met Cole and he saw something in me that was better than what I was settling for.

He tracked me down and extended an invitation to a boxing facility, helping me channel my anger into a healthier function. He subsequently hired me on as security and I slowly built a security empire for him with men like myself that have special qualifications that go beyond regular security services.

All of that is on the backburner now, at least until we get this current situation under control, I would never turn my back on my brother.

Checking my phone again, I see that Alex has texted back.

Don't stress, Foster, I'm cool just thought you should know that this weirdo is still being... well, weird. The whole dead girl thing is fucking freaky though...

XXX

She always signs XXX and it makes me crazy. If she only knew the dirty shit I would like to do to her body. She is a vision, fucking gorgeous and that ass! But the best part about her was that crazy, dirty mouth of hers. I love everything she says, every ridiculous, insane remark that is always completely unfiltered. Some people may be put off by her dry sense of humor, but I absolutely love how she says everything that's in her head.

If that idiot were to do anything to hurt Alex, he'd better disappear or he will regret ever being born. I used to be surprised at my protectiveness over Alex, but now I realize that how I feel about her is a forgone conclusion. One day I will be able to share it with her, but for now I have to keep my head in the game. Re-reading her message, I am irritated that she doesn't answer my question. I want to know where she is.

I can track her phone, but I'll hold off on that for a moment. I call the penthouse to see if she has dropped by yet. I know she doesn't know I expect her there, but I'm the one that arranged a key for her to pick up, so she could look through those books.

As soon as I hear the phone pick-up, I bark out who I am, adding, "Has Miss Thompson collected her key?"

"Yes, she has, Mr. Crown," the woman answers happily.

"Thank you, please message me when she has left the penthouse."

"Will do." And with that, I hang up, relieved that she is at the house.

My last course of action is to call my contact at the precinct to find out what I can about the girl that was killed at their old apartment. I knew the story, at least what has been circulating around the news, but I would love to hear some inside information.

The ringing of Dax's cell rings clear through the speakers of my car. "Hey man, what's up? I didn't think I'd hear from you for a bit. Aren't you out with Cole right now?"

That's the great part of having friends on the inside, I know Dax has my back and will give me any heads up he can.

"No, he's doing his thing with the wifey. I was calling to see if you could give me some details about the deceased girl in the news that was at Mia's old apartment. I just want to rule out any connections."

"Man, you know I would tell you if anything was suspected, but they actually think it was a one-night stand gone wrong. Witnesses say they saw a man with her a few weeks before she died. It all happened way before Mia was robbed."

"Sounds like you have a suspect..."

"Yeah, we have eyes on a TA at the college she was at, he was seen talking to her at a bar downtown."

"What school?" I bark out, the hairs on the back of my neck were starting to rise. I didn't like this, too many coincidences.

Jack was a fucking TA. Jack dated Mia when all this shit started, Jack just ran into my girl and creeped her out. I don't like it. I don't like Jack.

"The community college, downtown... some douche bag named Evan."

"That's shitty, poor girl. Well, hey, keep me posted if you hear anything, brother," I end the call, trying to hide my near panic.

"Will do, buddy," and Dax hangs up.

Fuck! I need to get my shit together. I almost lined a guy up for murder based on my girl being creeped out. She has no idea what's coming her way the minute all this shit clears up. In the meantime, I'll keep everyone at bay that tries with her, just like I convinced that dumbass bouncer to stop calling her.

I shoot off a text to Cole letting him know I'm back in the city and to let me know of any developments. I know I've left him in good hands, the guys there are my best team. Stopping by my place, I grab a fresh change of clothes and laugh knowing that the partial reason for my change is because I know that I'll be surprising Alex at the penthouse. The whole ride over, I can't help but feel the buzz I get from knowing I'm going to see her. I park underground and head up through the private elevators. As they open to the entry, I notice the door ajar and I am in full alert. Something isn't right and I'll be damned if something goes down on my watch. I reach to the small of my back, grabbing my weapon and holding it out as I enter the house. Scanning the entry, it's hard to see anything with all the lights out.

"Alex?" I yell out. "It's Foster, come out and help me with my bags." I try to sound unsuspecting.

Then my foot taps against something soft. I glance down to see Alex's lifeless body lying in front of me and that's when I snap.

Threatening every single person on the staff at Cole's building for letting someone get to her and finally calling Cole, not because I worried about him and Mia, even though that is

exactly where my head should be, I couldn't think past my own despair.

## CHAPTER TEN

Coles shakes me gently to wake me. "Mia, sweetheart, wake up."

"Cole, what time is it?" I ask, blinking my eyes open and stretching. We had to have slept until afternoon since we stayed up to watch the sunrise.

"Honey, it's around one in the afternoon," he smiles down at me and grabs my hands and pulling me to a seated position. "We didn't hear our phones this morning. They both died and I didn't put them on the chargers until this afternoon, I'm sorry for that."

Pulling my hands away, I start to laugh at his apology over not charging my phone. Who cares? I don't need to speak to anyone, and anyone I know can call me later. I stretch my neck side to side and hang my legs over the side of the bed and realize that Cole is still struggling to finish this conversation.

"What is going on, Cole? Are you okay, what are you trying to tell me?"

"I don't know how to say this... I just..." He scrubs his hand on the back of his neck in his frustration, but when his eyes meet mine, I can see that something is wrong

"Spit it out!" Standing up, I reach out needing to brace myself.

"It's Alex. Mia, she is in critical condition, she was attacked at our place last night and they aren't sure she will pull through."

A scream escapes my mouth before I tightly cover my hand over it. "Get me to her, Cole."

Every minute of the trip back is hell, but I'm calm on the inside, I know that she will be okay because the alternative is never an option.

When we arrive at the hospital, I leap out of the car and hustle directly to the front desk. "Hi, hello... I'm here to see my friend, Alex Thompson, she was admitted last night... she was attacked, I need to see her!"

The nurse looks over and holds up a finger to me that makes me want to break it, but I wait (impatiently) for her to tap on her keyboard.

"Sorry, but she isn't allowed visitors, family only."

"Excuse me but I am family—"

"You said friend—"

"Wait, what?"

"You said *'your friend was admitted.'*"

"What are you, a fucking detective? Give me a break... what do you want? A twenty? Maybe a fifty?" My anger apparent as I pull out my wallet. Thankfully Cole interjects.

"I apologize, it's been a long night, I'm sure you can imagine. Why don't you call her husband and have us approved?"

Giving me a side glance, she smiles at Cole and nods her head. I turn and look at him for an explanation as he places his fingers to his lips and mouths "shhh." My heart is pounding and I am emotionally unstable, but I know when he is working in my favor and I keep my mouth shut as I am told.

"Okay, thank you," is all I hear her say as I close my eyes to help me find the patience I need. "Here are your passes, you can go through those doors and make a right."

Cole reaches out for the badges and nods, "Thank you" as he grabs my hand pulling me in the direction we need to go. We come to another desk inside the doors and they direct us to the room. All I can hear are machines and beeping. It's eerie and horrible and I briefly think that this is what everyone has felt about me when they came to the hospital.

When I walk in the room, two things stop me in my tracks. First, I am relieved to see that Alex does not have a thousand tubes in her, just an IV drip. And second, Foster looks like he has aged ten years. He stands as soon as we enter, and Cole puts his hand on my back, urging me forward. I realize I've been frozen to my spot, Foster just nods at me and takes his place next to Alex like a sentinel on watch.

"Hey man," Cole greets as he walks over and pats Foster on the back. "You all right?"

"I'm good, fine," Foster answers dismissively, turning back toward Alex, he continues. "The doctor explained the induced coma is a way for her body and mind to heal. She was hit in the head pretty fucking hard, but you know Alex, it'll take more than that for my girl to be down for the count." *Hold up, did he just say my girl?*

"Foster, what happened? I honestly couldn't even hear it from Cole, I was too freaked out and I just needed to see her, but I'm okay and she's alive. What the fuck happened to her?" I realize that I am eerily calm, Cole is looking at me with the strangest look. Foster speaks before Cole says anything.

"Mia, are you sure you're okay? Because I've never actually seen you this calm and it's actually kind of scary. Maybe you should sit down, just in case you start having a panic attack."

Taking a deep breath, I look at both strong men and say, "Fucking speak. I am not as delicate as you think, I had multiple murder attempts, attempted rape and a goddamned kidnapping happen to me. I think I can weather this, and like you said before, your girl is plenty tough. She will make it through this, I have zero worry about that, she will also know that you referred to her as your girl," I add with a small grin in the hopes that everyone can settle down and we can get down to business.

Foster fills us in on everything that happened, but he's vague on the timeline of the day. After he finishes, he sits and just stares at Cole until I tilt my head and say, "What? You guys are doing that thing... where you think with the same brain. Someone clue me in."

Cole reaches over and smiles at me. “Baby, let’s go get Foster some coffee and maybe a Snickers for me?”

“Okay?” I look at him a bit confused, but totally willing to follow his lead.

As we get up to leave, Cole gives Foster a guy hug, the kind with the back pat, and I follow him out toward the cafeteria.

“All right, clue me in. What is going on, there is more you aren’t telling. I swear to God if you start treating me like some delicate flower, I will never touch your wiener again. I am not kidding, Cole Parker.”

Cole pulls me close as I push back and kisses the top of my head. “All right, feisty. Calm down and stop saying mean things about your biggest fan... and by biggest fan, I actually mean my cock.”

I laugh and push him gently, rolling my eyes.

“I was looking at Foster for a few reasons. First, Mia, it is clear to me that whatever has been going on between him and Alex, he is a goner... all in, head over heels. That girl belongs to him and he freely belongs to her. Like recognizes like,” he looks down at me in that way that makes me melt and thankful all at once. “Second,” he continues. “I smell something fishy... something is off. Why would someone hurt Alex? If they were waiting in our apartment to hurt us, why not let her come and go? They had to have known her. This is personal against us and that ‘us’ isn’t just me and you. We need to focus in on that cousin. Third, I need to get security in place for you, me and your parents.”

“Wait, isn’t that Foster’s thing? Why are you doing that for him?”

“Mia, the only place Foster will be, is right where Alex is. I couldn’t and wouldn’t pay him to leave her side. My concern is you and his is Alex, I understand. Foster is like a brother to me and I want him to be able to put his focus where it needs to be.”

I hand him the coffees that I ordered and smile at him, because he is honestly just fucking incredible. I love him.

Foster and Cole leave me with my best friend for a bit to talk logistics and hammer out some details about our new detail and I take the alone time to tell Alex how much I love her, adding that I don't think I'm the only one.

“Please wake up soon, friend. I will not know how to exist without you. I'm only partially cool because of you, you aren't done with me. I'm only halfway there, I'm sure you still have more to teach me about eye shadow and how Vans aren't the go-to shoe for every occasion. I need you, please don't go yet,” I whisper, wiping my eyes before the guys come back in.

Cole walks over and rubs my shoulders. “You ready to go, sweetheart? Foster is staying, we can come back tomorrow, but I think we could both use some rest and food.”

He's right, but honestly, I'm afraid to leave her.

Foster, stares at Alex's sleeping face, “I won't leave her side, Mia. I'm having clothes brought to me now and I don't mind the cafeteria food being delivered. I won't leave her. I can't,” he finishes and nods his head to me and I believe Cole is right. There isn't anything or anyone that could separate him from her. I am so incredibly grateful that I stand up from Cole and walk over to Foster and give him the biggest bear hug I can muster.

“Thank you, Foster. Please call me and keep me updated. I'll be back tomorrow.”

“I think you're breaking my ribs, Mia,” he laughs as I let go of him.

Taking Cole's hand, I follow him out of the hospital room, only looking over my shoulder to see Foster settle into the chair and turn on the sports network saying, “Well darlin', all you have to do is wake up and I will watch every chick flick you want until the end of time.” *Come on Alex, take the challenge.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN





Our new security meets us as we exit the hospital and leads us to the black S.U.V. waiting in the front. It's not until we are driving that I look at Cole panicked. "Cole, where are we going?! I can't go back to the house... we can't!"

Smoothing my shoulders, he answers calmly, and I realize he's hoping I will follow his lead. "No, baby, no, we aren't going back there. I got a room at the Four Seasons, unless you would rather go to your parents'. I already had the team go to the house and pick up some things for both of us and we still have our bags from the lake house. It's okay, don't worry, Mia. I'll fucking sell that place tomorrow if you want me to. I don't ever want to feel unsafe or scared in our home!"

The dam breaks and I start to cry, I'm not overwhelmed or scared. I'm sad. Just really sad that we can't seem to stop everyone we love from being hurt. As I struggle to explain why I'm crying, Cole holds me and strokes my hair from my face, planting gentle kisses on my face. "Shhh now, shhh, it's going to be okay, Mia. I promise you that this will come to an end. We will find this fucker and put an end to this shit."

