

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is on the left, wearing a light-colored shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a pink sequined dress. They are surrounded by a field of vibrant flowers, including red and orange blooms, and palm trees in the background. The overall atmosphere is warm and intimate.

*It Started
with
a Kiss*

New York Times Bestselling Author

S.L. SCOTT

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IT STARTED WITH A KISS

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PROLOGUE

Marlow Marché

“MARSHHH—”

“Marché,” I say, emphasizing the ending. I’m used to people butchering my last name. What I’m not used to is a stranger standing in my high-security building on my floor, much less at my front door without being buzzed in by the doorman prior to arrival.

I thought Jackson would be picking me up for the party. With a slouchy misbuttoned gray shirt and jeans that sag, this guy is definitely not Jackson St. James.

When he remains standing there staring at me, I eye the large envelope in his hands, trying to scan it for clues to his presence. “I’m Marlow Marché.”

He hands me the package, and seeing my name on the front has me reaching forward. As soon as I take it, he says, “You’ve been served.” Tipping his hat, he chuckles. “Have a great day.”

“What?” My voice shakes, matching my hands as the words sink in. “What do you mean I’ve been served? For what?”

Shrugging, he punches the button to call the elevator, and then ignores me.

I hold the envelope out from me like it's an infestation in my home and then tilt my head to the side to read the return address. *The bank?* I thought I had more time to find a solution. My stomach drops because I know this can't be good.

After the bank rejected the deposit I offered in good faith to secure more time to come up with the down payment, I didn't realize they weren't willing to negotiate. *Is that what this is?* My time is up.

I feel sick.

"Financial institutions don't care about feelings." The last words my dad said to me after cutting me off financially ring through my head. I glance down at the package that feels as cold as the knife he stabbed into my back.

"Yeah, no kidding."

Who fakes the purchase of their daughter's apartment?

Apparently, my dad.

The months of unpacking his deceit while packing my bags and belongings has been a task I never thought I'd bear.

And the bills?

Who knew things were so damn expensive?

Apparently, not me.

Now I do.

How am I supposed to clean up this mess on my own?

Returning inside my apartment, I close the door with my foot and then lock the bolt, sliding the tips of my fingers against the smooth steel. Still holding the package away from me, I walk into the kitchen and drop it on the counter next to my crystal-encrusted clutch. *Did the bank really have to serve me on New Year's Eve?*

Stepping back, I stare at it as if I can magically make it disappear, but I know that time has been running out for months, and I've had no such luck. Deep down, I admittedly hoped things would turn around like they always do—in my

favor, that is. But I'm thinking I'm supposed to learn a lesson. I just wish it wasn't at the expense of my apartment.

No. *I can't let this get to me.* Not tonight, anyway.

I grab my lipstick—a bold red—that makes me feel more like the Marlow I know I am—*Confident. Strong. Determined*—and then use the mirror inside my bag to apply it.

“You can do this, Marlow,” I say before touching up the bow at the top of my lip. “I'll show everyone that I can stand on my own two feet.” *Somehow.*

I slide the lipstick into my clutch and turn to leave. But my gaze sweeps across the delivery lying on my countertop like a bomb ready to detonate.

My stomach twists in forewarning. *Dammit.* I'll be distracted all night if I don't at least have a peek at the contents.

My heart beats heavy in my chest, my throat constricting as I set my clutch back down. The envelope scratches against my palm as I rip it open and pull the sides apart.

Eviction Notice.

Despite knowing this was coming, the weight of the announcement crushes me. I blink back the tears forming in my eyes. As an art director, I can't afford this apartment without help from my dad. I look around the space, my home, and know that Bob Marché can't afford it any longer either since he filed for bankruptcy.

Another knock is heard. *Jackson.*

I swipe my clutch from the counter, leaving the documents behind and hoping to forget about them for the night as I head to answer the door.

What am I going to do? Where will I go?

There's no time to answer questions. Hell, there have been months to prepare, and I still haven't come up with a solution. I was hoping for a miracle that didn't come through.

A third knock raps against the door, this time louder. I can deal with this mess tomorrow since this might be the last time I get to celebrate. Whatever it takes, I'm determined to enjoy tonight.

When I swing open the door, I'm hit with a gorgeous smile and clean-shaven face that shows off the strength of the jawline. Jackson's dressed in what looks like a tailored Tom Ford black suit, and the light in the hall shines in his blue eyes. I swear they twinkle for me when he winks. He looks so handsome that I momentarily forget that we're nothing more than friends with the occasional benefits.

Jackson's always been a bit of trouble, but trouble might be just the thing I need tonight.

Giving me the same smirk that got me into bed this past summer, he asks, "Are you ready for me?"

Jackson St. James

IF MARLOW MARCHÉ knows how to do one thing, it's torture me.

Sexy ass.

Tight dress.

Killer curves on full display.

Her gaze locks with mine from across the room. Our arrangement has been a highlight of the past four months.

Who knew that these added benefits with one of my closest friends would end up being the best sex of my life?

Or that sneaking around with her would be more fun than publicly parading any other woman in this city?

We've agreed it's been fun to act like there's nothing to see here, to pretend that I don't know what it feels like to be buried deep inside her heat, or like she hasn't made me privy to the fact that she likes to be bent over and taken from behind. We've fucked every way imaginable, yet with midnight fast approaching, I can't stop thinking about kissing her tonight.

I realize now that I would have been content staying home on New Year's, celebrating with her at my place or hers. Low-key. Order in. Have some drinks. Kick back and then have sex.

She's been doing a fine fucking job of torturing me since the moment she opened the door. But now, from across the room—locking eyes with me as another man vies for her attention—it's another level. Tired of the distance, I weave my way through the party, heading straight for her. Eyeing the curve of her exposed lower back where it meets the top of her ass, I lower my gaze to the short red dress highlighting her great legs and then back up. The graceful line of her neck is on display under a loose twist of her hair, drawing my attention to that spot I tease with my tongue near her ear that drives her wild.

It's warm in here, so I tug on my collar.

Slowing when I pass from behind, I lean in close and whisper, "I'll be on the balcony if you're looking for someone to kiss, Marché."

Turning back, I catch her gaze dip to get a good look at my backside before those bright blues reach mine. "And why would I be looking for someone to kiss, St. James?" She takes a sip of her champagne, acting prim when I know how she shreds my clothes when we're alone. Those buttons don't stand a chance against her desire to see me naked.

I don't either, but I never did when it came to Marlow.

We may have been *just friends* all these years, but I always gave in to her whims. And more recently, to her sexual desires. Not without a little, *or a lot*, of teasing as a lead-in. But we both benefit from the deal we made.

I tap my watch and wink. "Ten minutes."

She grins before some jackoff dressed in a tux dares to fucking touch her bare shoulder to get her attention. There's more than one reason she's watching me, so the fucker needs to take the hint and move along.

Of course, he doesn't hear my internal tirade. I'm a gentleman, after all, and this is a party. My fists clench, but I keep walking, not looking to end this year in a fight or start the next one in jail.

She removes his hand from her body just before her eyes meet mine again and the slightest of grins graces her lips. She enjoys making me jealous, but it's become more agonizing every day.

The woman may have been pampered her whole life, but I've learned firsthand that the last thing Marlow wants stepping into the mix is a man. She doesn't let anybody into her life that easily, which has been one of the hurdles we've faced. So I know she can handle that situation without my assistance.

I've become a student, intent on learning everything about what makes her tick. I've spent our time together studying how the puzzle pieces of our lives might fit together. Or if it's an impossibility.

I read her body language like a book, digging deeper into each of her expressions, the sounds of her pleasure, and most of her glances.

The way her eyes lock on mine, telling me she wants me without saying a word.

Her annoyance, seen in the roll of her eyes when I talk sports with the guys.

The impatience that embodies her tapping foot when she's bored and ready to go to the next place.

Those are the simple ways she expresses herself.

It's the soft lines on the outside corners of her eyes that make my chest tighten. I know the genuine smile that caused them is from something I said or the joy she feels. The gentle way she touches my leg when a meal with our friends has her feeling connected to me, even if short-lived. Even when she treats what we do as casual sex, I see through her.

Marlow Marché has started treating me in ways that allow wonder to creep in—*what if we tried for more?* I'm not opposed to this idea anymore, not like I used to be. In fact, with her, I'm beginning to like it.

A lot.

Little mysteries embody the parts of her left to discover, and I can't wait to unravel every one of them.

“Jackson?” *Fuck*. “There you are,” Mr. Morgenstern starts. He's a former client from when I was an advisor for Christiansen Wealth Management. We made a lot of money together. He also hosts one of the best parties in Manhattan. Not only did I score an invite but my five friends were also included. I wouldn't have come if they weren't, but I thought I'd actually get to spend time with them. I haven't. Not so far.

I've been paraded around the place as Morgenstern's golden ticket. But I need a break from the stale financial conversations I've been stuck in for the past two hours, looking for free advice.

“Do you have time to meet with a friend in the library? He's in need of some good advice,” he asks.

I start backing through the crowd. “It's almost midnight, and I promised my friends—”

He checks his watch. “*Ah*. Yes. Go. I need to find my wife. She'll kill me if I don't kiss her.”

I escape, leaving him there mumbling about Argentina 1986. Sounds like that was the only time he'd made the mistake of not kissing his wife at the stroke of midnight.