"Fuck!" I yell, wiping my eyes with the palms of my hands roughly. "I thought we were done with this when Carter died. Honestly, I was relieved, but now this? Who would do this? Who... I know you think his cousin, but this kind of crazy is beyond revenge. Someone tried to straight up kill Alex in our home, whether by mistaken identity or on purpose, it is apparent that this crazy person has an agenda. Have you contacted Carter's parents? Wouldn't that be the easiest way to find out about his extended family?"

"Actually, it was our first stop, but they are out of the country. Seems they have little interest in communicating with us."

"Of course, why would they be interested in helping us when they seem to not give one shit about what kind of monster their son was!" I snark, throwing my hands in the air. Cole leans back, running his hands through his hair and blows out a hard breath.

“Trust me, I feel your frustration. Hopefully, Foster can find out some more information from his buddy in the department. I’ve got my money on this fucking cousin.”

“I hope you’re right because this whole, ‘scared to leave my hotel room’ is going to get old fast!”

“I know, baby, I know.”

We check into the hotel, order dinner, and I fall asleep before it even arrives. Keeping my eyes open is no longer an option. The exhaustion from the day. Fuck, from my life. All night I dream of shadows chasing me and trying to kill me, the absolute worst dreams of my life and I cannot count how often I wake up through the night until I finally just give up, going back to sleep.

Cole walks out of the bedroom, stubble on his face and sexy bedhead paired with dreamy eyes, searching for me. “When did you get up, baby?”

God, I love when he calls me baby, sweetheart, sexy, anything really. “Oh, ‘round four this morning, I just couldn’t sleep... monsters,” I say with a wink. He walks over and stands me up, diving his mouth onto my neck and removing my robe at the same time. “Well good morning to you too, this is a very nice hello,” I breath out, moving my head to the side to give him more of me.

“Sure-fire way to chase away monsters,” he hums into my neck. Pulling my robe from my shoulder he tugs it down until it stops at my waist where it’s tied. Standing back, he bites his lips while appreciating the view. Reaching out with one hand, he snaps the closure of my bra to set my breasts free, all the while holding a crooked grin on his face.

“Whatcha doing?” I ask, mirroring his smile.

“Just trying for a better view,” he winks while he starts tugging on my belt.

“Ahh, so you just want to look?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” he growls a bit louder as my robe falls down the rest of my body. Knowing exactly what game he is playing at, I let my bra slip from my shoulders and back onto the floor.

“Mmmm, that is a great view, but it could be better.”

“Better?” I ask with fake innocence.

“Take em’ off.” He levels his stare right at my center. If looks could remove my panties, they would be flying off right now without my help.

Slipping my finger into the waistband, I run it back and forth watching his eyes follow the path of my fingers.

“Take them off,” his voice is husky, but still a measured tone.

“Mmm... these? Do you mean my panties? Do you want me completely naked, wet... standing in front of you?”

Cole’s heavy intake of breath through his nose is all I need to know that I am having the effect I’m hoping to have. He takes a step toward me, reaching out with one hand grabbing the front of my undies into a fistful ball, forcing me to take a few steps closer to him. They bunch up tighter and create a little sting but it’s the kind of bite that just makes me want and need more. I grind my hips against it to feel it on my clit.

“Ooh, my dirty girl, you like that. I gave you a chance to save these flimsy little things, but now I’m going to rip them off of you and fuck you on this table.”

Throwing my head back, I moan in appreciation of his words and true to his word, I feel a much bigger bite as he shreds my underwear off my body and pushes me back, causing my butt to hit the table and my hands brace against it. Just as quickly, he leans toward me, grabbing my waist and plopping me onto the table. I widen my legs to give him access and he wraps his arm around my waist, causing my hands to jump to his chest as my body is pulled tight up against his. I grind my core against his hard cock as our mouths barely touch. I can feel his breath and just the smallest area of our mouths touch, but he doesn’t lean any closer, staying still as if he needs to savor this moment.

“Fuck me,” I plead breathily. “Fuck me into tomorrow, don’t be gentle...I want it.” I groan into his mouth, forcing my kiss into his mouth, pushing my tongue in, wanting his kiss.

Cole stays still as I grind my pussy into him, licking and kissing his mouth. He just stands there with that crooked smile and hooded eyes, watching me use his body to fuck myself. I feel feral like an animal. The more he holds back, the crazier I become with need. I’m not even embarrassed by my desperation.

“Fuck me, Cole! Please! I need you.” I beg as I continue to cause a delicious friction on my clit from grinding into him.

“That’s it, baby, show me... show me how much you want me, does that feel good, Mia? Fuck yourself. I want to watch you come.”

I lose my mind and throw my head back and arch my back into his grip, tightening the space between our lower halves. I can feel the build, just a little more, I just need to push harder, grind deeper. I can feel my body tense.

“That’s it, do it, baby... come, baby.”

Hearing his words make me topple over.

“Oh, fuckfuckfuck,” I scream as I am hit with an orgasm like a Mack truck.

The minute I hit the top of the wave, Cole lets go of me and I fall back onto the table, bracing my hands down to stop myself from falling too hard. He hooks his arms around my thighs and buries his mouth on my sensitive clit. Screaming out, I feel the softness of his lips and his tongue take quick licks over my bud making the fire start to build again. Goddamn. I love him.

“Oh my god, yesssss... I’m coming again!” I scream, not giving two shits if anyone can hear us. All I feel is the vibration against my clit as he moans and that’s enough to send me flying, screaming his name loud enough for the whole floor to hear.

Pulling away, he rubs his hand over my stomach and toward my breasts. I use my feet to paw his pants down until I feel them fall. Feeling Cole at my tight entrance, waiting,

unmoving, I open my eyes to see what he is doing and am met with the eyes of the most gorgeous man, staring at me, his chest rising and falling, giving away his struggle for restraint. He keeps the head of his cock at my entrance, teasing me like he did with our mouths earlier. Leaning forward, he wraps his hand around the back of my neck and pulls my mouth to his, filling it with the taste of me. Kissing me long and hard, pulling back and stepping away as I reach for him saying, "Over." Tensing his jaw, I can see that his restraint is gone. When I said, 'fuck me into tomorrow' he was certainly listening.

I slowly roll over, putting my feet on the ground. He kicks my legs open with his leg and puts his hand on my back, holding me in place. Kissing and nipping down my back, he reaches down between my legs and pushes in two fingers, causing me to lurch forward and groan.

"Don't move, Mia,"

He holds me by the waist, now causing me to be just on my tiptoes as he fucks me with his fingers. Pulling them out, he runs the wetness over the seam of my ass. I squeeze tight in reaction to his fingers being there.

"Relax for me, baby." He slowly puts pressure on the tight hole. Rubbing gently, he doesn't release the pressure, just keeps it where it is and I feel the familiar heat down in my pussy. Fuck, how does he make every part of me feel like this, like I'm on fire.

"Do you like that? You do, don't you... you want me there, inside. I want to hear you say it. Tell me where you want me, Mia."

I feel like I've forgotten how to breathe, "Ahhh, Cole, please, I want it."

He never stops the rhythm, pressing just enough to cause me to want to push back into his finger, but I don't have any leverage on my tiptoes.

"Say it, Mia. What do you want from me. Be specific because my cock gets so hard hearing dirty words coming out of your

mouth.”

Oh fuck, I’m so close just from his words I think he might make me come again just from talking to me like this.

“I want it, fuck my ass with your finger,” I groan at the same time he pushes his finger into my ass and pushes his cock inside of my pussy. That’s all it takes to make my whole body shake as he fills me and fucks me hard.

I can’t breathe or process, all I can do is feel. Every receptor in my body is exploding and I am just want and desire. Wave after wave of orgasm explodes around me and I feel Cole shatter behind me as he comes inside of me. My breathing become slow and I feel myself being lifted and carried off the table.

“Sleep now, baby. I’ve got you.”

I drift into a sleep too deep for monsters and shadows.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



Waking up, I let my body acclimate to the light and sounds. Stretching my limbs out, I slowly open my eyes to my empty hotel room. I look around for Cole and then over my shoulder to see the clock, which reads two p.m. I’ve slept another day away. Geez, I need to get my days and nights straight. I throw my legs off the side of the bed and roll my head around in an attempt to de-stiffen my neck. I slept like the dead and I have Cole’s magic penis to thank for it. I pad out to the sound of the sports network coming from the living room and walk into Cole’s arms for a hug.

“Hi,” he mouths, pulling his mouth from the phone and kisses my head.

I smile back, pulling away to go to the coffee. I need the coffee! After pouring a cup, I snuggle on the couch and watch

Cole handle his conversation. No matter what the conversation entails, he doesn't take his eyes off me. I can feel his eyes watch me grab the remote and turn the television to the Food Network. I can feel him watch me fluff the pillows on the couch for a more comfortable spot and I know he is watching when I lick my lips after taking a sip of coffee. Knowing he is watching is making it very hard to concentrate, to say the least.

“Handle it. I have full faith that you will find the solution and not let this situation turn into a full disaster. What we all need right now is stability and a dose of morale. Our employees need to maintain faith that we will always work in their best interest and that interest is always aligned with company values.”

My curiosity gets the best of me and I gesture to him to say “what's up?” I'm really hoping that this doesn't have anything to do with his arrest, because I secretly harbor some guilt over that, even though I know that I had nothing to do with it. I can't help but feel bad about his life being so negatively affected by my dumb baggage and the fact that he is so amazing about it makes me feel even worse. I wish he would just be mad at me for a minute. His sainthood will be my demise! Perfect asshole. I laugh to myself at the crazy that exists within my mind.

“Nothing to worry about,” he reassures, pulling the phone from his ear. “Within any company, sometimes the employees want one thing and corporate wants another. I try to find middle ground. Nobody gets their cake and to eat it too.”

“Aww, softie, you are a good boss”. I blow him a kiss.

Smiling, he tosses his phone on the chair and walks over to me, planting a kiss on my lips.

“Mmmm, you taste kind of like cake. I guess I could have my cake and eat it too?” Biting his lip he draws back to look at me.

“You are disgusting!” I laugh, swatting at his shoulder. Cole just wags his eyebrows in response.

“How’d you sleep?” he asks, grabbing my coffee and taking a sip.

“Amazing, thanks to your magic penis...”

“Magic penis? So, I’m like David Cockerfield?”

I spit my coffee out that I just sipped and double over with laughter. Cole joins in and we both have to catch our breath from the laughter.

“I could do this all day, you realize this!”

“Yes! Yes, I realize, but before you hold me hostage with all your insane jokes, maybe I could carve out time to see my best friend?” I respond as my laughter slowly dies down.

“I’ll try to hold the jokes off for a while. Go get dressed and we can get going.”

Giving him a kiss, I jump off the couch and head back toward the bedroom. Cole follows saying, “I talked to Foster this morning after I put you to sleep and he said Alex is doing well. Still a sleeping beauty, but the swelling in her head has gone down and her body is functioning just fine. The doctors are really optimistic that she’s healing.”

I listen from the bathroom, holding onto the counter for stability. I cannot even think of the alternative. She has to wake up and get back to business as usual. There just isn’t any other reality I see for her. That girl means everything to me and if she doesn’t wake up, a piece of me will forever be missing.

Being at the hospital is never fun, but I am acutely aware of everything around me today. It’s like my body is hypersensitive to the sounds of the machines and the silence. I especially hate how quiet it is. Turning on the television, I try and block it out. I don’t know why I am so creeped out, but I am. Even knowing that Foster and Cole are both right outside the door, I spend an hour talking to Alex about anything and everything until my one-sided conversation starts to feel stupid. I sit for a moment, wondering if she can hear me and wishes she could respond, hoping that maybe she will wake up soon.



“Hey, I have that interview the day after tomorrow. Wish me luck. I feel like I’m losing them. I will mention I have a friend in a coma and maybe they will take pity and hire me.” I wait for a second, hoping she will open her eyes and point out my sad sense of humor, but she doesn’t, so I stand to leave.

Cole and Foster decide at that moment to walk back in, exchanging sympathetic glances at me. I’m not trying to hide my sadness, I can’t. It’s just on me and I can’t escape it. Foster walks past me and pats my shoulder as he does, taking his post at Alex’s side. Cole reaches out to me and I happily walk into his arms, letting them wrap around me. We all just stay quiet for a few minutes until Foster interrupts the silence.

“Hey, Mia, the nurse gave me a bag of Alex’s stuff, but I am just staying here, will you take it back to her place or yours. You know how she is with her phone.” He laughs. “She would kill us if it isn’t charged when she wakes up…” His voice drifts off at the end as he looks at her, brushing her hair from her forehead.

Walking around, I grab the plastic bag from him and tuck it under my arm.

“Yeah, I’ll take it back to our hotel and hook it up. Have you made any headway in finding Alex’s mom?”

“No, the woman is a ghost. It’s sad really because I thought Alex was always being dramatic when she said she was abandoned.” Foster shakes his head as if to rid himself of the disappointment.

“No, it was always crazy growing up. Her mom was always with the guy of the month, chasing a lifestyle, and Alex was on her own a lot, we spent most of our time together.”

“People don’t cherish the privilege of becoming a parent,” Cole interjects.

I just nod my head in agreement, because that really was the gist of Alex’s story. She was abandoned. I met her when I began going to public school. I remember begging my mom to let me go to a public high school the year before my freshman year. I was looking to escape the snobby ridiculous fauxcolites that attended my private school. Alex was the first person I met, we both thought P.E. was an extreme waste of our time, so we basically bonded over our laziness. It was perfect, from the day we met we were bonded for life. My mom was always welcoming to Alex hanging out, probably because she was happy I made a friend. Regardless, we took advantage of the allowance and spent many a night giggling in my room and dreaming up our perfect lives. Alex always knew she wanted to work in print. Which was perfect because she adored the fantasy that fashion provided and who doesn’t love the quizzes in those magazines? Plus, she was great at putting a spin on almost everything. That trait came in handy for the both of us in high school.

I laugh under my breath at the memories of our shared mischief and try to regain my focus, bringing me back into the conversation with Cole and Foster.

“Ready to head back, sweetheart? I have to drop by the office for a bit, I can drop you at the hotel. Give me Alex’s bag and I’ll have everything taken to the penthouse to be boxed up.” Kissing my forehead, he takes my things, literally removing the stress I feel.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” Frankly, I just wanted to crawl back into bed. I was feeling exhausted by my sadness.

I know there is so much to be grateful for, Alex is showing signs of improvement, but I think the weight of our reality is starting to take its toll. I just need to keep my focus and prepare for my interview in two days. I need to keep myself positive and pushing forward. For mine and Alex’s sake, she doesn’t need a friend wallowing and mourning her when she is getting better.

The next two days go by in a blur between hospital visits and making sure that I get my schedule back to normal. I have managed to pull myself into a pretty good rendering of a professional. Sitting in the lobby of the advertising firm, I remind myself to take deep breaths. I have been looking forward to this day before this week from hell. I was super stoked to have this piece of the puzzle fit in its place. I pull my phone out of my purse and check the messages, re-reading my last message from Cole.

Good luck baby, remember that if you don't want this, don't take it. I happen to know of a pretty amazing company that would hire you to run their public relations department... just sayin'.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For the millionth time, I open the text box to respond but close it without replying. I'm so torn. It would be amazing to work with Cole, after all, it is our company. Although, I don't really feel any kind of ownership over it. Cole worked his ass off to get where he is, and he has an empire to show for it. I want the same, without handout or favoritism.

I'm deep in thought when I hear, "Miss Parker?" I look up and quickly place my phone back into my purse.

"Yes," I answer as cheerily as I can and follow the sharply dressed suit into the office.

"Please have a seat," motioning to a chair in front of her desk. She reminds me of a school teacher from an 80's movie. Dark suit, hair in a tight bun, with an attitude just as closed off. *Fantastic*, I think to myself, this should go well. Clearing her throat, she begins flipping through some paperwork looking for something in particular, it seems.

“Ah yes, I guess my first question would be addressing why there seems to be a large gap in your work history. Would you like to explain the history?”

I guess we are diving right in. This lady isn't the kind to beat around the bush. *Hmmm, maybe I do like her.*

“Well, I had an accident and needed to recover.” The details and truth are way beyond this interview.

“I see. I trust you are healed and will not be looking for any additional time off?”

Fuck, she's the devil. I almost laugh out loud at her curtness, but manage to keep it together. I respond, “I am ready to get back to work, no additional time needed.”

“Great, let me give you some details regarding what we are looking for...” As she begins to speak, I start to realize that I am not being interviewed but hired. Holy hell, I know I'm new at this, but I figured any company would want to at least get a feel for me before hiring me. I'm stunned by the quickness, but then a nagging feeling starts to creep in and I wonder if Cole has made a call on my behalf. If he has, I will kill him. He knows how important it is for me to regain my life myself.

When the schoolmarm finishes, I smile sweetly saying, “I don't want to get ahead of myself, but am I being hired for the position?”

“Well, you were initially called in for an interview, but we received a very high recommendation from the higher-ups, so yes, you are being hired. Frankly, I am surprised that you didn't join the marketing department seeing as how much they backed you. Have you worked with Sam previously?”

“Sam? Forgive me, but I don't know who that is.”

“Sam Johnson is the head of the marketing department, it was because of that memo that you owe your new position. If it were me, I would send a thank you note. There were a lot of candidates for this position.”

“Yes, yes, I will definitely do that.” I barely remember anything else she says, because I am boiling. Cole is going to

get it when I get home. I'm sure my lovely husband is acquainted with Sam Johnson. Son of a bitch!

After getting all my paperwork together and agreeing my start date would be Monday morning, I walk out of my new building with a bittersweet feeling. On one hand, I'm excited to get going, but on the other, I feel robbed. I'm not sure if I could feel successful knowing that I didn't really do anything myself. Fuck, Cole. Ugh, why did he have to interfere? I pull out my phone to dial Cole.

"Hi, baby, how'd it go? Did they hire you on the spot, because they would be fools not to!"

*Seriously! Is he fucking mocking me?*

"Are you kidding right now? Cole, I know what you did. Don't be a dick."

"Whoa, what the hell are you talking about? The only thing I'm being is supportive, and you are beginning to make that difficult."

"I'm making it difficult? Me? I'll kill you, or maybe you can sleep over at Sam Johnson's house, since you two are besties," I snark.

"What the fuck are you talking about, Mia. Is this code supposed to make sense and who the fuck is Sam Johnson?"

"Wait... what? Why are you acting like you don't know what I'm talking about?" I ask calmer and frankly more confused.

"Are you on drugs, Mia. I DON'T know what the hell you are talking about," he yells. *Oh shit, now I've poked the bear for, what is apparently, no damn good reason.*

"Okay! Calm down and don't yell. I'm coming home, we can talk when I get there."

"I'm at the office, come here," he spits before ending the call.

Well, great! Clearly, Cole doesn't know who or what the hell I'm talking about and I have just started a fight with my husband for absolutely zero reason. This day is the best.

I let the driver know where to head even though I'm positive he knows where Cole's office is. I'm still trying to get used to having an entire security detail with me everywhere I go. I know Cole said it was just until we figure out Alex's attack, but a part of me wonders if this is just my new reality. As we pull up to Cole's offices, I stop and look at the top of the building, wondering if the king of this castle is about to lose his shit on me. I laugh to myself knowing that I have really stepped in it this time.

As I walk into the waiting area for his office, his assistant smiles at me and tilts her head toward the door letting me know to go on in. I push the door open and see him standing, looking out the window. He's dressed down in a pair of jeans and a crisp white collared shirt. This man is a sex god. Part of me wants to just go over and climb up his body, but when he turns around, the look on his face halts me.

"Hi," I smile as sweetly and contritely as I can.

"Would you care to explain why you have been hurling insults at me and being a 'dick' to me... not me to you, as you so sweetly called me, but you to me."

Aww shit, I'm in trouble.

"Okay, listen. They did, in fact, hire me on the spot. However, they were basically told to hire me by an upper-level executive and I assumed—"

"You assumed that I wouldn't actually care about your feelings and I would completely disregard your need for independence, because I am a control freak that treats you like my property?"

"I mean, when you put it that way, it makes me sound like a real asshole, so let's compromise and say, 'I assumed maybe you weren't taking me as seriously as I was hoping for.'" I smile at the end hoping he softens.

I see his smile crack through, "Don't do that anymore, don't assume I would ever treat anything you say to me with disregard. Plus, if I was going to interfere I would make sure you didn't get it... I'm actually a selfish asshole." He walks forward and grips my waist and pulls me to him.

“So, should we celebrate, I mean since this is bad news for you, but great for me?” I laugh.

Smiling down at me, he licks his lips, “Let’s celebrate naked in our bed for the whole night.”

“Oh, my favorite kind of celebration.”

Cole squeezes my ass and leans down, crushing me with a kiss that leaves me breathless.

“When are you done?” I ask between moving lips and roaming hands.

Pulling away, he looks at me like he’s in a haze, a trance that neither of us can break. Moving his hand slowly up my back, he pauses when he reaches the top of my dress and my insides start to ignite making the zipper sound like the actual crackle I feel internally. Never breaking eye contact, I can see just how much he wants me. I feel lightheaded, giddy even, knowing what’s coming next. I jump right out of my skin at the sound of Cole’s assistant’s voice interrupting us over the speaker.

“Fuck.” He groans as I cup my hands over my mouth to stifle my yelp and then my laughter. Walking around to his desk, he presses the button saying, “Thanks, tell the team to give me five minutes.”

“Sorry,” I grimace, still giggling.

“Come here,” smiling as he sits down in his chair. I walk over to him, struggling to zip up my dress. When I get to his chair, he turns me around and pulls me onto his lap, pulling the zipper back into place and adding a kiss on the nape of my neck.

“Okay, Mrs. Parker, you are all set. I want you naked and ready in two hours. I’m leaving early and I plan to bury myself in my gorgeous wife.”

Leaning back into him, I respond, “I like the sound of that. Good luck getting rid of that chub in the three minutes you have left.” I wiggle my ass against him as I start to stand. Gripping my hips, he pulls me back and grinds hard into my ass and I grip the desk in front of me letting out a small moan, “You are going to be late.”

“They can wait,” he barks back.

Fuck, I love when he’s all CEO caveman.

The speaker buzzes again with an interruption and I’m pretty sure that his assistant is wishing she never buzzed after Cole snaps at her.

“Be nice,” I chastise, standing and looking over my shoulder, only to catch him checking out my ass.

He smiles and winks at me, knowing he’s been caught.

“I can only be so gracious when it seems everyone is trying to cockblock me.”

I laugh at his ridiculousness and walk to the couch to grab my purse. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours. Naked and wanting,” I purr, blowing kisses to him.

“Let me walk you out. I have to go that way for my meeting.”

“Okay, but no funny business!” I joke.

Putting his hand on the small of my back, he leads me past his assistant’s desk and rounds the corner. I can feel all the eyes on us and I realize this is the first time I have been to his office since our time apart. Since he works from home on occasion, apart from Cole’s assistant, whom I’ve met, this is the first time I’ve been with the extended team. I nestle a little closer to him, uncaring at my display of affection. Cole leans down and kisses the top of my head, wrapping his arm tighter around my waist.

As we near the elevator bank, I see one of the security detail nod at Cole and hold the door open for me. I turn to Cole for a final kiss, but he pulls me back after my peck saying, “What was the name of the person who recommended you? Johnson? Sam?”

“Yes, Sam Johnson. Now that I think of it, maybe it was my folks. I was talking to my mom about it the other day and she said something about asking Richard if he knew anyone at the company, but I told her not to do that.”

“Let’s be real, your mother isn’t a rule follower,” he laughs.



“No truer words,” I agree, giving him another kiss and walk into the elevator. Cole stands still, raking his eyes over my body and licks his lips until the doors completely close.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



### Cole

“Foster, how’s Alex?”

“Same, but good, she had a response today, she squeezed my hand, all of two minutes ago. I was literally picking up the phone to call Mia when you called.”

“Holy hell! This is amazing, I will call Mia the minute we get off the phone,” I hesitate, not wanting to ruin the mood. God knows my friend could use some relief.

“What’s with the hesitating. Spit it out, Cole. I know you didn’t call randomly. Stop walking on eggshells. We are brothers. What’s going on?” Leave it to Foster to cut right through the BS.

“We have a... what I think is a problem. Mia interviewed today and was hired on the spot. I don’t doubt my wife is amazing and capable, but it was a highly sought out position and in a very competitive department. Every new and old graduate wants to work for Simmons Advertising and especially in that PR department. They have a great team. I have even tried recruiting some of them. The bizarre part is that an executive named Sam Johnson, sent a memo strongly encouraging hiring Mia. He heads marketing, that’s what is so bizarre. Something isn’t sitting right with me. Can we have the guys look into it and especially keep a close eye on my bride while she is in that building.”

“You don’t have to ask twice, I don’t like it either. Consider it handled.”

“Thanks, brother. Listen, I’m happy for you. It’s a small step in the right direction. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do and thanks. Don’t forget to call Mia, if you don’t tell her, she will kill you.”

I know he’s right!

“See ya.” I hang up and immediately call Mia.

Telling Mia was quite possibly one of the best parts of my day. I couldn’t make out anything she said as she screamed and began to cry, with the exception of the ‘Thank you and the I love you.’ We made plans to meet a little later so she could stop by the hospital and talk to Foster. Honestly, I had so much on my plate at work, that I was happy to oblige, and this would give me some time to make some calls regarding our new friend Sam.

I called Richard’s office and was patched right through to him.

“Cole, what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Hello Richard. This may seem odd, but I was hoping you could tell me about a man named Sam Johnson, works head of marketing at Simmons Advertising.”