Tugging at the sleeve of my dress shirt, I straighten the cuff as I trek through the party toward the large balcony. Large being the distinguishing factor from the other three this apartment has.

When I push through the door, the gang is almost back together. As best friends since college, we always kick off the new year together. Rad, Tealey, Cade, Cammie, and me. We're only missing Marlow. I'm hoping she'll be here in time, but we didn't set anything in stone. We never do.

A wink.

A nod.

A subtle insinuation.

That's usually enough for the other to get the hint to move behind closed doors. Even when subtle, she knows the signals without me making a production. I don't have to chase her down just like she doesn't do that to me, but when I look back, she's not coming. *Yet.*

Should I sneak back in to help her free herself from the crowd, or should I disappear to avoid being stood up? *Maybe.*

Whatever I decide, I need to figure it out fast. That or be stuck with couples kissing all around me while I stand alone at midnight twiddling my thumbs. Or staring at me, like they are now, which makes me think it's too late to make a break for it. "Hey," I say.

"Hey," Rad replies, moving his arm from his fiancée Tealey's waist to her shoulder.

The few inches separating Cade and Cammie is the most distance I've seen between the newlyweds since they got married a few months ago. Then she resettles against his side as if she couldn't take it, and says, "Hi."

I get a sympathetic grin from Tealey, but Rad and Cade exchange a guilty glance like they were busted speaking of the devil. The devil being me—the last of the trio to still be single. I ask, "What?"

"Nothing," they practically all reply in unison, and then start busying themselves by quickly turning back to face the city. *They were definitely talking about me.* I can't say I like that kind of limelight, but I can't stop them from gossiping. It's what friends do. We don't say anything hurtful, but we're all embedded in each other's business and have been since the six of us became friends at NYU.

It feels a little different tonight, matching my mood. I can't tell if I'm feeling lonely or left out. I scratch the back of my neck to ease the discomfort before I close the door behind me and step into the line of fire. "Just fucking say it." I walk to the corner and lean against the railing to face them. The balcony is big for New York City, even for this large apartment on the Upper East Side. But I'm still within glaring distance of them.

Tealey steps around Rad as if she needs to protect him. “We were just talking about how beautiful Marlow looks this evening.”

I narrow my eyes, searching for the lie, but Tealey hates lies more than anything, so I know I can trust her. I lighten up and turn to face the cityscape. “She does,” I say indifferently, though I feel the opposite inside. *Marlow looks fucking stunning. Irresistible.*

I kept myself from checking to see if the fucker returned to touch or talk to her once I left. We’re not a couple. She’s not mine to claim in any way, so why am I having a change of heart these days?

Tealey leans on the ledge next to me, keeping her eyes on the avenue below. “It’s almost midnight.”

I’m onto her. Grinning, I glance over. “It is.” I can’t make anything happen with Marlow, though, if Marlow doesn’t want it. Since the moment our friends found out we were, let’s just say ... benefitting each other, they’ve tried their best to give us space. But on the rare occasion, like tonight, the hope in Tealey’s eyes gives her inner thoughts away.

I say, “Let’s cut to the chase. I don’t know if she’s coming, and although we came here together, we’re clearly *not* together.”

Tealey sighs. “So nothing’s changed with that?”

“No. We’re complicated, to say the least.”

“I know, but I know as well as you do that sometimes Marlow needs a little nudge in the right direction.”

“Me, being that direction?”

She smiles as a giggle escapes. “There could be worse things to wish for than two of my best friends being in a relationship.”

I look over her shoulder at the others again. “I know it’d put a nice bow on the group dynamic, but it might not work out that way. I don’t want to upset you—”

“You won’t upset me if it doesn’t work out. Ultimately, we all want what’s best for both of you. I just think ...” She pauses and looks out at the city. The reprieve from her gaze gives me a second to take my own deep breath. “Tonight would be a great time to try, if there ever was one.”

I smile and bump into her. She’s like a little sister to me, and her heart is always in the right place, even if she’s off base when it comes to mine and Marlow’s love life. I say, “The invite is out there. All she has to do is meet me on this balcony.”

Tealey looks up at me while the others discuss options for after the party and then bumps right back into me. “Are you going to leave this to chance, Jackson?” Grinning ear to ear, she backs up into Rad’s arms again. “You have four minutes to make it happen.”

I dip my head, laughing. “Way to be subtle.”

Cade chuckles. “Subtlety isn’t your style.”

Shaking my head, I don’t know if I should be offended that they’re all so desperate for me to hook up with Marlow or flattered that they care so much about my happiness. “You don’t have to worry about me. I’m a big boy. I’ll be okay. Promise.” Checking my watch, I look back up to see four sets of eyes still on me. I throw my arms out and join in the fun at my own expense. “Three minutes.”

Cammie turns and wraps her arms around Cade. “Whatever you’re doing at midnight is what you’ll have in abundance the rest of the year.”

He whispers something in her ear that makes her giggle and blush. Rad embraces Tealey like she’ll slip away if he doesn’t hold tight. When her arms go around his neck, I’m privy to the exchanged love they share in their eyes. That’s when I realize I want that.

I want that comfort, that ease, that ... I can’t believe I’m even saying this.

Predictability.

Accountability.

Responsibility.

I want someone to rely on and someone I can count on.

Maybe that comes with age because the concept of love and dating only one person has always been foreign to me. But I've been feeling a pull wrenching me toward a relationship for a while now.

Kissing Marlow sounds like a great way to start the new year. Not kissing her body in foreplay to get laid, but really kissing her with everything in me and the passion she deserves. We'll find out if there's more to us than a casual night of sex here and there. That will be different for us and could lead to something ... *new*.

I look through the glass door, spying Marlow at the center of the party.

Will breaking down that final barrier, the one we've kept in place to protect ourselves from us becoming real, change anything?

Marlow refuses to discuss relationships. I'm not sure if it's because her life is up in the air at the moment, if she doesn't want anything serious with me, or if the idea scares her. And I haven't really pushed because the idea of doing the one thing I've never done—been serious about a woman—scares me a little.

I've always been underestimated, called a rich kid who was given everything. I was given a damn good start, but I worked my way from the mailroom to being a venture capitalist. I continue to work hard because one fuck up and it could all be gone overnight.

The transition through my career stockbroker to a financial advisor with CWM has been very calculated. Being in my position, being an investor, takes more than money. It also takes most of my attention. Am I willing to divide that at a time when the path I'm choosing potentially comes with more risk than reward?

Timing matters, and I'm not sure Marlow and I will ever be on the same page.

Cammie announcing two minutes drags me from my thoughts to see her leading Cade inside where the masses have gathered to celebrate together. Tealey and Rad are right behind them, but Rad stops to ask, “You coming, Jackson?”

“No.” I peer into the crowd, disappointment ... *reality*, settling in when I don’t see the one person I was hoping was coming to meet me. “You guys go on.”

Couples move closer, arms around each other, and the music fades under the sound of the countdown.

As my friends disappear into the center of the revelers, I turn around, resting my forearms on the ledge again. It’s not so bad to have the city before you, the lights bright and the sound of horns below adding to the melody of the end of another year.

With the doors left ajar, I hear Morgenstern announce into a microphone, “Ten... *nine*...”

“Hope the invitation still stands.”

I turn back, surprised by that voice—the only one I wanted to hear. Marlow—that dress showing off those hourglass curves of hers, long hair freed from the clip holding it up earlier, and high heels that make her legs look a million miles long—with a tentative smile as if she didn’t know I’d be waiting for her.

“With me, the invitation is always open.”

“Thought you might have other plans by now.” She looks around, and I suspect it’s to make sure no other woman is out here before taking a few steps closer. As if she doesn’t know me at all ... or maybe she knows me too well.

I’m not sure. Our arrangement hasn’t really been defined before.

She’s gone on other dates.

I have.

For some reason, we keep meeting in the middle.

“Eight ... *seven* ...” Morgenstern continues.

My heart starts to beat faster. Being alone with her always does that to me. “No plans.”

Coming even closer, she maintains a few feet between us. “That’s too bad. I was hoping you’d have plans with me.”

“Six ... five ...”

“I always have plans for you, but most are not appropriate to discuss in public.”

“Four ... three ...”

“Good,” she replies, raising her chin. “I have no interest in discussing it when we could be—”

“Two ... one ...”

I take her hand and pull her into my arms, our mouths crashing together under the sound of the city coming alive at midnight. Our lips caress and then open, our tongues eager to reacquaint themselves.

Kissing wasn’t always on the table with us, but tonight, our guard is lowered and our bodies are hungry for the connection. Marlow will blame the champagne. I’ll blame my weakness for the stunning beauty.

Either way, I cup her face and then look into her eyes. As she searches mine and curiosity overtakes her Bahama blues, I ask, “Want to go to my place and ring in the new year?”

She smiles coyly. “I thought we just rang it in.”

“No. We’re just getting started.”

Jackson St. James

NEW YEAR'S Eve traffic is a mood killer.

Reaching over, I take hold of Marlow's hand and kiss it. Her body has never been off-limits for the gesture. Only the intimacy of her mouth. I don't have issues with boundaries, but now that the flood gates have opened, *damn*, I want to kiss her again. Since we have some time to kill, we might as well dive right in. "We kissed back there."

A flirtatious grin appears. "We did, and now I'm wondering why we weren't doing it all along."

"You're reading my mind."