He repeats the name over and over and I can tell he is trying to connect a memory to the name.

“Sorry, Parker, but I don’t know him, I can’t seem to place the name. Did he drop my name?”

“No, it’s nothing, It’s my mistake. I thought you were acquaintances. That’s all. Richard, I’m sorry, but I have a meeting. Thanks for the info.”

“Not a problem, have a good one.” With that we end our phone call. For the slightest of seconds, I consider calling Sam Johnson’s office and asking him what his motive is, but I know Mia would disapprove and it would put us back where I definitely do not want us to be. A little digging would be fine, her safety is my utmost priority and I won’t listen to anyone about the methods I choose to keep my love safe and sound.

God help this Sam guy if he has any worrisome plans for my wife. I'm not to be tested.

I pick up my landline and ask for our marketing department, the line rings twice before I hear my department answer, "Mr. Parker, hello, how can I help you?"

I'm sure it's nerve-wracking when your boss calls you unexpectedly. I'm sure my call adds to those nerves, one hundred percent.

"Well, I was hoping you could help me. I would like some background on another marketing head and I know we have worked alongside the marketing team at Simmons a few times with some projects. What can you tell me about Sam Johnson, you can speak freely? I'm not replacing you, Barnes."

I inadvertently hear his sigh of relief as he responds, "Well sir, from what I hear she is a great leader, capable and has an incredible work ethic. From personal experience, she was easy to work with, very collaborative. She always has fantastic ideas."

"Great, thanks, Barnes. Oh, and great insight on the tower project. I like the road we are taking on that."

"Thank you, sir", With that, I end my call. What the fuck. He is a she. Who is this lady? I text Foster what I know and I get a singular response.

Interesting

I respond:

Mia thinks it's weird too.

Something is off, I can feel it.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



# Mia

Cole and I stayed wrapped up in each other the entire weekend, the only time we came up for air was to visit Alex. I knew that he was having a hard time with the idea of sharing me with my new job, but I share him, so he will have to deal! Still, it broke my heart a little. He was so sweet about it on Monday morning after giving me two supersonic orgasms, he made me breakfast and drove me into my first day.

“All right, Dad, thanks for the lift,” the sarcasm rolling off my tongue, his smile makes me laugh as I get out of the car.

“Ha! Give Papa a kiss,” he waggles my eyebrows.

“Oh my God! You are disgusting,” I laugh, leaning across the seat and kissing his lips. “Are you picking me up as well?” As soon as I say it, I realize that I want him to.

“Of course, we have dinner plans and my agent is taking us to see a listing. We can’t stay at the hotel forever.”

I smile at him, because he always just knows what I need. I could never go back and feel safe again, although I loved our place.

My first day flies by, orientation is insane and learning the whereabouts of everything is a task in itself, but everyone is helpful and welcoming. My office is shared with three other junior PR members. Each of us had our own laptops, but we congregate around a huge white table that is the work area. There is a wired phone line in the middle of the table and whoever is closest answers and puts the phone on speaker, so we were always kept abreast of what’s happening. The energy is kinetic and I love it.

We are currently working on selling the idea of a luxury tower, in a neighborhood that is trying to resist gentrification. I have a lot of ideas for the other side, but not a bunch for our side. Since I’m lacking ideas for my first day, I choose to listen. Cole told me that he always appreciated the employees that really tried to listen and become collaborative rather than show

off and try to create a spectacle on their first day, so I figure my silence may be welcome.

By the end, I am exhausted. My day was long and my mind is reeling from all of the information, but I couldn't wait to run downstairs and tell Cole everything. As I walk out, one of the other junior associates named Jules, calls out to me.

"Hey, so how was your first day?"

"Amazing! I think I'm going to love it here!"

"Yay! Why don't you join us after work on Friday, a bunch of us get drinks at the bar across the way. You can get to know the team better."

"That sounds awesome. Thanks, Jules."

"And hey, everyone brings their boyfriends or husbands too. So, if you have one of those, feel free!" she smiles laughingly.

"Thanks, I will. See you tomorrow."

"Totally. Don't forget the department meeting in the a.m. too. They start cruelly on time, but they always have treats!"

"Thanks, see you tomorrow," I wave, heading for the elevators with a real spring in my step.

The elevator ride is excruciating, it feels like we stop at every single floor before we find the bottom. I almost push past everyone to get out quickly. I feel like I'm having withdrawals from Cole, absence has seriously made my heart grow fonder. When I push out the doors, I see Cole leaning against the car in his light grey suit, jacket open, his white shirt gleams behind his dark black tie. He looks like an ad for Christ sakes, every woman walking out of the building can't help but gawk, but it doesn't matter, I can't even feel jealous, because those shades are pointed right at me. Uncrossing his arms, he pushes off the car and closes the distance between us. He wraps one arm around my waist and picks me up, kissing me. I put both my palms on his face, enjoying the moment. Setting me down on the ground, he opens the door of the car, allowing me to brush past him and get in.

“How was your day, beautiful?” he smiles down as I pass by, making me feel a bit shy.

“Torture. Can we just be independently wealthy and stay home all day long together?” I giggle.

Leaning down, Cole gets close to my ear and whispers, “We are that wealthy and yes, we can if you choose.”

I know we have money, I’m not stupid, but sometimes I forget that he is as wealthy as he is and his company is not a small business that one day we hope to sell so we can retire. I also forget it’s half mine, honestly, I couldn’t care less. I like working and so does he, but I could use a weekend away since we keep getting interrupted by tragedy.

“Shut up, neither of us would last more than a minute if we had all day to do nothing.” I laugh, looking out of the window at the envious faces.

“Oh, I could think of plenty to occupy our days,” resting his hand on my thigh, his fingers squeeze into my skin.

Looking over at him, I wonder for a minute what it would be like to just be. He and I living a jet-set life with no ties anywhere. As quickly as the thought enters, I dismiss it, that isn’t who we are. I love my friends and family. I love having ties and responsibilities and mostly I love watching him be king of the castle. I wouldn’t trade our life for anything.

Cole takes me to the first listing and I hate it, but then again so does he, too modern and sterile feeling. Two more after that, equally hated, then we make a pit stop for hot dogs and push on to the last listing. Pulling down the tree-lined street of brownstones, I become super excited. Ever since I was little, I have wanted to live on a street like this. My family was more of a building with concierge, rather than a brownstone crew. I can’t even hide my excitement as we pull up in front of a gorgeous white façade with a large red door. I’m literally in heaven!

“My girl is happy?”

“Your girl is very happy,” I squeal, doing a little wiggle dance in my seat.

Cole laughs as his door opens and he walks around to open my door.

Not only is the house perfect, but it has outdoor space. Cole sits and talks details with the agent as I tour the house alone again, imagining all the things I will do to each room. Our home. I'm standing in the master bath admiring the enormity of the space when Cole walks in, running his hands down my shoulders.

“Congratulations Mrs. Parker.”

“What! They already accepted our offer?”

“Of course, I made them a solid offer. This time tomorrow, you can grab the keys.”

“Oh my god!” I yell, turning and jumping into his arms.

“How about we christen our new bathroom?” Cole taunts as he lifts me onto the counter.

“Mm, but wait. What about the agent? I'm not sure she would appreciate waiting for us downstairs.” I giggle as I put my hands on his chest, just to feel him up a bit.

“She's gone, we can lock it up when we leave. It's just us Mia, unless you don't want me to make you come right now?” Smirking as he already knows the answer to his question.

I crash my mouth into his, letting my body answer him. Cole runs his hands through my hair, gathering it up at my nape and pulls my head back making room for him to devour my neck. Everything in my body lights up like a damn Christmas tree, I couldn't tear myself from him if I wanted to. All he has to do is touch me and I lose all control over my own body. I can feel my panties are already soaked and all I want are his hands on me. I reach down, feeling like a crazed animal and pull his hand up my skirt.

“Do you want my fingers inside of that pretty little cunt, is that what you want? Do you want to ride my fingers until you can't take anymore?”

I lose all sense of myself when he speaks to me like this, dirty and raw. It's what I feel inside, dirty and raw, in the best

possible way. I want him everywhere, all over me, I can't get enough. I can feel my body writhing as he whispers dirty things in my ear.

"Fuck me, Cole, just fuck me. I need it, please."

Without hesitation, he pushes my dress up to my waist, spreads my legs open and pulls my lace panties aside, thrusting two fingers into me, creating friction on my clit and making it sting just enough.

"Oh fuck, yes!" I scream and arch back into the mirror.

"Look at me, Mia," he growls.

I try and lift my head, but my senses are on overload. Raising my head, I open my eyes to meet Cole's and his look pushes my insides to quicken. Gasping as my orgasm gets closer and closer, all I can see is Cole and that fucking look, the look of a man possessed by want and ownership. Want for my body and ownership of my soul. He fingers me harder and harder until I grip his shoulders and scream out my ecstasy, shuddering at the power of my orgasm. Cole drops down, sucking my tender nub into his mouth through the lace. He grips my ass pulling me forward to devour me. The sensation is overwhelming and conquering. I scream out as wave after wave hits me.

"That's it, baby, give it to me. Yes, Mia," Cole hums against my clit.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

This is how I will die, and I've never been so sated. As my breathing begins to slow, Cole gently kisses the inside of my thighs and grips my waist to help me down from the counter. I slide down his body and when we come eye to eye, he kisses me, letting me taste my own bliss. The kiss is slow and deliberate.



Setting my feet on the floor, he takes a step back, slowly undoing his belt, “Turn around, bend over, hands on the counter.” His voice is like velvet and the tension in his jaw alone is enough to make me want to drop to my knees.

I do exactly as he commands and I feel him come up behind me and rub the side of my ass as he slowly inches my dress up again. He pulls my dress around my waist and leaves me exposed as he gently pulls down my panties. Staying squatted on the floor, he runs his hands up my legs, kissing the backs of my thighs and placing his last kiss on my backside.

“Hold on tight, baby. I can’t be gentle.”

“Don’t be,” is all I can whisper out before he rams into me, forcing my hands to push against the mirror. Looking into the mirror, my voyeurism is met with matching intrigue as Cole watches me come undone. He thrusts harder and harder into me, as his face stretches into a wicked grin.

“You are so fucking sexy, Mia. Watching you need more, want more, is making my cock harder than I thought it could get.”

I spread my legs wider, wanting to be filled with all he has to give me. Cole grips my hips and I know I will have bruises on my hips tomorrow. Moving one hand up to my shoulder, he holds me in place as he pounds himself into me until I feel the tension building again.

“Oh fuck, Cole, I’m coming. Yes! Oh God!”

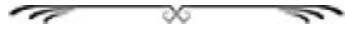
“Come with me,” he growls as he grinds his cock into me with enough pressure to make me scream out my orgasm.

“Cole! Yes!”

Cole growls in response, hunching over my back and gripping my body with intensity as he releases his hot seed inside of me.

We stay frozen in the moment until he interrupts our leveled breath with, “Well, sweetheart, I think we christened the fuck out of this bathroom.” I laugh, only to jump from the smack landed on my ass. “Sorry, I can’t resist,” he winks.

We clean up and walk back downstairs, lost in each other and in our joint happiness over our new home. I feel like I'm living in a dream and just like that, the fear comes creeping back. Where the hell is that other shoe, because I know it's bound to drop any minute.



When my alarm beeps in the morning, I reach to hit snooze, but Cole nuzzles my neck, nipping at my earlobe.

“Come on, sleeping beauty, didn't you say you had a meeting this morning? It may not be the right time to start saying ‘screw off’ to whole department meetings.” I feel him smiling against my cheek.

“Ha, aren't you funny. Fuck me, I don't want to get up!” I pretend to cry hoping to gain sympathy.

Before I know it, Cole straddles my body, holding my arms above my head. “Your wish is my command!”

“Quit!” I giggle and try to wriggle free without success. “Seriously, I have to get ready as you so sweetly pointed out.”

Letting go of my hands, Cole leans down and kisses my lips and looks at me with the cutest pouty face ever.

“Oh my God, you are not trying to make me feel bad now! You can put those puppy dog eyes and that lip away, it's not working.” Leaning in, he starts kissing my cheeks and my neck. “Ugh! Cole, I'm not falling for this. Ahh, yes, right there. I mean, what the hell? Goddammit, I QUIT! Fuck ‘em!”

Cole bursts out laughing and rolls off of me, setting me free. “Go, woman, before I change my mind.”

Once I'm dressed and ready to head out, I peek out the bedroom door and see Cole sitting in the living room, barefoot and shirtless, reading the paper. I'm going to need a full tank of resolve to combat this damn man. I walk out, grabbing my bag and a banana, calling out a goodbye as I rush toward the door to make my great escape.

“AMELIA PARKER.” Cole's voice booms through our hotel room stopping me in my tracks.

“Aw shit,” I’m caught, turning and wrinkling my nose like a little kid in trouble.