Ironic. I've always found her quite difficult to read. She's the queen of hearts with a million walls surrounding her like a fortress. Untouchable in so many ways, except when we're alone ... or maybe it's only when she's lonely.

She licks her lips, and I can't stop staring at them. Remembering the delicate taste of champagne as it lingered, a hint of something sweet when our tongues touched for the first time, I drag my tongue over my lower lip in hopes of tasting her again. Fuck, I'm getting hard from the tease and start to wonder if kissing is even on the table or if New Year's Eve is just a special occasion. "We've kissed before."

"Not like that."

“No, not like that.” Another car honks its horn at us. Our driver flips him off while grumbling up front about staying in his own lane.

I look around, making sure the situation won't escalate, and then sit back when I see the other driver turn to take a different route.

“We have bad timing,” Marlow says, picking up where we left off.

Finding her eyes in the cab's darkness, I ask, “You and me?”

“No, the traffic. We should have left earlier to avoid it.”

I nod, catching on. “Right. Is there ever a good time?”

“For us?” I swear I detect a note of hope in her tone.

As much as I like hearing that, I chuckle because we both seem to be a little confused tonight. Is that what kissing does? It's rattled me in a good way. *Wonder how she feels about it?* “There's never smooth sailing in Manhattan traffic.”

She looks out the window, making it hard to read anything about her, so I hold tighter to the hope I heard and her hand. I rest our bond on my leg, which brings her attention back to me. She says, “Don't worry, Jackson. We'll get there eventually.”

Her words have new meaning under the earlier intimacy of kissing. Not sure what to say under the curious gaze she's laid on me, except, “Happy New Year.”

Her grasp tightens, and her head tilts. “Happy New Year.” She slides across the back seat until she's close, close like Cammie and Cade get, and Rad and Tealey.

For a small moment in time, it feels like we're that couple. Or could be.

When I release her hand and lift my arm, she snuggles against me, and says, “New Year's Eve should only be allowed on weekends.” She laughs to herself. Sitting up suddenly, she angles toward me. “I sound so old. When did we get old?”

“Somewhere between graduating and being able to stay out all night partying to bumping up against thirty and being tired before one o’clock on New Year’s Eve, I suppose.”

“Changes in jobs.” She rests back again, her head on my shoulder.

“Living on our own.”

She nods. “So true.” Adjusting her head, she’s closer, if that’s possible. She looks up at me. “Do you ever get lonely?”

I realize that’s what tonight was about—my wandering thoughts, questioning what I should be doing with my life relationship-wise, and feeling like a fifth wheel with my best friends for the first time. It’s a lot to digest. I tighten my arm around her and admit the truth. “Sometimes, I guess. I thought you liked living in that big apartment? Isn’t that why you’re trying to stay there?”

Discomfort slumps her shoulders momentarily, and a shaky breath is released. “I’m trying to stay because I have nowhere to go.”

My heart hurts to see this usually strong woman fighting an embarrassment she should never bear. I want to protect her, to help her, to do something to make this better. Wrapping my arm around her, I hold her close and kiss her head. “Sure, you do. Whatever happens, you have me. You don’t have to fight this alone. We’re all here for you.”

She leans up enough to look at me with a soft smile playing on her lips. Her eyes are wide with the same hope tingeing her tone when she says, “I’ve been sheltered and taken care of for my whole life. Where did that get me?”

She’s always been daddy’s little princess. He even called her as much when he was paying for her every whim, but to hear her say it is new. She still deserves some credit where it’s due. I tuck some loose strands of hair behind her ear. “You’re following your dream. You work in a gallery, just like you always talked about, and you work hard.”

“I work in a gallery but can’t afford my bills.” She looks down as she rests the palm of her hand on her leg. “My dreams

won't pay for my lifestyle, and I willingly let that happen."

I've never seen this side of her, her vulnerability palpable in the back of this cab. I didn't know it was this bad. She's not one to show weakness, so I'm not sure what to think other than Marlow deserves better than how her family has left her. "Your dad fucked up."

"Yes, he did. He lied to me and everyone else, including the bank. But I picked an apartment that most people in the city can't afford, choosing to feed an ego instead of dealing with reality. I had no idea he was headed for bankruptcy. That he lied to me when he was responsible for paying my bills was wrong on every level. But at the end of the day, I got myself into this mess by thinking my dad would always be there for me." She sits back. "It doesn't matter how I got here. I'm never going to let something like this happen to me again. Never."

"What are you going to do?"

"Enjoy New Year's Eve with you." She pushes up on her hand and kisses under my jaw, my body coming back to life.

The familiar surroundings have me ready to pay so I can get her upstairs. Hanging out in cabs for longer than necessary isn't what I call entertainment, not when I'm with a beautiful woman. *Especially when I'm with Marlow.* I lift her chin so her eyes stay fixed on me. "You're never alone. Got that?"

A grin grows, but she restrains it before it gives too much away. "Got it," she says like the sly devil himself replied.

The cab pulls to the curb, giving me a reprieve from this heavy conversation. We head inside like we've done many times. It's not been hundreds, but it's been enough for the doorman to remember her. *How could he not?* She's unforgettable. He tips his hat. "Evening, Ms. Marché. Mr. St. James."

"Happy New Year, Paul," Marlow and I say in unison. The sound of her heels against the marble floors trails along with us. I reach my hand out, and she takes hold, clasping mine

without a glance ever exchanged. We work on instinct and the gravitational pull that keeps bringing us together.

It's a pull I don't want to fight anymore.

I wonder how she feels?

We ride the elevator in silence, but a tension builds while our eyes are fixed on each other's in the reflection of the mirrored door. She drags the tips of her fingers across her collarbone and then bites her lip. Her chest rises and falls with each breath.

Fuck.

She's so fucking gorgeous I'm tempted to take her right here. Too bad our every move is being filmed in this elevator. I appreciate the security all other times.

Gripping the railing behind me with my other hand to keep myself from pulling her in for another kiss to that lip she's currently biting, I will the elevator to move faster.

It's the first time her eyes leave mine. She whispers, "I've been thinking," and looks at her shoes.

"What have you been thinking?" It's then that I notice she's holding the railing behind her like I am. I loosen my grip, stretching my fingers.

Just when her gaze rises, the elevator stops, and the door slides open.

I glance at her at the same moment as she looks at me. She leaves me trying to read her mind when all I want to do is kiss her again. I hold my hand out, and as soon as she takes it, we bolt down the hall together as if we'll find any answer we need down here.

I have my keys out and am unlocking my door as soon as we reach it.

We both take a breath, but doors and keys, hallways, or even privacy don't matter at this point. The buildup consumes us quicker than a breath can be exhaled. She's against me, her lips on mine, causing my back to hit the wood door with a thud.

I take her in my arms and lift her, pivoting inside the apartment. With our lips locked, this kiss feels better and more intense when there's a different intention in mind. Sure, I want to fuck her, but I also can't wait to take her out on a date.

Kicking the door closed, I set her down and am quick to lock the bolt. But then I stop. Through heavy breaths, I cup her face, and ask, "I want to know what you're thinking. I always want to know what's on your mind, Marlow."

Her breathing is jagged, and her lashes flutter as she looks up at me. "You do?"

"I do."

"I was thinking," she starts but then pauses. Staring into my eyes, she's consumed by emotion, the storm turning her brighter blues cloudy and gray. "I have so much on my mind, but I don't want to think about anything else." Her arms tighten around my neck, and she places a kiss on the corner of my mouth. "Just kiss me and make it all go away. Okay?"

She always wears a brave face, but I'm starting to wonder if that's just for show. Cupping her cheek and then running my fingers into her hair, I whisper, "You can always talk to me. You know that, right?"

"We've never been those kinds of friends, Jackson. Are we friends at all? Or just friends by association?"

"Sometimes," I admit, "but that doesn't mean I don't want to be more with you." I can't say we were friends in college or even after graduation. Still, something over the past year changed—our patience with each other, or even Rad and Tealey eventually getting together—and suddenly, we were the only ones not dating. A lot of whiskey, a star-filled sky, and the sound of the waves became foreplay. We made a deal. We'll tell no one, no getting our emotions involved, and only have sex until we meet someone else more appealing.

No one else more appealing came along, so we became a regular thing. So I'm not sure what we are anymore, but my guess is that we're caught in the middle of the friends we are

now, the acquaintances we were at best in the past, and a committed relationship. *Purgatory*.

Gliding my other hand along her ribs and tilting my head down, I kiss one corner of her mouth and then the other. “We’re friends. More than.”

“More than. I like that.” She smiles. “I’m here, so what are you going to do with me?”

“What do you *want* me to do with you?”

Her gaze travels down my hallway. “Maybe we figure it out in the bedroom.” I scoop her into my arms, eliciting giggles straight from her belly. *It’s a beautiful fucking sound.*

She tosses her handbag on the table by the door when we pass by, but then she returns to kiss the underside of my jaw. “You never shave for me,” she says as we head for my bedroom.

“I can’t help that I’m so manly and can grow a beard by lunch.” I chuckle. Every other woman I date wants me to look like a lumberjack. Not Marlow. She’s always been about the clean-shaven, white-collar look. And most days I fit that, but when I get to choose, I’m more laid-back.

Reaching the side of the bed, I quirk a brow at her. “I can call you a car if it bothers you that much.”

Marlow’s eyes widen. “I’m not bothered.” The tension that appeared in her shoulders disappears just as quickly. “Not bothered at all.”

I smirk and then set her down on the mattress. Although we’ll be a frenzy of hands and other body parts in a minute, I take a moment to admire the woman on my bed. She lifts to toe off her shoes, each jeweled shoe dropping to the floor like she has no care for them at all. I know she does. Marlow loves her shoes.

But it seems she might like something else even more.

Me.

At least for the night.

Jackson

“DO YOU MIND UNZIPPING ME?” Marlow bats her eyelashes while looking at me over her shoulder. Now standing before me, she’s already well-aware of the answer without me saying it.

I kiss the curvature of her neck before unzipping the dress from her lower back and farther over the mound of her ass. “Why do you have to be so goddamn gorgeous?” I reach the end of the zipper. My cock stirs as I unwrap her red dress like a present I’ve waited for all year—savoring every moment. Placing my palm flat on her warm skin, I slide it down her spine. And then I follow with kisses, appreciating every inch of her with my lips.

Her body shivers when I blow across the trail I’ve left behind. Letting the dress fall to the floor, I expose her dangerously sexy curves, and then she moves back on the bed and rolls over. “You’ve never been big on foreplay before, St. James.”

Marlow’s never been shy, but with that body and her fantastic tits, she shouldn’t be.

“I like foreplay.” Leaning over her, I plant my hands on either side of her head and kiss her cheek. “Especially with you.”

She takes hold of my lapels, keeping me close. “What are we doing?”

“Sex. You’re familiar with it from my recollection.”

That smile just about does me in—bright and drop-dead gorgeous like she is. “Funny. But you know what I mean. We always said we’d stop when emotions got involved. It’s feeling a lot like they’re already pretty damn involved.”

“People change. Feelings change. Is that a bad thing?”

Tugging my jacket over my shoulders, she whispers, “Not bad. Different. New. Maybe we should—”

“Talk about this tomorrow?”

“I agree. I’d rather get back to this sex you mentioned.”

Chuckling, I push off the bed and let the jacket hit the floor. “Are you going to take that strip of lace off or lie there teasing me like that all night?”

She lifts her foot and runs it along the inside of my leg. “You’re not the only one who enjoys teasing.” The tip of her foot rubs my erection. I make no apologies for being hard for the woman. *She’s sexy as fuck.*

Taking matters into my own hands, I grab the band of black lace on her right hip, and ask, “Do you want these to remain in one piece?”

Her grin disappears under a look of shock. “They’re Agent Provocateur.”

“And?”

Her sweet lips part, and eyes widen again. “You better not, Jack—”

The ripping of the lace causes her to gasp. I wink. “I’ll buy you more underwear.”

Lying in nothing but that incredible birthday suit, she smirks when the shock finally subsides. “You better.”

“You didn’t honestly expect that thin strip of lace to protect you?”

An ember sparks to life in her eyes, yet she plays coy with a slight dip of her chin. “Protect me from what, St. James?”

Taking her foot, I run my tongue along the arch and then lift it onto my shoulder before kissing her inner thigh. “From the Big Bad Wolf.”

She tucks her hands under her head and watches me with captivated interest while letting me indulge in the creaminess of her skin. “I’ve never been one for fairy tales.”

I rest my lips against her thigh. “Who disappointed you so badly that you don’t believe in happily ever afters? I thought all girls believed in fairy tales.”

Without missing a beat, she replies, “Everyone. And for the record, I’m all grown up.”

“You sure are, but how about we make another deal? Just for tonight.”

Shifting, she tilts her head to the side, her gaze dipping down my body. “What deal?”

I stare at her, wondering if I dare cross another line with her tonight. First kissing and now ... “When we’re in here, when we’re together like this, forget about everyone else because, unlike the world, I won’t disappoint you, Marlow.”

She smiles—genuine and sweet, that honeyed side not seen by many. I’ve borne witness to it many times between us. “You never do in the bedroom.”

The sting from how specific she is slights against my skin, but for now, I let it go. I’ll leave heavier topics for another day because she wants to forget about anything outside this room tonight. And I’ll make that wish come true.

Her fingers weave into my hair while I keep kissing and then nibble just shy of where I know she really wants my mouth.

Pushing up, I stand and start on the buttons of my shirt. “Since you’re so into teasing.”

She laughs and then scoots up the mattress. Leaning against the walnut headboard, she settles in unabashedly,

watching me as if this show is just for her. It is if I'm being truthful. I like the way she looks at me. I like that I can see her breathing deepen as I strip another layer of clothing away from my body.

But I really fucking love when she starts wiggling from the need blooming inside her, when we're on the precipice of our bodies being together again.

I grab a condom from the nightstand and stand next to the bed. "I want you to put it on me."

She acts all proper for everyone else, playing a role for them. She's a woman who's used to being given everything she wants, but she's bored of the gilded cage that she's been placed in. She can be who she really is with me, and that's never more herself than when we're tangled in the sheets. She takes the packet and gets to her knees before me. And I fucking love it. *This is my Marlow.*

The one behind closed doors. There's so much more to her than the rest of the world sees. It took years to get here. I thought she was nothing more than a spoiled princess, a Hollywood kid from famous parents who ate up the socialite title.

I was too blind to see who she really was back then, but now that I have, her beauty is more than skin deep. And despite what she says or how she acts around others, I know she cares about me. That's what scares her.

Kissing my shoulder, she drags her hand down the center of my chest. She presses the packet to my stomach—*the tease*—and then bends to kiss me lower. I suck in a breath when she slides my cock into her mouth. Gripping the base, she holds me steady as she sucks in her cheeks and then slides off me.

She drags the packet against me and then rips it open. "How about we stop teasing each other and get to the main event?"

Shaking my head, I chuckle. "You're going to be the death of me."

“We wouldn’t want that.” Sliding the condom over my hardness, she smirks. “Trust me, I want you alive and well for this.”

Cupping her chin, I take a deep breath and release a sigh. What am I going to do with her?

Sexually—I already knew back at the party. Sex with her is always phenomenal.

Emotionally—this is foreign territory.

By the uncertainty in her eyes, I’m not alone.

There’s not one part of our bodies that we haven’t openly shared. But the walls have remained in place when it came to anything deeper.

I climb onto the bed and right on top of her. Her legs butterfly open for me, and her arms come around my neck. Resting on my forearms on either side of her head, I say, “I’m thinking we should try that kissing thing again.”

“What are you waiting for?”

I don’t. *Not any longer.* I kiss her firmly on the mouth as I position myself at her entrance. The heat between us penetrates the cool air as soon as my dick touches the apex of her legs.

Deepening the kiss, I push in, capturing her gasp. Her nails dig in as she holds me, her tongue finding and then twisting with mine.

I pull my hips back and push back in, wanting to lose myself in the ecstasy of her warm embrace. The sounds of our connection fade under the sensation, her moans and hearing her beg for more, faster, spur me to drive harder. The rhythm of our bodies together and then apart, the push and pull, *the impatience, the love, the like*, and everything we’ve ever said or felt for each other mix into a singular goal—my name from her lips for the whole fucking city to hear.

And kissing her? Marlow is an incredible kisser—like nothing else exists but this connection with me. This

newfound intimacy heightens every sensation we've ever shared.

Sliding my hand between us, I find her clit and rub small circles, causing her to buck against me. One more rotation of my hips and hand, and I'm rewarded.

"Jackson ..." My name rips from her throat before Marlow digs the back of her head into the pillow—mouth open, eyes clamped closed, body trembling around mine—and then a stuttering breath is exhaled before she's collapsing beneath me.

With her arms still wrapped around my neck, I stay close, but the sight of her falling apart sends me into my own completion. "Oh, fuck," I growl, my body charging into the release. Swept into the ecstasy, I freefall into it, letting my mind rest as my body vibrates.

The fog clears, and I exhale, dropping on top of her before rolling off to the side, sated.

We don't speak or rush to move.

Heavy pants fill the air until our breaths and speeding hearts settle into a manageable rate. I reach for her hand, my fingertips touching the tips of hers. She takes the offer, and we lie there a little longer.

I turn to her, and whisper, "Happy New Year." It's then that I see the glisten in her eyes as she stares up at the ceiling, a desperation in her features willing the tears away. I angle toward her and brush the hair back from her face. "What's wrong?"

She glances at me. "Nothing." Sweeping fallen strands away from my forehead, she takes a breath. "Everything is so right." She lifts to kiss my cheek and then my mouth once more. Her lips linger while a tear streaks down her face, landing where our chins meet. "Thank you."

I swallow, not sure I've ever seen her cry before. And not exactly something I wanted to experience after having sex either. I slide my hand to the back of her neck and bring her closer to kiss her forehead and then the apple of her cheek, the

tip of her nose, and then her mouth. The liquid coating her eyes subsides, so I fall back on the pillow, and ask, “Thank you for what?”

“An amazing night.”

I realize then that despite our best efforts, we’re never going to be the same—a casual hookup when we were lonely, a secret affair that we kept hidden from most of the world, friends with benefits with no strings attached.

All it took was one kiss at the stroke of midnight, and a million strings attached. But I don’t broach that, especially not after sex. I lean into what I know she wants from me—easy and carefree. It’s the safest place to be. “It was literally my pleasure, so I can’t take much credit.”

She laughs, lying back on the mattress. “As good as the sex—”

“Good?”