“I expect a kiss goodbye,” he booms, keeping his eyes on the paper.

“No funny business, Parker, I’m serious. I want to make a good impression. If I don’t, I’ll be forced to sleep my way to the top!” I yell out with melodramatic flare as I near the back of the couch. As soon as I say it, Cole grabs me and pulls me over the couch onto his lap. I scream out with laughter as he pins me into his arms.

“If you are going to sleep your way to the top, just switch companies first.” He smirks, going along with my joke. Dazzling me with his smile, he leans forward kissing the tip of my nose.

“I love you,” I smile sweetly.

“I love you back,” he whispers before annihilating my lipstick.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Walking into the building with a spring in my step, I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face from this morning. I wave hello to Jules and grab my laptop off my desk as she approaches.

“Hey you, ready for snacks?”

I laugh. “Funny, but I think we should maybe focus on the meeting more than the muffins? You know just to pretend we like to work.”

Jules makes a face of horror when I say the last part and we both laugh, walking toward the conference room. I like Jules, but she makes me miss Alex. I realize making work friends is important, but I can’t help but feel guilty.

Shaking off my feelings of guilt, I try to refocus, “So, what should I expect at these meetings? It’s just our department?”

“It’s ads, us and the heads of the other departments. It’s mostly us taking notes on how to promote their stupid ideas, I mean, some of the marketing ideas are just insane!”

I smile and just nod my head, secretly I’m super excited like a kid for the first day of school. As we walk through the doors, I look around at the growing number of people filling up the room and Jules points to our seats.

I’m pulling out my seat when I hear, “Sam, nice to see you! I heard you were out for a while, I hope everything is okay.”

Immediately, my eyes scan the room to find Sam Johnson, then I hear *her* respond and realize Cole and Foster are correct. I feel even more confused now, how the hell does this lady know me? Old teacher maybe? I think I would remember Sam, though. She is tall, very blonde and her looks are striking, angular and powerful, but she still manages beauty. I realize I’m staring at her when her eyes meet mine, questioning my look. That is until she leans over to someone whispering in her ear and then smirks in my direction. My gaze drifts toward the whisperer and my heart stops and for every reason, I am mad. Really fucking mad.

“Hello stranger.” Jack casually strolls over to me.

Of all the people, here’s my fucking shoe. It has been dropped.

“Hello Jack, fancy seeing you here.” Sarcasm fills my voice like a hurricane.

“Oh, come on Mia, be nice. We are work colleagues after all. I also think the fact that I singlehandedly got you your job would go further to you being politer.”

I open and close my laptop, unable to say what I want to say. I keep trying to think of a “better way” to phrase my answer, but all of my responses seem to end in “go fuck yourself.” Ugh, this day sucks.

I’m relieved when the meeting begins and Jack turns to join Sam at the opposite end of the table. The next hour is the hardest hour of my life, trying to maintain focus when all I

want is to get up, walk straight to HR and quit. I cannot believe I owe this job to Jack. Jack, the biggest asshole in the world. Why would he do this? I swear I think it's his way of keeping me under his thumb. What a psycho! Cole is going to lose his mind. My attention is brought back to the present as Jules hands me a muffin.

“Treats!” Her excitement apparent.

Looking around for Jack, I see him standing with Sam off to the side by the door. This is not happening, dammit. I stand and decide to just face the firing (or hiring) squad. I feel so awkward walking over and for a split-second wonder what they would do if I just keep walking through the door, but instead I stop when I see them staring at me, anticipating my conversation.

“I believe I owe you a thank you.” I smile at Sam hoping to open the conversation in a friendly but professional manner. “I’m very grateful and surprised to have been recommended for my position.” Not expanding, I look between her and Jack.

“Well, really it was Jack that insisted I hire you. He said you were a star student. I trust his word implicitly. We are a partnership and I am a very loyal partner.” She smiles sweetly, but puts a lot of emphasis on that last sentence. Weirdo, but I get her meaning. It’s obvious that something is going on between them.

“Great,” I’m not sure where to go with that. “Well, thank you again, and of course to you as well, Jack.” The last part came out like a hairball. I know he has ulterior motives. Such a dick. Who gets their ex hired just so they can either plot revenge or even worse, try and get her back. I hate both options.

All I can think of is how Cole is going to react. I swear he will burn this place to the ground. Great, just my luck that I find an amazing job, and I have a stalker ex. Ugh!

Just when I’m at my office door, Jack comes hurriedly around the corner. “Mia, hey, wait up!”

I deliberately pretend not to hear him and close the glass door to the office, hoping he will break his nose. Not the most

mature way to handle the situation, but I gave up caring an hour ago. Hearing the skidding from his shoes brings a smile to my face as I sit at my side of the desk.

“Mia, c’mon, was that really necessary? I would think that you would be better behaved since you’re still a new employee. You haven’t really made enough of a mark to start acting like a spoiled brat.”

I knew he was in there somewhere, the Jack I’ve come acquainted with.

“Welcome back. I was beginning to think you may have actually started to believe the bullshit coming out of your mouth.” I shuffle some paperwork around to look disinterested in his presence.

“You know what, I just came to say let’s bury the hatchet. Honestly, I was hoping that this could have been an olive branch. Jesus, you act like I am out to get you or something. You realize I am only guilty of recommending you for this fucking job! I remembered when we had our thing, you saying something about working for this firm and when I was hired on and after everything what happened... look I’m the one who got their ass beat down and humiliated. For fuck’s sake, Mia, I was just trying to do a karmic good, sue me. Better yet, enjoy your position and you don’t have to even worry about me.” With that, Jack turns and pushes out of the door and walks away.

I stand, feeling embarrassed. Had I just made a monumental error? I mean, did I really think he was stalking me or that I am so amazing, he was unable to move on? Oh my God, I’m so ridiculous. Fuck.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Making it through the rest of my day is torture. I can't stop thinking about my run-in with Jack.

I'm jarred from my daydream torture by Jules. "Ahem, earth to Mia."

My cheeks heat and I look at her apologetically. "Sorry Jules, what's that? I was thinking of something and must've spaced." *Oh my God, I can't even take my own stupidity right now. Get it together, Mia!*

"No worries, is everything okay? You've seemed distracted today. Boyfriend?"

"No, God no. I mean, it's just that I ran into someone that I didn't expect to see and it's thrown me for a loop. Seriously, I'm just spacey because I didn't eat my snacks at the meeting this morning." I laugh at the end, hoping to sell my story but it's clear to me Jules sees more than I would like her to see.

"Oh, yeah. I was wondering why you and Jack seemed so tense. I mean, most of the girls think he is strange, but we all know not to look his way or Sam will bite."

"Wait, hold up... they're actually a thing?"

"Yeah, for a while now." Looking around, she leans in as if what she is going to say is top secret. "Everyone used to say that Sam was different, like into some serious fetish kind of stuff, but I guess that's not true, because Jack does not look that interesting."

"Really? Hmm, very interesting."

"Yeah, but Laura on the fifth floor said that she saw them bumping uglies in Sam's office once and Jack was doing some really strange stuff. She never said what, but she seemed pretty tripped out."

"Well, to each his own. Who cares what people do as long as it's not on my desk," I laugh to myself.

I'm glad she is so forthcoming with information, but I couldn't care less about his sex life. Really, her story just cements how off base I am about his motives and manages to re-ignite my humiliation.

I glance at my watch and realize I've finally made it to the end of the day. I straighten my workstation and say my goodbyes for the day. As I walk outside, my eyes scan the curb for my car, knowing Cole will be inside waiting for me. I almost have to force myself to walk because my instinct is to run directly into his arms and hide away. I'm stopped in my tracks when the driver exits and opens my door for me.

"Where is Mr. Parker?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Parker, he is still at the office, he asked me to swing by and pick him up after picking you up."

"Oh, that's fine, sounds great," my voice gives away my relief.

Sitting in the car in late afternoon traffic isn't ideal, but knowing who I'm going to see in the next forty-five minutes is worth it. I sit, reading and responding to some emails, but my thoughts keep drifting back to my misstep today. I open my phone and scroll through, stopping first at Alex. I need her awake and giving me advice on how to handle this situation. God, I really miss her bad advice. Damn her. I keep scrolling and find Jack's number, hitting the message icon, I start to type:

Hey, well this is awkward. I don't hate you and I don't want us to be strangers. Let's get coffee sometime, I'd love to start over...

NO, hell no! If he even knew me for a minute he would know that isn't anything I would actually say, so I try a more honest approach:

Hi Jack, sorry for the confusion earlier. Let's just let this be water under the bridge. I appreciate what you did for me but let's face it, friendship is not in our future... Cole would bury you.

Maybe not so honest, okay I need to mesh the two together:

Hi Jack, I apologize for the misunderstanding. Thanks again for the recommendation. I hope we can have a professional and friendly working relationship.

I re-read it twice before hitting send, right as we pull up to Cole's building.



I decide to give him the same preview I had the other day and I get out and lean against the car, jutting my leg out just enough so the split in my pencil skirt opens enough to highlight my leg. Keeping my sunglasses on, I pretend to look at my phone. I know it's flirty and teasing and exactly what I want him to feel when he walks out. I see out of the corner of my eye the moment he notices me and I casually turn my head in his direction, pretending to be unaffected. Cole slows to a stop as he exits the doors and loosens his tie before he stalks toward me. The determination to rip my clothes from my body is so evident that I almost run out of instinct. Instead, I stand my ground and smile as he walks right into me, arms wrapping around my body and mouths crashing into each other without a care for who is watching.

Pulling away breathless, I smile, "Well, hello to you too."

"Get in the car," is all he growls, leveling his eyes at me, never breaking contact.

"I thought we could walk a bit? No?"

"Get in the fucking car before I rip that skirt off of you, right here in front of everyone." I squeal as he squeezes my ass and climbs into the back of the town car.

He settles in next to me, leaning over, giving me long, slow savoring kiss as he rolls up the privacy window between the front and back of the car.

"In a hurry?" I ask, shaking my head at him.

"Yes! Yes, I am. I've been waiting all day to ravage my wife and now I have you alone in that fucking skirt and I just want to rip it off." He groans as he grabs the hem of my pencil skirt.

I swat his hands away, rolling my eyes, "Well, my lovable sex-fueled god will have to wait. We are heading to see Alex and then we have to grab dinner. I mean the list goes on and on. I don't think we have time for sex and I certainly need my clothes on my body."

"Are you turning me down... for sex?" His face is incredulous.

"I guess, I am," I divert my eyes before he can tell I am joking.

“Huh, I mean... I’ve never actually had this happen, let alone with my wife. I’m not sure how to feel right now.” He laughs and blows out air. “I don’t like it. Your body is mine and I want to feel it underneath me.” He pouts with puppy dog eyes.

“I mean, I guess you can beg. That’s if you’re really desperate,” I purr.

“I see, my girl thinks she’s funny. She thinks she can bring me to my knees, but what she doesn’t know is that it’s her, on her knees, that I would beg for.”

Unable to hold back my smile, I turn my head and see the mischievous gleam in his eyes and before I can help myself I give him exactly what he wants... without the begging.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pulling up outside of the hospital, I’m feeling a bit powerful and very appreciated by my husband. We exit together and he takes my hand, swinging our arms slightly as we make our way to the elevator bank.

“You’re the very best wife,” he smiles down at me.

“Wow! I must give the best blow jobs ever. I may pass out from all this appreciation.”

“I appreciate everything you do. I just *really* appreciate your blow jobs.”

I laugh and elbow his side, but I know he doesn’t even feel it. As the elevator doors open, Foster nearly plows us down, causing Cole to jerk me out of the way of a frantic Foster holding his phone to his ear and yelling obscenities into it.

“Whoa, Foster, what the fuck are you doing?” Cole booms.

“What is going on?”

“Oh shit, sorry, sorry... I don’t, I can’t... it’s Alex, come with me,” he stammers out.

It’s at that moment I see the tear-stained cheeks and my heart sinks. Everything is running in slow motion, all I hear is a faint buzzing of noise. I feel like I’m having an out of body experience. I am pushed into the elevator and see Foster and Cole speaking animatedly, but all I hear is silence. I know I must be consciously shutting out the world, because I cannot hear the words. Alex is dead. Alex is dead, and I don’t ever want to know that reality. Closing my eyes, I feel Cole tugging at my arm, but I dig my heels into the ground, locking me into the elevator. I look between their faces and see Foster looking confused and Cole looking concerned. Cole steps back into the elevator and gently pries my hand from the railing, forcing me forward.

Leaning down to my ear, I can feel his breath and then I hear, “She’s awake, baby, you haven’t lost her.”

I suck in air as if I’ve been underwater and take off in a full sprint with Foster and Cole right behind me, busting through the doors, I see Alex. Alex. My beautiful, lovely, crazy best friend, alive and well, eating Jell-O. Freaking Jell-O! A hysterical burst of laughter pops out of my mouth followed by another and another until the tears start falling.

“Why does everyone keep having that reaction?” Alex looks to the nurse, who just smiles and continues to check her over.

“Hi,”

“Hi back.” She smiles tenderly. “Does someone want to clue me in on what the hell happened to me? I can’t get anything but tears from these two dummies,” she points at Foster and me. “But maybe you can help me, Parker!”

“Of course, beautiful,” he winks at her and squeezing my hand and moving over to her bedside. “It’s nice to have you back, Alex.”

“It’s nice to be back, Parker.” She smiles, setting her Jell-O aside and smoothing down her blanket “Now, where exactly am I back from?”

“What’s the last thing you remember, darling?” Foster interjects and walks toward her as Cole stands again to rejoin me at the foot of her bed.

Alex lets out a tiny giggle and looks around, clearly reacting to the endearment Foster has used.

“Focus, Alex, we can talk about *this*, later,” motioning between them to accentuate the point. She side-eyes me and I cannot hide my smile. I want to know what she remembers, but I am bubbling over with happiness that she is alive and well.

“Alex,” I grin. “Seriously, do you remember what happened to you?”

“I remember being in your house and I remember looking through the yearbooks and then it gets hazy. I feel like maybe someone called or I don’t know, I just remember needing my phone. After that it’s fuzzy and now I’m here with a shit headache,” she groans as Foster rests his arm around Alex’s back, causing her to jump a little. She looks over at me and mouths “what the fuck?”

I shake my head trying to keep a serious face. God, I missed her. She is always irreverent, even in the face of her own crisis.

Speaking directly to Foster, Cole interjects, “I think we need to grab hold of Alex’s phone records and see about who called —”

“There was nothing unusual, nobody called other than Mia and me,” Foster counters.

“We have your phone at the penthouse! Maybe you were writing a text or something. I didn’t even think about it earlier!” I add.

“Wait, hold up... how are you looking at my phone records? What the hell, Fos—” Is all Alex gets out before she is stopped in her tracks by a very intimate and sweet kiss from Foster.

Cole and I turn and look at each other, smiling. I hide my face into his shoulder feeling a little embarrassed to be witnessing such a moment between them. Clearing his throat, Cole tries to

remind them of our presence, but they don't stop. Cole tugs at my shoulders leading me out the door before we witness something we shouldn't, and telling by the kiss, we may be outside the doors awhile.

"Don't be so dramatic, you two! Let's get back to it," Alex calls out just as we make to walk out the doors.

Cole and I rejoin the two lovebirds and I cannot hide how much my heart warms knowing that Foster loves my friend so much.

"So, here's the deal, Alex," Foster begins. "You were at Cole and Mia's when someone broke in and attacked you. You were beaten and the headache is because your head was split open from some serious blunt force. If I hadn't found you when I did, you wouldn't be here, baby."

Alex's eyes grow big and she squeezes Foster's hand at the same time I wipe a tear from my face. I still cannot believe we almost lost her.

"Wow, okay. So, I made it through the second robbery of my life. I need to buy a lotto ticket, I am the luckiest bitch on the planet." She laughs out, wiping her tear-filled eyes. I feel Cole smile against the top of my head, where I've been tucked while listening.

"Be serious for a minute, is there anything during your day that happened that could help us figure out who would want to hurt you?" Foster questions while adjusting her pillows.

"No, not unless Leslie is pissed that I ate her yogurt. I mean, if it's not labeled, it is first come first serve." Alex laughs. "The only creeper moment I had was with Jack. Seeing him was super strange and he was definitely a ten on the serial killer scale."

"Hold up! You saw Jack the morning of the attack?" I question, pulling away from Cole to give him a pointed look. Then pointing my finger at Foster, I add, "And you kept that information from us... or just me? Did both of you know about this?" My voice is raised by the end of my monologue and I'm sure they both know I am super angry.

Cole and Foster just stare at each other, doing that thing I hate.

“Quit! Speak right now. Foster, if you want me to keep you around for longer than three seconds, you better know I am not the kind of girl that will be kept in the dark. It’s all or nothing, baby!” Alex huffs out.

Cole raises his eyebrows to Foster and Foster gives back a look that can only be described as the silent equivalent of “bullshit.”

“Parker!” I yell.

“Yes, my love?”

“Seriously?”

“I thought it was in your best interest to be kept in the dark. I didn’t want you to interfere, because I believed you may not want me to look into the idea of Jack having a connection to all of this. I realize you may think it is out of jealousy, but it was a gut instinct.”

I stand staring at him and a horrible sense of guilt washes over me. He’s right, that is exactly what I would have thought. What if Jack is crazy and trying to hurt me. I would play right into his hands with my constant second-guessing and worry.

“Okay, you aren’t wrong, but I still don’t like it and Alex doesn’t either. This is happening to all of us, we need to keep each other in the loop.”

“I second that,” Alex nods at Foster.

“Deal,” he agrees, taking her hand and kissing the back of it.

“Well, now that all of that is out of the way, let’s get down to business,” Cole interjects and gives me a reassuring smile.

We stay with Alex for another hour discussing different possibilities for her attack when she starts to get tired. Before leaving, tears spring to my eyes again, giving her more reason to make fun of me. I have to be acutely aware of how hard I am squeezing as to not hurt her, but I can’t help giving her the longest hug in history.

“I love you, too.”

Leaving the hospital, I am so relieved and happy that I want to shout from the rooftops, but I doubt people would appreciate my celebration since it's late at night. My stomach growls, reminding me that Cole and I haven't eaten. He must hear it too, because he says, "Looks like my girl needs a burger" with a smile.

"That sounds perfect, just like you and this day!" I throw my arms around his neck and let him lift me into a kiss.

I crawl into the back of the car and toss my purse next to me. Cole scoots into the adjacent seat and tells the driver to take us to the closest burger joint. Reaching down, he picks up my purse to remove the space it is creating between us when it dings again.

"This thing is becoming quite the nuisance, it's been going off all evening," Cole complains as he reaches in to hand my phone to me.

"Sorry, I know. It must be my new work friend, Jules. I'm sure she wants to talk to me about some more treats at work," I laugh, rolling my eyes at the thought. "I can't imagine why anyone else from work would be messaging me."

Then it hits me that the only person I messaged was Jack. I don't even know where to begin if Cole finds out, he will be livid and I can only imagine what his reaction will be now that I know the backstory. I dive my hand into my purse hoping to grab my phone before Cole gets to it, but he pulls it out before I do, his eyes frozen to the phone.

"Something you'd like to share with me," he asks coolly, leaning back into the seat, his jaw tensed, and his eyes narrowed in on the screen of my phone.

Breaking his eyes away he looks directly at me, placing the phone into my hand. I look down and see five missed calls and at least a dozen messages from Jack. Oh fuck.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



“Listen to me before you freak out and turn into an unreasonable beast,” I ask, putting my phone down on the seat.

“I’m all ears,” his tone is challenging and it’s clear to me that he is set out for a fight. Lord help me.

“Okay, Jack works for Sam Johnson... he was the reason I was hired for this position. When we were ‘friends,’ I mentioned how much I wanted to work for this particular company and he remembered. Trust me, I went off today and really gave him the ‘what for’ but honestly Cole, this was his olive branch. We don’t really even work together and he is seeing his boss... like ‘seeing’ her. You can’t freak out. You can’t, because this has been a great day. I know you are suspicious of him, but that’s totally based on your gut, not fact. I don’t want to base my entire work life around a ‘might be.’ We are about to eat burgers and go sleep in our new place. Don’t ruin my wonderful amazing day with your bad attitude, Cole Parker!” I end with a huff that makes me sound like a child, but I don’t care as long as he doesn’t freak out.

Cole sits for a moment, and I can tell he is taking in everything I just said. Reaching his arm across the back of the seat, he lazily draws circles on my shoulder with his finger.

“Mia, I had hoped that my wife would have been more forthcoming with her day. I don’t like being kept in the dark much like you complained about earlier. That being said, I already know about Sam Johnson, the weird part is Jack never showed on any of the files. Your security detail told me you had an argument with a male co-worker, but I was hoping you were going to tell me about it sooner. I know you don’t see it, but that guy is bad news, Amelia, and I’m done talking to you about this when you refuse to listen.”

Opening his door, he exits the car leaving me feeling lectured and childish and really pissed off. Forget him, I don’t need to call him about anything. I’m a grown woman and if I handled it, well then, it’s handled. How about that?



My internal monologue is interrupted when he hops back in with two brown paper bags. Handing one to me, he cocks his head as if to ask me to speak. I stare into those gorgeous blues and open my mouth to put his silly ass in his place, but something unexpected pops out, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel like I was keeping a secret. I honestly was trying to wrap my brain around it and had every intention of spilling everything to you when we were having dinner. The whole Alex thing kind of put a wrench in my plans. Knowing what I know now, about Jack, I agree he is a creeper, but how could he attack Alex, especially since the doormen know he isn’t allowed in? You made that happen the day you kicked his butt and drug him to the elevators!”

“I get that my suspicions have holes but, Mia, I really wish you had talked to me before starting a line of communication between the two of you. I don’t trust that guy. I don’t think it was coincidental that Alex ran into Jack the same day she was attacked. I don’t know how he attacked her, but I will find proof. I want you to quit your job. Don’t give me that look. I know exactly what I am asking from you. I know it’s high handed and unfair and a bit patronizing, but that’s not the place I am coming from. I need you safe and I need you to be far away from that psycho.”

“Hold up, wait. The day she was attacked, what does the security video show?”

“Baby, trust me, Foster and I have been all over the footage. It’s clean, but on that day the service camera was broken. That’s how I think he got in. I can’t even consider you going back, Mia! I won’t even be able to focus, you are the most precious person to me and I literally almost lost you to one monster. This time, I can stop it. Please, let me protect you.”

I look into his eyes and see the all the horrors flashing through them that are flashing through mine. I know he needs me to be safe and a large part of me just wants to let him care for me, but my mind keeps interrupting that feeling.

“I want you to care for me too, but to what extent? My life has to be my own, Cole. I can’t be locked in a tower like some kind of city Rapunzel,” I counter, taking a bite of my burger.

“Obviously Mia, I’m not trying to turn you into a kept woman. All I’m saying is quit the job where the possible sociopath works. Is that so unreasonable?”

“Yes! Yes, it is when I have a whole security detail that is on me every day. I promise not to be alone with him and I promise not to keep you in the dark, but I’m not hiding away,” I emphasize, shaking my head.

“You are the most pigheaded person,” he grunts, tossing the bag from his lap.

“Oh, don’t take it out on the food, big baby,” I laugh, handing him back his bag and watching him open it and start eating, begrudgingly.

“This feels too easy, Parker,” my disbelief obvious as I raise my eyebrows.

“Well, Mrs. Parker, we are at an impasse, so it seems it’s every man for themselves. You won’t listen to reason, so I will just have to try another method.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“I guess we will find out, won’t we?”

“If you interfere with my career, I will be beyond pissed off, Cole.”

“If you interfere with your own safety, then I am left with no other alternative but to handle it myself. I love you and I will take on even the likes of you if it means I’m protecting you. I’m starting to think I need to protect you from yourself, too!”

“What exactly does that mean, Cole?” I ask through gritted teeth.

“None of your goddamn business, my love.”

“So help me God... I will not pu—” Before I can finish, I am lifted and placed into his lap, our mouths becoming a tangle. Pulling away, I look into his eyes and see desperation.

“Are you going to try and fuck some sense into me?” I ask with a smile.

“If it were only that easy,” he winks, “To answer your question, no, but I’m going to ask you to check those messages, because if he is as crazy as I think, he may prove my point.”

Looking down at my phone, a feeling in my gut tells me he is probably right. Shit, I can’t even begin to think about leaving my position, but if he is a psycho what are my choices. He did leave a lot of messages and voicemails. *Here we go...*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Shifting back into my own seat, I slide my finger across the screen to open my phone and take a last look at Cole. Seeing him eyeing me, the tension radiating off his body. Despite myself, I put the phone down.

“Cole, this is ridiculous.”

“How can you say that, Mia? Why do you act like I’m being some kind of controlling caveman? You know me better than that, I love you. You are my every reason for everything and I have to protect you, even from your own stubborn pride.” He runs his fingers through his hair frustrated, leaning his head back, blowing out air.

I scoot closer to him and remove his hands from his head, making sure I look directly into his eyes for what I’m about to say. I want him to see how sincere I am being.

“Cole, that’s why I said, this was ridiculous. I trust you and you would never ask me to do something on a whim. You are not impulsive or controlling. I love you and if I need to leave that place for my safety, well then, we better get home so I can give my notice. I’m sorry for even waiting a beat. I feel like my senses are dulled. I’m so focused on getting through all of this insanity that I think I may be living in a bit of denial. I really just wanted this to be the happy ever after part. I like the

job, but I really like feeling normal and boring, even if it was for ten seconds. I know you understand, thank you for being in my corner while I spun my wheels! I love you.”