Rolling her eyes, she giggles. “Great. As *great* as sex is with you ...” She looks over at me again, her smile genuine in its placement. “I didn’t know what to expect at midnight, but you didn’t disappoint.”

“So what you’re saying is I don’t disappoint in the bedroom or outside these walls?” Hope grows wings.

Her laughter is heartier, feeding my ego and making me feel like the king of the world. “I guess that’s what I’m saying.”

I kiss her shoulder. “See? That wasn’t so hard to admit.”

She sighs, shaking her head. “For a man who can have any woman he wants, you sure do need a lot of stroking of the ego.”

Does she not see how she’s the only one I want? I won’t be the one to ruin the fun, though. “It’s not my ego that needs the stroking.”

Slipping out of bed before I can catch her, she says, “Good to know, hotshot.” When she goes into the bathroom, I spread my arms wide. As much as I love this massive bed, I sure the

fuck like having her in it with me, taking up space not only here but also in my day-to-day life.

We swap, and I decide to shower. By the time I return, she's close to being asleep, so I hold her in my arms, wrapping myself around the back of her and soaking in how good we are together.

It's a new year. Time for a fresh start. Maybe it's our time as well.

I drift off after her breathing has steadied, finding comfort in the possibility of what tomorrow brings.

Marlow Marché

“ARE YOU OKAY?” Panic shrouds Tealey’s tone.

“Yes, I’m okay,” I whisper.

“Thank God.” Yawning, she asks, “Then why are you calling me at ...” She pauses, I assume to check the time. “Four thirty-six?” Maybe I shouldn’t have called, but I need to talk through my feelings with someone I trust.

“What am I doing, Teals?” I ask, confused by my revolving emotions.

Jackson and I were supposed to be a little fun.

Nothing more.

Sex—the casual kind with no strings involved.

That’s worked great for a while, but he only knows a portion of my situation. I have no room in my life right now for the added commitment. None of that will come as a surprise to him. I’ve never portrayed myself to be any different. But no one could have predicted Jackson and I would hook up. Least of all, the two of us. We’ve always been more different than alike in our views on life. From art to movies, food to cocktails, how we like to spend our time to how we spend our money, Jackson St. James couldn’t be a worse match for me.

“I don’t know. What *are* you doing?”

I peek back into the bedroom, where Jackson sleeps so peacefully. The moonlight glides over the cut of his muscles and the sharp corner of his jaw. Crossing the living room so I don't wake him, I say, "I should leave, but my gut tells me to stay."

"Then you should stay."

"I can't do this, though."

An impatient sigh, which is uncharacteristic for my friend, is heard. "Marlow?"

"Yeah?"

She gulps and then says, "You've been doing this with Jackson for some time now. Hold on ... Let me get out of bed so I don't wake Rad." I hang on the line, listening to the soft shuffling from her end of the call. "Okay, we can talk now. Tell me, Marlow, what's so different about tonight than the other nights you two have been together?"

"We kissed. He kissed me, and I kissed him."

"I know." A light giggle permeates the line. "We were all there."

Sitting on the windowsill, I say, "It—"

She gasps. "Wait. I may be a little slow at this hour, but I just realized what you meant. You and Jackson don't kiss?"

"We kiss in ... *hrm* ... How do I put this? We kiss in certain ways, but we don't kiss like we did tonight."

"I had no idea." Her voice is clearer, the fog of sleep stripped away. "I thought—"

"I know."

"So ... " She pauses again. I can tell by her humming that she's hesitant to speak her mind.

"It's okay. You know I'll tell you anything."

Lowering her voice, she says, "How was it?"

"It was amazing." *Just like him.* I keep that part to myself, though. Generally, I'm an open book, but sometimes, I keep

my cards close to my chest. Jackson is one of those cards. My finances are another.

But I smile, thinking of how he makes me laugh when he gives me a hard time about pretty much everything. But then he looks at me like I'm more than he could ask for. The man is gorgeous with his *GQ* face and a body that is hard everywhere except when it comes to his heart.

I'm dramatic and over the top, and sometimes self-absorbed. *So I've been told.* Though I can admit to the tendencies and see the worst of my parents in me, Jackson seems to have a soft spot for me.

Go figure.

Tealey asks, "Amazing is *amazing*, so why are you calling me when you could be with him right now?"

"I ..." I stand back up and pace in front of the windows, staring out into the darkness of the night. Lights dot the cityscape like stars in the sky. "What if I mess it up?" That would be so like me. I not only have a knack for falling into traps but I've caused a few catastrophes as well and never portrayed myself any different.

It's just safer to be alone.

"You won't," she says. "Jackson knows who you are, and that's who he wants."

"I don't want him to hurt me." I clear my throat softly to clear the emotions threatening to clog. "Every man I've ever trusted has hurt me in one way or another. Cheating boyfriends in high school or guys who dumped me in college to the ultimate betrayal of my dad. Always traveling to a new movie set, he left the house manager to raise me. And let me tell you, she wasn't paid enough for that job. I may have felt abandoned by my parents physically, but I knew I would always have a safety net financially. I never thought my dad was capable of doing what he did." I tear up. "The lies. I can't get past the lies he told me."

"You don't need to forget or forgive right now. That can come in time if you so wish, but those situations are better

handled after sunrise. As for Jackson, he's not like your dad or any of those loser boyfriends."

I stop and cross my arm over my chest, holding my hand on my other bicep. "I'm messed up, Tealey. I don't want to hurt him either."

"Then don't."

The answers come so easily to her. I always thought as a social worker, she'd see things as right or wrong, fair or unfair, but she lives in the gray area, her heart empathetic to others. That's not a trait I was born with, but I'm envious of her. I'm so fortunate to have her in my life. She knows my heart, and I'll be forever grateful for her friendship.

"Maybe it is that easy," I say, "and I'm overthinking this. The man didn't ask me to marry him. It was only a kiss, no matter how amazing it was."

"I can tell you're tired. Go easy on yourself and get some rest, Marlow. You can deal with everything in the light of day instead of self-sabotaging yourself in the late hour."

The university's freshmen orientation may have brought Tealey and Cammie into my life, but our friendship has thrived over the years. The weight of my worries begins to dissipate. "Why do I feel like I have to solve all my problems tonight?"

"I don't know. You have a lot going on in your life, so maybe that's making you restless."

"You're right." Thinking about Jackson brings a smile to my face. "I can go back in there and just sleep."

"Exactly. Just enjoy your time with him."

Breathing becomes easier. "Hey," I whisper, "thanks for answering."

"Always. Go have a good night."

"You, too. Good night."

I hang up and return my phone to my bag before slipping back into bed. There's no great production. Jackson just rolls

over and wraps me in his arms again like we've done this a million times.

Reveling in the feel of him pressed against me, I close my eyes, feeling safe, feeling cared for, feeling cherished, and fall back asleep.

STARTLING AWAKE in the gentle light of the rising sun, I gasp as my heart races. Fortunately, Jackson's still asleep next to me.

Not closing the blinds before we fell into bed was a mistake, although understandable since he's utterly distracting. The man is a modern-day Adonis, and he kept his promise. I forgot all about the rest of the world. *At least for a few hours.*

I gently maneuver out from under the heaviness of his arm, the heat too much to stay covered, and then shield my eyes from the brightness pouring in from the outside.

Tiptoeing across the room, I go into the bathroom to freshen up. The giddiness I felt only hours ago has settled into the pit of my stomach, making me question myself all over again.

When I return to the bedroom, I stop at the end of the bed and debate what I should be doing. Leaving should be easy. It's something I've done many times before. He's walked out my door just the same, if not more. *So why is my heart not as sure as my head this time?*

I reach down for my dress and slip it on, zipping up the back.

Jackson St. James and I are a disaster in the making.

As different as we are, we're too alike when it comes to relationships. We burn them to the ground before they have a chance to flicker into a flame. I put one shoe on and then lean down to put on the other.

Jackson will hate me.

But he'll thank me one day for leaving.

I'm not emotionally built like either of my friends—Tealey, the hopeless romantic, or Cammie, the woman born to be a mother.

I take one last look at the man who opened his heart to me and, in the process, opened mine before walking to the door. I stop with my back to him.

Why am I hesitating?

Why am I fighting this?

I was raised by two dysfunctional people in the Hollywood Hills who still can't figure out their own lives, even after being divorced from each other for fifteen years. Staying goes against my inherited nature.

They've had other marriages between them and countless affairs. Breakups, makeups, and a few days of being single amongst the ruins of their relationships. And their life choices have spilled down on me.

Other than my friends, I've never had anyone I could count on. Cam and Teals taught me the meaning of true friendship, but why continue to pretend I'm capable of ever opening my heart again when it comes to men? I'm not, especially not at this point in my life.

I already have enough trouble and don't need to add to the pile. I'm saving him from a disaster down the road.

I look at him, sleeping so soundly, his hair growing darker with the years, his jaw that tenses during sex is relaxed. He's so handsome that sometimes I have to look away, not feeling worthy of the way he looks at me like I'm not as damaged.

Sex with Jackson is incredible, but why'd we have to get our feelings involved?

I take a deep, staggering breath and make my way from the bedroom through his apartment, snapping up my clutch from the table near the door. There's no reason I should stay, but a million reasons why I should go, including a package waiting for me at home.

Leave now. Get out before I'm in too deep and drag him down with me.