Cole picks up my hands and kisses the palms. “Thank you,” is all he whispers and pulls me into his side, wrapping his arms around me.

We stayed like that, silent and cuddled until we pull up to our new home.

“Let’s go, baby.”

As I exit the car, the exhaustion from the day catches up and my feet feel like lead. Cole takes one look at me, sensing my exhaustion, dips down and swoops me up, kissing my neck as he does.

“Come on, princess.” The twinkle in his eye is too adorable to resist.

I laugh, just happy not to have to walk the steps up to our new home. Squeezing him extra tight, I whisper sweet little, dirty nothings in his ear. His growl and nip at my ear tells me he likes what he hears.

“Baby, stand up for a minute, I need to open the door.” Cole rights me before letting go to open the door of our new home. He walks through the door and turns on the lights and that’s when I notice his face is beaming.

“What have you done? You have that look. You only get that look when you are about to surprise me with something insane. I don’t even want to walk in the house!” I say, letting out a laugh. Grabbing me, he tugs me through the door and I squeal.

“Look!” he spreads his arms, motioning to the completely furnished rooms.

“Oh! My goodness! Cole! You had all our stuff brought home, here... to our home! Are you serious?”

I stand stunned at the incredibly amazing and sweet gesture. I was dreading having to move, I honestly just wanted to walk in and be settled and he just made my dreams come true.

“Are you mad? I know you may have wanted to decorate it yourself, but you still can. I will dutifully move any couch you want. I just wanted to see you comfortable.”

Smacking a kiss on his lips, I look directly into his eyes and say, “Race you to the bedroom.”

We take off up the stairs, forgetting our fatigue and stumble through the door. I’m beyond giddy and I don’t even take time to look around the room. Instead, I am hurled onto the bed by my husband. I scream out, laughing loudly as he jumps on top of me, covering me with kisses. We kiss and caress and make love before he gets up out of bed and heads out of the room bare-assed.

“I’m headed for water, would my girl like some as well?”

*God, I fucking love it when he calls me his girl.*

“Yes, I’m in need of some serious hydration.”

With a wink, he walks out of our room and I can hear him pad down the stairs. I stretch out my limbs and relish in this moment.

Alex is alive, Cole and I are happy and living in our new home, any suspicions about his involvement in Carter’s murder seemed to be losing ground and Foster is in love with my best friend. My life is insane. Perfect, really. Instinctively, I look around for that other shoe to drop again. Getting out of bed, I see my bag on the floor and my phone is lit up. I walk over and rummage through to grab it and see three missed calls from an unknown number. Oh man, I hope these aren’t from Jack because if they are, Cole is going to close the whole building down. I don’t hear Cole coming, so I decide to take a peek at the messages Jack left. Swiping my phone open, I can feel my heart start to beat quicker. I think I’m more nervous that they will be something so terrible that I will have to show Cole. I start reading the first one.

Hey thanks, I appreciate the olive branch. Maybe we can catch lunch sometime?

Then the next.

Or not, whatever. I thought this was a friendly but apparently, we are more of a one and done kind of relationship. Ha ha... no worries, I'm sure your boyfriend wouldn't appreciate us having lunch anyhow.

I shake my head seeing where this is going and scroll down to the bottom message.

I should have known you were still such a cock-tease. After all these years, all this time and you still haven't figured out that turning your back on the wrong person will never work in your favor.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Holy shit! I don't even know what to do. Staring at the phone, my mind is wandering, bouncing off a thousand fears. My mind scrambles to make sense of everything as I re-read the last message.

All these years? I haven't known him for years, what is he talking about? Cole was right though, he is psycho and something isn't adding up. All I can think to do is find Cole. I turn to run out of the room as Cole walks in chugging a water bottle.

"Whoa, baby, what's up?" He steadies my shoulders as I hold out the phone to him. Taking the phone from me, he walks over to the chair and throws on his sweatpants.

"Look. It's... I don't even know. Oh my God, Cole, you couldn't have been any more right! I'm totally skeeved out, but the part that has me freaked the most... look, he writes 'years,' Cole. I haven't known him for years!"

He keeps one hand on my shoulder pulling me close to his chest as he reads the messages. We stand in silence as he reads and strokes my back. Setting my phone down, he reaches into his pocket, pulling out his phone and hitting dial.

“Foster, we need to talk, I think we are more on target than we thought. It’s Jack... all of it. It’s him. I know it! Come to the penthouse. I will meet you there. We need Alex to try and remember. I left her belongings at the penthouse, we can start by checking out her phone. Call your friend and share the new information I’m sending you now. I sent you a text with messages to Mia’s phone from him. See you in twenty.”

I look up to Cole for an explanation, because I’m seriously reeling right about now. I know we all think Jack is sketchy, but this is too much and I’m not sure how to process all of this information. If I’m being really honest, I’m more afraid that Jack will finish what Carter started and the thought is leaving me paralyzed.

“Don’t.” Cole’s voice pushes past my daze and pulls me back into the present.

“Huh?” Shaking my head, trying to shake off my thoughts.

“Don’t,” he repeats, keeping his eyes trained on mine.

“Don’t what?” I respond with barely a whisper.

“Don’t start thinking about what could happen, because the only thing that will happen is the end of this nightmare. You are safe, Mia. No one will ever lay a hand on you or I will end them. Do you understand?” To accentuate his point, he grabs both my shoulders and gives them a reassuring squeeze.

All I can do is nod. My entire body wants to believe him, but at this very moment, I’m not even in my right mind. I can feel the other shoe dropping. I feel that horrible gut feeling that tells me things will not end well.

Realizing Cole has let me go, I reach out to him as he turns to walk away.

“Where are we going?”

“We?”

“Yes, we! You are not leaving me alone, even with the Calvary outside.”

“The penthouse and I know you don’t want to be there. Mia, it’s not a good place for you to be. I just need to grab the

phone for Foster. I know I'm grasping at straws, but I can't ignore my gut!"

Panic. That's all I feel. Sheer fucking panic.

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Driving up to our old home, I can feel my palms sweating and my heart racing. I don't want to see the place where my best friend was so brutally attacked, I'm not sure I can. This is all too close for comfort and I am doing everything I can to maintain a sense of calm on the outside.

"I'm right here, Mia. It's okay to freak out, but you don't need to walk in the house, stay here with security. I'll be right back. Foster is already here."

Squeezing his hand, I nod. He is right, one hundred percent, but I don't even know what I would even be able to piece together and for some reason, I can't seem to shake the fear that we are in imminent danger. I look around as we walk through the garage to a waiting Foster and Alex. *Wait, Alex! Why is she here? How is she here?*

She looks tired. I realize I've said that out loud when Cole responds, "She's strong, she'll be fine. She didn't really give Foster a choice whether or not to bring her." He shakes his phone in the air to indicate Foster just text him.

Walking up, I motion to Alex shrugging my shoulders. "What are you doing out of the hospital? I thought you had to stay for observation?"

"Nah, I wasn't going to be left out of this Scooby mission. I checked myself out and made Foster bring me. I'm hoping maybe I can have flashbacks like the way you had them. I would really like to know who the hell busted my head open!" She levels intensity on the last part of the sentence. "Plus, this is like a real-life *Mission Impossible*, we should have coordinated our outfits," Alex adds as the elevator doors close.

"For fuck's sake, Alex, I told you to be serious," Foster grumbles.

Cole laughs, shaking his head and I just smile.



“Be quiet, or I will tell them all the mushy romantic shit you said to me tonight,” she warns Foster.

He doesn't look at her, instead just stares ahead with a crooked grin on his face.

I'm momentarily lost in their moment when the elevator rings, making me jump. Cole looks down at me, holding my gaze and my hand back as the others exit the elevator. Holding the door open, he looks out and then back at me.

“Mia, speak. No nodding, are you good, baby?”

“Yes, but let's just get this over with. I don't know how Alex can come back here. I'm so creeped out!” I shiver and let him lead me out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Walking into the house freezes me on the inside. Not at all like uncontrollable panic, but a stillness that is full of dread. I can feel it, that same feeling I had when Carter had me by the throat. I knew I was going to die, to be torn away from Cole. It must be what people feel before the end. I feel like I'm having an out of body experience. I look down at my hand joined with Cole's and I can feel the heat from our hands. I just keep concentrating on our hands. *Everything will be okay, everything will be okay.*

Foster is walking Alex through her possible steps as Cole and I head for the back office to collect Alex's phone.

“Do you know what box it's in?” I ask Cole.

“No, honestly, I just know it's in here. They aren't sealed, so we just have to open the tops.”

We go through at least thirty boxes before I open and spot the familiar hospital bag.

“Got it!” I yell victoriously.

“Thank God, I was starting to worry that we were going to be here all night! Come on, baby, let’s get out of here.” Cole extends a hand for me to take and we exit back to the front room where Alex and Foster are still talking through her attack.

“No, Fos... I just remember getting a call or something. Oh good, Mia, here, hand it to me and I will open it.” Alex puts her finger on the button and her phone unlocks.

“Look at the call log, maybe I missed something,” Foster urges.

“Nope, I only have your texts, Foster, see,” she holds the phone up to him, but what her phone shows is that she was writing him a text with a picture attached. Foster clicks the photo and it enlarges.

“What is this, Alex? It’s a picture of you and Mia at a Halloween party? Do you remember why you were sending this to me?” Foster looks confused, passing the phone to me.

“Oh yeah, this was the Halloween party at the Sigma Chi house; fun, but not really my cup of tea. I think we left right after this picture was taken,” I stare, looking at the picture more intently.

The room starts to change, blur and then I see it. Jack is standing in the shadows next to Carter. Just like Jack was sitting in the corner watching from the shadows while Carter held me down on the floor. Like a shot, everything focuses in on the present and I collapse to the floor.

“Mia!” Alex screams as I’m caught in Cole’s arms. He carries me to the couch and I can barely make out what everyone is fussing over.

“Get her a glass of water,” Cole barks out. “Dammit, I knew better. I shouldn’t have brought her here.”

“Cole, stop! You had no way of knowing how this would affect her. Frankly, I don’t think she would have let you leave her behind,” Alex states with a nodding Foster behind her.

“Mia, baby, drink this,” Cole pleads, extending a water bottle to my lips.

I take a small sip and steel myself for what I’m ready to tell them.

“Listen, because I’m not sure I have it in me to repeat myself. He was there, Cole. Jack was in the room when Carter attacked me. He was participating. I must have blocked it out. Look! It’s him in the picture. He knew Carter and I would bet that Jack is the cousin! I feel sick, I need to...” Motioning to the bathroom, I stand. Cole helps me to my feet and Alex comes and takes my hand walking me to the restroom.

I walk into a room I used to love and all I can do is cry, not out of sadness, but anger. My life has been destroyed by an “almost.” I almost died, I almost had my sex ripped from me. I almost became a victim... *well, maybe not almost*. I sure as hell feel like I’ve been victimized, and I sure as hell feel like a piece of me died in that room. Looking up at Alex, I can see that same anger on her face. The same uncontrollable rage that bubbles right under the surface.

“Fuck Jack,” I answer to her matter of fact, my nausea subsiding.

“I couldn’t agree more. All I remember is being here and seeing our yearbooks and scrapbooks on the table. I must have looked at them, but it’s all a blank. Thank God I took that picture. Maybe we can give it to the cops and with everything else they can round him up.” I can see the hope in her eyes. She perches on the counter and I sit on the edge of the tub, we sit in silence.

“I’m sorry I asked you to look at the books! I’m so sorry, Alex, I feel responsible for all of this.” My guilt washes over me as I reach my hand out to hold hers.

“I was happy you did it! Mia, if this hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t know how devious and crazy Jack is... HOLY SHIT! Do you think he killed Carter? Maybe he was trying to frame Cole! Hear me out. If he was in on your attack by Carter, that means he has been obsessed with you for years, way before Cole came along! It makes total sense, he weaseled his way

into your life and tried to fuck with your head. Jesus Mia, he's been in the background forever!!”

My nausea is back.

“Alex, I don't even know how to process this. I can see him clear as day, coaxing and instructing Carter. Like a puppet master! That sick fuck was going to sit and watch me be destroyed mentally and physically, the sickness is beyond me! I need to tell the cops, he won't get away with this! That poor woman he is dating has no idea what he is capable of!” My body shivers at the thought. I need to warn Sam.

“Do you think he had anything to do with the girl that died in our old building?” Alex wraps her arms tightly around herself. “He mentioned it all creepy-like when I saw him on the street. It really freaked me out.”

“Wait a minute, what girl died in whose building?”

Thinking back, I remember seeing a news report about a girl found a couple of months after going missing.

“Remember the girl like two floors down, redhead, super quiet, book type? She was killed, strangled and wrapped up. Mia, it was awful, they didn't find her for almost a month after!”