He didn't act drunk, but I'm going to chalk up this night and the emotions we tangled ourselves up in and blame it on the alcohol and holiday.

Jackson's friendship is worth protecting, even from myself, because I couldn't stop myself from falling for him.

Falling?

No. *That's not possible.*

This is too much to think about at six in the morning.

It will be best if I just start that walk home now to get it over with. After all, there is no shame in my heel game. And these red soles are still stunning even at this hour.

I open the door and head for the elevator, also not ashamed of leaving at sunrise. *Why would I be?* I have needs and desires, and I enjoy feeling pleasure. Weaker men tell me I fuck like a man because I can walk away right after. What can I say? It's a specialty of mine. *Clearly.* But if their egos are too fragile, then we have no business tangling in the sheets either.

Cutting through the lobby straight to the sidewalk to call a cab, I raise my arm into the air. I think cabbies know this time of hour is golden for getting low-key fares. One pulls to the curb, and I hop in, giving the driver my address.

As the cab drives away, I don't bother looking back, but my chest twists in doubt. Maybe I shouldn't have left while he was sleeping. *What's he going to think when he wakes up?* Or maybe it won't matter because it usually doesn't.

Last night mattered.

It did to me.

I'm sure it did to him.

We both know it was different. The night was infused with feelings, even if we did put off delving into deeper conversations.

Should I have left a note or made coffee or something to ease that blow? Unlike most men, nothing about Jackson is delicate. He gives as good as he gets and never thinks twice about walking away when he knows it's not right.

Will he know we're not right together?

By the way we kissed, I'm thinking everything might be a little messy in his mind as well. Why'd we cross that line? Was it a statement for us to make, to taste and test before we walk away? Were we proving something or making it worse?

It wasn't just a kiss to me. I felt that embrace in my toes. I've never been kissed like that—kissed with so much emotion that reached inside me and cradled some deep hidden part of me. His touch sets my body on fire and my heart beating like a drum. He consumes with a look, and then I'm supposed to walk away like my soul wasn't just devoured.

Kissing Jackson St. James is everything I ever dreamed a kiss would be. But we're not supposed to be real. I'm a friend with benefits, at best. That's the zone I feel most comfortable residing in when it comes to him and whatever this is between us.

But there's one thing I can't deny.

That kiss just changed everything.

Jackson

MARLOW'S GONE.

Just as the front door clicks closed, I open my eyes to find the empty spot where she slept curled in my arms not fifteen minutes ago.

I should say I'm surprised, but I'm not.

She was unaware that I saw the debate warring through her body language while she got dressed, unsure if she should leave, and checking on me. She doesn't know that her voice filtered in from the living room when she called Tealey early in the morning hours.

No, she doesn't know that I was awake. But I know she struggles with matters of the heart. Can't say I don't either, but I got myself into this situation, so all's fair in love and war as the saying goes.

Scrubbing my hand over my face, I know she didn't want to leave. But I can't help but wish she hadn't and chose to stay.

Marlow

“HELLO?”

“Just got up, and I’m having coffee,” Tealey says. “Rad, naturally, has already worked out, showered, made breakfast, and now he’s squeezing in some work before—”

“How many cups have you had?”

“Two, but who’s counting?”

I feel like I just got dropped into the middle of a conversation. “I haven’t had *my* coffee yet, though, so slow down, Teals.”

She laughs as I pad down the hall toward the kitchen just after eleven. The silk of my pajama top and the shorts I slipped on after showering when I got home catch in the air behind me, and I shiver from the chill.

As if she’s been dying to call me all morning, she asks, “What are we doing today? We always hang out on January first and usually relive all the juicy details from New Year’s Eve, but I haven’t heard from anyone.”

I drop the capsule in the coffee machine and push the button. “You know my story already, so I’m not sure I’m up for anything.” That’s when I spy the document still on the counter. Ugh. No, I’m in no mood for that today. I shove it in my junk drawer and then walk to a window lining the wall of

my living room. “I have a slight headache, and I need food.” I open the fridge and scan the mostly empty shelves. “At times like these, I really miss living with you and Cam.”

I really do, too. Life was so much easier back in college. Cammie, her, and I living together, having the time of our lives, being there for each other through heartbreak and happiness, job losses, promotions and personal struggles. We’ve been together through life’s ups and downs ... and now

“Oh, yeah?”

“You both were always cooking or had stocked the fridge with groceries.” The memory has me smiling again.

She laughs, and even though it’s light, I pull the phone from my ear so my head doesn’t pound even harder. She says, “You can’t live off champagne.”

“Wanna bet?”

Her laughter continues, but this time, I can’t stop from laughing either. “How about this? I’ll have a full spread of greasy hangover food and a hair of the dog bar set up. All you need to do is show up.”

“What time?”

I’m already feeling better because the happiness heard in her tone begins turning my mood around. I take the coffee mug and sip, the warmth of the liquid along with my friend still being so present in my life comforts me.

“We’ll be ready for food and cocktails before kickoff.”

I grimace. “Football. Ugh. I had blissfully forgotten there was a game today.”

She laughs. “You know the guys are going to want to watch it. We’ll let them so we can chat. I can’t wait to hear about what happened after that kiss. I’ll text everyone to get the ball, pun intended, rolling.” She laughs at her own joke. God, I love my friend.

“Sounds good.”

As soon as we hang up, I snatch a shirt from the hanger and a pair of fitted jeans from the shelf and slip them on, eyeing shelves of purses and shoes from every luxury label—Hermès, YSL, Gucci, Chanel, and more. My gut twists at the thought of having to sell my babies. I pat a few and say, “I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

I walk into the bathroom and start to get ready. Depending on when this get-together is happening, I might have time to go through my accounts once more since my paycheck deposit finally landed. I just wish I could access my trust fund, but since he’s listed on it, that seems to be a dead-end because of my dad’s bankruptcy in play.

A text pops up from Tealey: *Come over. Football and food at one.*

I love that she wants to continue our tradition. It’s not easy being surrounded by so many in love, but it feels good to always be included. I text: *I’ll be there with queso and chips.*

Cammie replies: *YAY! We’ll bring hot wings and beer.*

My stomach growls. I’m not usually one for greasy food, but that sounds good after a night of drinking.

A text pops up just as I’m about to set my phone down in the kitchen. I glance before reaching for a glass from the cabinet but then stop and return to read the message.

Jackson: *Sorry, guys. Can’t make it.*

The message is a punch to the gut. He never misses a get-together, and that the message is fewer than five words is unlike him. Dragging a finger over my lip, I read it again. *And again.* He never cancels. *Never.*

I start to feel sick to my stomach. Is he upset? Should I call him or text him privately? The reason I left was to preserve our friendship, but did me leaving do the opposite?

Cade: *The fuck you talking about? Get your ass over there before kickoff, or I’ll drag it over. This is tradition, man.*

Like a train wreck you see coming, I stare at the screen watching the messages roll by, unable to fully process what’s

happening since I'm still caught up in wondering if I've caused unintended damage.

After Rad sends a message telling him to come over and even Tealey hops back on the thread to try to sway him with his favorite tacos from a place across town, I finally take my shot and type: *It won't be the same without you, St. James.*

The thread comes to a halt as those three dreaded dots linger on the screen too long, then go away again. When they appear and then are replaced with words, it reads: *Things change, Marché.*

I pause to take in the words and, more importantly, to decipher their meaning. There must be more than just a casual response in that, a double meaning that clues me in to whether he's mad at me or just doesn't want to come today.

I text Tealey on the side: *What does he mean?*

Tealey: *I'm not sure. Maybe that it's just not the same since he can't make it?*

Me: *I don't know. It feels like there's more to it.*

Tealey: *Want me to ask Rad?*

Rad's his best friend, but I don't want to make it a big deal if it's not. Or come off as clingy. That's something I'll never be. I've seen strong women marry my dad and then turn into desperate ex-wives as they try to hold on to a lifestyle and his money.

I will never be made a fool or put myself in a position of being hurt by anyone, so I type: *It's no big deal.*

It's probably not. Maybe he has work to do or just wants to relax at his place. I throw my arms up. "I can't read his mind."

Quick to end this, I text her back: *I'll see you later.*

She's not as fast to return, but then I receive her reply: *See you later.*

I try to busy myself with my own life—get a glass of water, pop some ibuprofen, return to my room, and start searching for my red Gucci block heels while buttoning the

white cotton top I've chosen. I fluff the puffy sleeves in my reflection in the full-length mirror, knowing me being overdressed is nothing new. I dress for myself, and even if it's just a football game on TV, I want to feel my best.

Using a stool to reach the high shelf, I pull down the shoe bin, then set them on the floor at the end of the bed.

Jackson never strays far from my mind as I finish my makeup and then coat my lips with a ruby-red lipstick. I know he loves when I wear red, especially on my mouth. At least that's what I gather, considering I often catch him staring at my lips when I'm wearing it. Come to think of it, he's always staring at my lips, though.

Anyway, he dates plenty of women who wear red lipstick, and ones who like to claim him in the most childish ways by leaving traces of their presence behind. Or were they staking a claim on him? Who knows, but I'll never be that girl if that's what he's looking for.

I've never thought twice about the myriad of women he's brought around who I've met over the years. The guys I've casually introduced to my friends never venture to the forefront of my mind either.

Why am I doing it now?

Last night, it was just him and me.

Two friends.