“You mean the girl that Jack fucking started hooking up with? That's the whole mess that made me go for a run before getting attacked! I saw him leaving her apartment, Alex! Oh my God, he didn't, I mean... he was in our home, around us. I kissed him, Alex!!”

“Mia! Holy shit, he fucking murdered her. I don't even doubt it!” She stands, making her way to the bathroom door and I know exactly what we need to do. The time for crying is over, it's time to put an end to this guy. Jack is a horrible person and needs to be locked up forever.

“Go! We need to tell Cole and Foster!” I bark out as I run out the door.

As I run into the main room, Alex runs into my back and I hear her gasp as she takes in the scene before us.

Jack is standing with a gun to Foster's temple and Cole has a hunting knife at his throat being held by the one and only Sam Johnson. So much for warning her about Jack. Both men are standing in the expansive space in front of the living room about ten feet apart. Jack's smug look is all I need to know this was planned. We all unknowingly walked right into their trap. I reach into my pocket for my phone, wanting to alert security, only to realize I left it on the bathroom counter! Damn!

"Now it's a party!" Jack bellows.

"Mia!" Cole barks. "Run, get the fuck out of here!" His words are cut off by the knife snugging up against his throat. My stomach drops. I keep looking back and forth between him and Foster. It's the definition of rock and hard place. Cole can take Samantha without a problem, but Foster could be shot. My mind is racing through a million options and is tormented by the sounds of Alex beginning to cry behind me.

"Shut the fuck up, Parker. Not such a tough guy now, are you?" Looking to me Jack sneers, "You aren't going anywhere, or I'll shoot Foster and then put a bullet in your husband."

His eyes are dead and the way he looks at me makes me physically ill. I feel Alex grip my arm and I reach back to show her I'm with her.

"What the fuck do you want Jack, if that's even your name? Why are you doing this to all of us? I'm the only one you want, let everyone go and just take me. Isn't that what you want, to hurt me?" I try and keep my voice calm and measured while I go through a thousand alternatives in my head. This is why I felt the calm earlier. I need to feel the dread, because I need motive. Tonight, this ends and I realize that it's not just Jack's life I will take to protect those I love.

Jack laughs and shakes his head. "I want you to feel the pain I felt. I want your life to be meaningless. All those years, I waited for you to open your eyes, to see what was in front of you and you treated me like nothing. Like I didn't matter, you and your whore friend. Carter was my ticket to making you pay attention, everyone always loved my stupid jock cousin.

He was perfect; good looks, and he didn't understand the concept of the word 'NO.' But not you, you never gave him the time of day, because you think you're better than everyone! Now we'll know what it's like to be a pariah. Nobody will ever touch or look at you the same way again, Mia. Not after I gut everyone you love and turn you into a monster."

Foster struggles against the stronghold of the gun, but Jack pushes the gun to Foster's temple. "No, no big guy... cool your jets. Your girlfriend and her friends are whores and if you try anything, I'll make you watch while I prove it."

"I am going to make you choke on that gun. Mark my words," Cole threatens from across the room, catching Jack's attention.

"Ah, the hero, my plan was going to work until you showed up. I had to work on riling up my dumb ass cousin. He was always in need of women, consent being optional. I had Mia in his sights, he could ruin her and I would sweep up and kiss all the wounds. It was perfect and then she met you. You stole my chance the first time, but I finally had her away from you and I arranged to be her prince again, but those stupid mother fuckers botched the job and just robbed her in the alley." I can see Cole's eyes close and the haze of rage start over her features. I stand horrified at the knowledge of Jack setting up this elaborate plan to insinuate himself into my life but even more so that it almost worked.

"You can't think that I would have ever loved you?" My voice is laced with the disgust I feel for this animal.

Jack shakes his head, "Love me? Why not me, you bitch?"

"You are a monster! You tried to have Carter rape me, you hired people to attack me, how can anyone love you?" My anger boils over making my voice a scream.

Jack begins shoving the gun into Foster's temple, "I saved you from Carter! He's six feet under because of me, ME! And I'm going to put your prince charming there too, but not before I take each person away from you, one by one", a grotesque sneer takes over his face.

“You will never touch her. I promise you that”, fury is projected toward Jack as he turns his attention to Cole.

“You ruined my life and then you both sat back in your palace and ruined my business. You left me with nothing! This is why you deserve to pay. You all deserve to pay!” he screams at Cole.

Jack continues yelling his justifications at everyone for his crimes, but my head is silent as I take in the scene. Foster being held at gunpoint has not dropped his eyes from Alex. I don't even have to look behind to know she is looking at him too. These are their final moments. Scanning over to Cole, I see his chest is heaving, anger rippling off of him in waves. He is capable of murder tonight and I don't know that he won't risk his friend's life to save mine. In fact, I'm pretty confident he will and hate himself for it later. Then there's Sam. I can see the fade of what looks like a bruise around her eye, she seems unnerved like she is feeding off Jack's energy. *Is Jack making her do this? I need to appeal to her, let her know we can help her.*

“You don't have to do this, Sam. You can walk away, I understand how hard this is for you, but we can help you. You don't have to let him manipulate you,” I plead.

She tips her head back and laughs. “You think I'm being manipulated? Such a naïve little girl. I love Jack and if he wants you, then I will hold you down if I have to.”

Stunned, I step back into Alex. I can't believe this is happening. I shake my head back and forth trying to understand what she just implied, but Cole's voice pulls my attention back to the present.

“This must be hard for you, Sam, having the man you love carrying a torch for another woman. It's not every day a man finds a woman so willing to be the second choice,” Cole raises his eyebrows.

Sam pushes the knife closer to Cole's throat and I see a bead of red perk up. “Shut up! He loves me! He promised he would kill her when he's done with her!” she spits out.

“Kill her? That won’t happen. Get real, Sam. He orchestrated all of this just to *get* her. You seem to be the naïve one,” Cole presses.

I can see what he is doing, playing them off each other, hoping to trip someone, looking for an opening. Jack is already pulling the gun away from Foster, pointing it at Cole while he yells at him to stay quiet.

He has them and it’s a matter of time before someone explodes.

“I mean, what the fuck are you doing to your girlfriend, Jack? You come here for revenge for being rejected and being a shitty business owner? I usually remember when I take over a company, but yours doesn’t even ring a bell,” Cole smirks, keeping eye contact with Jack.

“Keep talking and I will gut your precious Mia while you watch!” Jack yells and I can see that he’s there, at that place where you jump down the rabbit hole. Jack gives an imperceptible nod to Sam and I see her draw back the knife at Cole’s throat.

That’s when I do it. I run straight at Jack and straight at the barrel of his gun. Alex lets out a blood-curdling scream and I hear the gun go off, seeing it fly from Jack’s hand from being knocked by Foster. Cole grabs Sam by the arm and throws her to the floor as Alex rushes to grab the gun. My body collides with Jack and I feel my hands around his throat. Squeezing. Squeezing. Squeezing. I don’t know where I get all my strength from, but he is fighting me and I feel superhuman until I hear Cole’s voice.

“Let go, Mia. It’s okay, we are all okay, let go, baby. Don’t do this. You are not a monster. Let go.” His voice is soft and soothing, and I feel my grip loosen and the color starts to pour back into Jack’s face as he sputters and coughs back to life.

Pulling me away, Cole holds me as Foster calls for the police.

“On the way,” Foster reassures, as we all collectively breathe easier.



I survey the room realizing what almost happened. There's that word. I *almost* killed Jack. I *almost* became a murderer. I *almost* feel guilty.

Foster trains the gun on the pair of degenerates that have plagued my life for too long, and we find ourselves in silence as we wait for the police to arrive and the tension shifts.

“Did you think you would get away with this? Did you think nobody would ever find out your connection to Carter?” I ask to Jack, hoping to understand his thought process.

“People believe what they want to believe. You believed I was Jack, not John Williams. Sam believes I love her. Keira believed I was a harmless TA and then believed I loved her until the love I gave her was too much and made her cry all the time. I couldn't risk her telling someone. So, she had to go away.”

I hear Alex gasp and I cover my mouth to hide the nausea that takes over my body.

“Oh my God, that was the girl downstairs. You really are a sick fuck,” I scream at him as Cole pulls me away and I catch the glimmer of the knife in my eye as it comes down on Foster's foot. He yells in pain and Alex goes for Sam, literally knocking her to the ground unleashing punch after punch. Jack lunges for the now loose gun as Foster and Cole both throw shoulders into him to stop him from getting the gun. I scramble across the floor, reaching for the gun and spinning around on my back pointing it back at the group. Ferocious rage is all I see coming from Jack's eyes, he is dead inside and all his rage is directed at Cole as they tumble and fight on the ground. They crash into everything, breaking the coffee table, eliciting screams for Cole to stop. I realize they aren't fighting, Cole is literally throwing Jack around like a ragdoll. Jack doesn't have a chance. Cole is going to kill him.

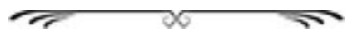
“Cole!” I scream, and he stops, heaving in breaths like he's never breathed. I can't help but look down at Jack's bloodied body and wonder if he'll make it. Cole turns to walk toward me, motioning for me to lower the gun. As I do, Jack lunges at

Cole with a shard of wood from the coffee table and all I hear is the silence.

Looking around, I wonder why everyone is so silent and then I see the red start to spread through Jack's shirt. I've shot him. Dead in the center of his chest.

Whizzing turns into a rumble and slowly I begin to hear the sounds surrounding me, "Put the gun down," is yelled behind me as Cole shields my body with his. I drop the gun only to feel the cold sting of metal placed around my wrists.

*I'm under arrest for the murder of John Williams.*



'What the fuck is happening with my wife?' is all I could hear being yelled at the man sitting at the front desk, as I walk out of the room I spent hours in being interrogated. By the end, everyone in the room came to the same conclusion. I acted in self-defense. I was also assured that any questions about my husband's involvement in Carter's death were moot. He was no longer a suspect, as they believed Jack was the responsible party.

"Cole, I'm here, stop. I'm alright," I comfort as I grab his arm.

Pulling me into his arms, he hugs me fiercely and presses kisses into the side of my head. The lawyers escort us out and exchange some directions, but all in all, I feel shell-shocked. I took a life from a man who had been intent on hurting everyone I loved. His fixation has cost more than one life, but now it was over. I wasn't really sure how to feel looking up at Cole's face. It was as if he heard my thoughts because he looks down and pushes a stray hair behind my ear.

"Let's get out of here, baby, and never look back. It's just you and me. No demons, no more looking over our shoulders. It's just me loving you until you tell me to stop."

"I'll never say that."

Cradling my head, Cole kisses me gently on the lips, parting only when the car pulls up.

"In you go," Cole steps back as he opens the door.

As he closes the door, I look out the window at the precinct wondering if I will ever get past these last few months. As he slides in next to me, he grabs my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm.

“Home,” he speaks authoritatively, then turns and leans into me whispering, “Don’t look back, baby, that’s the past. We’ve had our future on hold for too long.”

He doesn’t need to say it twice, I will never be the same. He will never be the same, but Cole would always be mine and I would forever be meant to be his.

## EPILOGUE



One Year Later

“Cole! You cannot be serious. I am not going to be at the hospital for three months. I already have a bag packed by the bed.”

“Baby, I just want to make sure you’re comfortable. I want to take care of my lady,” he laughs.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph! I cannot with you, please just call Alex and tell her and Foster to get to the hospital. You need a friend and I need one sane individual to be there for the birth of our child!” I giggle, shaking my head.

Standing in the doorway, I take a moment to let this all sink in. I am delivering our son today. He is coming into a world where his father worships his mother and his parents will protect and love him fiercely. A year makes one helluva difference, but the biggest difference is I haven’t been waiting for my life to start. I’ve been living and loving.

After life settled from the attacks, Foster and Alex became love recluses. They seem to be making up for lost time and it

seems to me that they are getting closer to sealing the deal. Life is amazing with this man, who every day, finds ways to smother me with love. I reluctantly started working at my husband's company. He made an excellent point. If we are building an empire for our little man, then we need to do that together. Sometimes, it all feels surreal, but what I do know is that I'm so ready to keep enjoying this chapter of life.

"You ready to get this show on the road?" Cole smiles that grin that makes me weak.

"Are you?" I toss back with a wink.

"I've never been so ready for anything in my life, baby. All I want is forever. Is that too much to ask?" Closing in on me, he wraps his arms around me and kisses me senseless.

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Thirteen hours later Hayes Thomas Parker came into our world at 9lbs 3oz.

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You're welcome Hayes for your spot in the book..mommy loves you the best.

JK I love Georgia the best.... nah, probably Charlie.

Thanks for picking me to be your mama.

## OTHER BOOKS

### *Come Back to Me*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Trilina is an author, wife and mama to three rowdy kiddos. She resides in California with her family enjoying the sun and outdoors. When she isn't making grilled cheese sandwiches she can be found writing saucy novels that titillate and excite her readers.

Trilina always had a love for writing and she is excited that she can share her stories with you!

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