Two ... lovers.

Two ...

I return the glass to the kitchen with my purse in hand but pause, anchoring my hand to the counter. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, hoping to calm the unsettling in my chest.

Distract. Distract. Distract, Marlow.

Maybe it's not a distraction I need, but to accept this is what's best. For me and for him.

I start to switch my stuff from my clutch to a Chanel crossbody bag. I need to be surrounded by noise and friends,

junk food and grease to dull the hangover—emotionally and physically—I feel. I need to get going. Wrapping the strap around my body, I rest the bag on my hip and then grab my phone as I walk to the door.

The apartment has become too stuffy with my heart full of nonsense, so I leave in a hurry. By the time the elevator arrives, I've ordered chips and queso from a local restaurant. I breathe a sigh of relief when I find the elevator empty and can breathe easier in the solitude, and bonus, I reach the lobby quicker.

The streets are busier at the lunch hour, people brunching under the awning of the closest café, a line weaving out the door of the coffee shop, and even the grocer looks busy through the window. New York City never sleeps, and there's a sense of excitement in the air. A new start to the year tends to do that, but I feel conflicted.

Jackson and I need to talk.

I pick up the order and then hail a cab to Tealey and Rad's. Call me crazy, but I lean forward and give the driver Jackson's address instead. Is it wise to return to the scene of the crime?

I'm not sure, but I have fifteen minutes to change my mind.

Fifteen minutes that fly by as every other thought crosses my mind.

Fifteen minutes to do what I'd normally do—walk away without a second glance.

I don't, though.

I sit in the cab parked at his curb with the meter ticking instead for another five minutes before I pop the door open. "Thank you," I tell the driver while already stepping onto the sidewalk. I can't pause, or I'll turn back. With doubt filling each step that leads me to his door, I push through the uncertainty and keep walking.

"I'm Marlow Marché, dammit," I say under my breath, my strength gathering as I move through his building. "Screw the world and what they think." I'm doing this for me but also for

Jackson. He deserves more than I gave him this morning—an empty bed and a crappy start to the new year.

Jackson isn't just any guy. He's my friend, and I owe him more than sneaking out in the early hours. With my chin raised high, I knock and then take a step back and wait.

I don't even have a chance to gulp down my nerves before the door swings open. Wearing nothing but plaid pajama pants, Jackson leans against the doorframe. There's no warm greeting or kiss like he gave me at midnight. No smile or offer to come inside. He doesn't even look me up and down like he usually does. I miss that. Instead, he crosses his arms over his chest and asks, "What brings you by?"

The uneasiness I had returns with a vengeance. I hate that I react this way. I hate that he makes me feel as if I'm the one to blame. I stuck to our agreement. *Did I misread the situation?*

"I ..." I hold up the bag. "I brought queso." *I'm a fool around him.* I need saving from myself.

His blue eyes narrow into suspicion. "You brought queso to take to Rad's place."

I don't like the tension between us. It's not what I'm used to. Sure, he's the worst about teasing or giving me a hard time, but that's done in playfulness. That's not the emotion steadying his face as he stares at me now. And calls me out. *Yikes.*

Shoving it toward him, I say, "Just take the queso." *What am I doing?* Begging for forgiveness for playing by the established rules?

"As a consolation prize? Do you think cheese is going to make everything better?"

I shrug. "It couldn't hurt, right?" That earns me a smirk. I take advantage of the change in his mood, and ask, "Why are you mad at me?"

Jackson pushes off the doorframe and then swings the door open. "Want to come in and talk about it?"

It's a pet peeve of mine when people say they hate confrontation like they're unique that way. They're not. No one likes it. Some of us have learned to handle the situation. Normally, that'd be me. But right now, instead of strength, I'm feeling insecure, and I hate that more. It's something I haven't felt since I left the West Coast nine years ago. "Do I have a choice?"

"You can come in or let the door close. See, Marlow? You always have a choice." He walks back inside his apartment, letting the door swing toward me. I catch it, shoving it open and trailing in behind him. He looks back and says, "But you already know that."

"I know that because I chose to leave?"

Turning back, he stands in the middle of his living room, his eyes piercing mine. "So you do want to talk about it?"

Do I?

Although I'm tempted to dash back out the door, I'm here, so his assumption might be right on the money. Sexual benefits aside, I don't want to lose his friendship. We may be oil and water, but it's not been so bad in the past few months. As strange as it sounds to admit this even to myself, Jackson St. James has become someone I look forward to seeing. I don't want to lose that. *Or him.*

I'm a pro at letting others go, leaving yesterday in the past and moving on to let them live their lives without me. Why do I care so much this time?

I know ... deep down, I know.

"Yes, I do think we need to talk," I reply, feeling steadfast that I'm ready to throw it all out on the table.

"Then let's talk."

Jackson

THIS IS NOT the Marlow I know.

Shifting from foot to foot with her eyes cast down, she offers me a bag of chips with queso as a consolation prize. I'd almost go as far as saying that she's barely recognizable. Not because she's not the epitome of put together. She's dressed nicely with her hair styled in place. For me, it doesn't matter what she wears because I always see her beauty. But it's not her clothes or appearance that are out of character. It's her expression.

Humility doesn't suit her fine features.

The fact that Marlow walked out this morning doesn't surprise me, although it was disappointing. Now, she's here, and that is completely unexpected. She's never been one to grovel, even when I asked her to last summer while we were exploring new sexual kinks. She suggested begging, I thought she meant for her to beg me, ready to drop to her knees, but I quickly found out she meant the opposite. I also discovered one of her hard limits. I would have thought this fell under that umbrella.

Scratching the back of my neck, I leave her standing near the door, not sure what to think of this turnabout. She's either trying to redeem herself or pretend it never happened. I'll give her the benefit of the doubt.

Can't help but find a little joy in watching this play out. Especially since she doesn't owe me anything. We crossed lines that she's not ready for. I don't feel I need to take away from her admitting she's wrong, though. It might be the first and last time, so I need to savor it.

She makes her way into the apartment, setting the bag on the counter before leaning against it. Even though she's hidden her hands from view, I can tell she's gripping the edge. Now that we're back here together, even I feel the discomfort that never existed between us before.

I keep some distance, not as a punishment for her but to protect myself. I choose a chair in the living room and sit. "Do you want to go first?"

Releasing the stone counter, she drops her arms to her sides. "Why aren't you going to watch football today?"

"I will. Here."

"You know what I mean."

"Look, Marlow. You don't have to check on me. I'm fine. Would I rather you have stayed? Yep. But I'm not holding it against you if that's what you're worried about. You know I've never been one to beat around the bush, so let's address the elephant in the room." I sit forward, resting my forearms on my legs. "I'm not going to their place because I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to see you."

The realization strikes her, widening her eyes and parting her lips. She's quick to realign and straighten her shoulders. "I want to see you. That's why I'm here."

"You're here all right." *Fucking gorgeous as always. Of all the people I had to set my sights on, why'd it have to be Marlow Marché?* "And why is that?" I don't know why I'm getting irritated, but I am.

"I'd say I read too much into your text, but it seems it landed how it was intended." She tentatively steps closer, moving around the couch to the far side from me before sitting down. I think her pit stop to see me wasn't part of her game

plan because of how uncomfortable she appears with her stiff disposition.

I look away, trying to find interest in the area rug.

She says, “We said no strings.”

“We said a lot of things.” I tilt my gaze up, knowing I’m too weak to look away from her for long. The feelings I have for her have been brewing for years. It’s too bad they couldn’t have stayed buried.

“I don’t understand what’s wrong, Jackson.”

“I know you don’t.” I push up and go into the kitchen, not sure what I need but pretend it’s something in here. “I take it you’re not staying?” I grab a bottle of beer and twist off the cap. I don’t even know the time, but it seems like a reasonable hour for a drink since it’s a holiday.

“After that warm welcome,” she replies sarcastically, not making a move to leave, “I’m not sure it’s safe to stay.”

“Safe?” I laugh, but there’s no humor. I take a long pull from the bottle, letting the liquid coat my throat. Setting it down, I press my palms to the cold stone. “You want to talk, let’s talk. I’ll start. Safe is what I felt in bed next to you. Safe in the thought that you enjoyed the night as much as I did. Safe in the crazy fucking notion that you’d be there this morning. Safe that we were moving past the games we play into something ... You know what? *Fuck safe*. Take your queso and go.”

She finally stands, her clicking heels causing an echo across the wood floors. Snatching the bag, she whips back to face me. “We have a good thing going, but you want something I can’t give you.”

“Which is?”

“More.” She’s already shaking her head when she adds, “I don’t have the emotional energy to spend on anything or anyone else. Don’t you understand? My life is a shit show right now. If I’m not being run ragged at work trying to constantly prove myself to a boss who will never see me as more than someone who runs her errands to dealing with

creditors and bills I didn't even know existed until a few months ago, I'm selling my stuff to try to earn extra money for a down payment I'll never have."

Like a rose, she blooms in anger, the thorns, the walls she uses to protect her. Or maybe more like an onion—layer by layer. Either way, I had no idea things were this bad because she wears bravado and attitude like the latest fashion. "Then tell me that instead of leaving me guessing."

Coming closer, she presses the bag to my chest, crushing the chips in the process. "I just did. I can't give you what you need, Jackson. Keep the queso." Her words land like punches, and she keeps swinging. "Maybe *it* can keep you warm tonight."

She leaves me holding the bag, literally, as her hair flies from her shoulders when she spins in her goddamn righteousness and storms toward the door with her walls sky high again.

What she fails to see is that I'm not her enemy in this scenario. "Don't drag the queso into this. This is about you and me, sweetheart."

Turning back with a hand anchored to her hip, she purses her lips in anger. Her chest rises once before she roars, "I'm not your sweetheart. I'm an after-hours booty call at best. So queso or not, this," she says, swaying her free hand between us, "isn't going to happen."

The disappointment that I felt when I woke up returns. It's not caused by her rejection. It's caused by her words. She doesn't even believe them. I can see it in her eyes. I've seen Marlow riled up before and have even been at the receiving end of her wrath a few times through the years. But there's no fire burning in her irises.

Despite the show she's putting on, she's not angry with me. She's lost faith. That's not something I can change in the heat of an argument, so I say, "You assume I'm trying to convince you to stay. I'm not."

“Then what are you doing?” she asks, her head wobbling on her neck.

“Waiting.”

The word hits as if she never saw it coming. She didn't. *I didn't either.* I'm not usually one to pour out my emotions like some sap with nothing better to do on a Saturday night. Doesn't matter that it's Tuesday. My point still stands.

She huffs. “For what?”

“I'm waiting for—”

“Don't wait on me.” And then she heads for the door again, unwilling to give me anything—peace, freedom, or even a glimmer of hope of scaling those walls she's built.

Not ten minutes earlier, I didn't think I had much to get off my chest. The woman brings out the best and worst in me, it seems. My worst wins, and with a boulder of a chip on my shoulder, I reply, “Don't worry, *sweetheart*, I won't.”

With her back still to me, she holds the doorknob in her hand and then swings the door wide open. I almost expect more of her anger, and I'm ready for the onslaught, but it never comes. She walks out, slamming it behind her.

I won't chase her. Not anymore. She's said her piece, and now I know where I stand. *Right where she fucking left me.*

I throw the bag against the wall. “Fuck!”

Marlow

THINGS ARE SO normal here at Rad and Tealey's. I almost forget my world is falling apart.

Almost.

I don't forget.

I can't.

It's impossible with Jackson not here. Not only has he broken tradition with his absence but my heart's not feeling so great either after our confrontation.

Cammie's just passed out bowls of popcorn to everyone, and by the swearing coming from the living room, Rad and Cade aren't happy about the last touchdown. I stare out the window, mindlessly shoving the popcorn in my mouth, wondering what Jackson's doing.

Is he still mad? He's never been one to easily anger. He's usually pretty laid-back in his approach to life. Not like me, who thrives off a high-strung life. My strings are so taut that he played my body like a fiddle, but a violin feels more fitting.

I'm still at a loss as to why he's always talking about some invisible barrier around me. I feel good around him, not like I'm hiding anything, much less on guard protecting my heart. So it's simply not true.

I let him in, as in as we agreed to be, so I'm still not seeing the problem. The problem I do see, though, is that we left things sort of in the air. Though that might be putting a positive spin on his response that he won't wait. Was that retaliation for me saying don't, or is that how he really feels?

Sex seems to be the purest part of our relationship. Not that we lie. No, we're probably too honest sometimes. We just have a way of saying whatever's on our minds. There's no filter between us. Right now, too many feelings are involved.

I hate fighting with him.

I hate this ache in my chest.

I hate that he might be hurting as well.

I hate it if he's not thought twice about me since I left.

I hate everything when things aren't right with Jackson.

Sitting down in a chair across from me at the dining table, which is covered in snacks between us, Cammie stares at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing."

"Clearly, there's something." I drop my head to the side and stare right back at her, mad that she's interrupting my wallowing. Though I also can't help noticing her brown hair has gotten so long that the tips dip below the table when she leans forward to rest her chin in her hand. I'm tempted to ask her if she's using a new shampoo, but honestly, I lack the energy to think about anything other than the fight I had with Jackson earlier.

What's wrong with me?

Beauty products are my jam, but even those don't hold my interest at the moment.

She says, "Why do you look like you lost your puppy?"

"Even if I am mad at him, I wouldn't call Jackson a dog." Sighing, I sound pathetic even to my ears. I miss the safety he provided me. Rad gets up and walks to the front door, momentarily distracting me. I welcome the diversion.

Cammie laughs lightly. “I know what you mean.” She leans forward. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Tealey joins us at the table and tops off my glass. “What are we talking about?”

“Jackson,” Cammie replies.

“Nothing,” I reply at the same time.

Our eyes dart from one to the other before Tealey says, “*Okaaaaay.*”

I felt like I was keeping things casual by drinking wine over here, but at this rate of awkward, I might need something stronger. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

Jackson bursts through the front door as if he’s been cued, causing us all to jump. Tealey grabs the sweatshirt she’s wearing over her heart. “Jackson, you scared me.” *I can’t say I fare much better.*

“What the hell, man?” Cade gripes. “You gave me a fucking heart attack.”

Rad’s laughing and tossing popcorn in his mouth while Cammie angles sideways, reaching for her bowl like the show’s about to begin. I worry it is as well.

Jackson’s eyes land on me, and he says, “You forgot the queso.”

“Did you just think of that comeback?” I snark as I stand, crossing my arms over my chest. I don’t know what kind of stance I’m taking, but it feels like I need to do it standing since he is.

“We’re going to sort this shit out, Marlow. Now.” When I continue to glare at him, he adds, “Please.”

“Fine,” I say under my breath. “Only because you said please.” I move around the table and grab my purse, pulling the strap over my head. My lips are feeling parched. If Jackson and I are going to have this out, I need my lip gloss, and then I head toward the door. Besides the nicety of the please he offered me, we’ll have an audience if we stay here, and I’d rather not be their entertainment.

He tosses that bag of chips and queso to Rad just as I pass.

To Rad, I mutter, “Traitor.”

With the bag in his hand, Rad asks, “What did I do?”

After pointing two fingers at my eyes, I then redirect them to his. “I see what side you’re on. Unlocking the door for your best friend. Not very subtle.”

Chuckling, he moves to lean against a barstool. “It wouldn’t have been as fun if the door was locked.” I roll my eyes when I hear them high-fiving behind me. *They’re mere boys when together and bring out the worst in each other. Rad’s a Wellington, for Pete’s sake. His family moniker carries prestige with it. He should act like it.*

With all eyes on us, I pick up my pace and walk into the hallway. Behind me, I hear Rad ask, “Why are the chips crushed?”

I can’t help but giggle. Those chips and queso have been to hell and back between Jackson and me.

Digging into my purse, I find the gloss and lather it across my lips before I’ve crossed the threshold of the door. Dropping it safely into my bag, I move about ten feet away from the door and turn back with my arms crossed over my chest again. Jackson is closing the door when he looks up at me, and asks, “Would you like to start?”

“No. You go right ahead. After making that kind of entrance, I figure you must have plenty to get off your chest.”

He comes closer, and I already know I’m trapped unless I start down the stairs. I’m not scared of him, though, not physically at least. He does have a knack for messing with my emotions, but he hasn’t ever purposely wielded that power. That’s all on me and how I react to him. Right now is a prime example.

I’m utterly annoyed that I find him stupidly handsome, the kind of attractive that has me tempted to ask him, “Your place or mine?” The gentle wave of his hair holds as if he didn’t just barge through a door. He was wearing a coat inside, but now

it's just him, me, and that T-shirt that clings to him in all the right muscley places.

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans and sighs before shaking his head gently. "I don't know what happened back at mine, but I didn't like it."

Tossing him a bone, I whisper, "Me either."

Coming closer, he says, "Whatever you think, this hasn't been about sex for me in months. Feelings have been mixed in for a long time now, but I'm just the only one to broach the subject."

Why does he always have to be so genuine? The man wears his heart on his sleeve for me, and something about that is so intrinsically endearing. But he's right. "We're not just sex, Jackson. You aren't just an easy lay, *you know*, to me. The connection we share is physical, but that doesn't mean it ends there." I lower my arms and suck in a breath to build the strength I need. "You matter to me. I care too much about you to cross any more lines at this time."

He doesn't rush to convince me, and his eyes aren't filled with responses I can't unfold. He's listening, not trying to change my mind.

I'm not sure what to make of that. Do I want him to beg? *No*. But I don't want to lose him either, so I say, "I need to make a confession."

"Okay." He leans against the wall as I lean against the railing.

"I can't do real relationships, but I hate being alone all the time." I drop my gaze and toe the wood floor. "I'm not good at them," I say, quirking an eyebrow as I peer up at him, "and you might be worse."

He doesn't do it often, but that earned me an eye roll. "Geez, thanks."

"I'm sorry," I reply through another sigh. "You know what I mean. We're terrible."

"No apology needed. You're not wrong."

“Not everyone is built to couple up forever. I thought we had an understanding that feelings wouldn’t mess with what we have.”

“I did, too.”

“Please don’t be mad at me. I have mountains of problems to deal with already and then add in the apartment slipping through my fingers and my career languishing in my job at the gallery.” I move closer, struggling to stay away from him. “This between us never felt like anything I couldn’t handle until yesterday.”

“What changed?”

It pisses me off that tears fill the corners of my eyes again. Am I making a mistake by not just giving in? Jackson would be so easy to fall for ... Maybe life would feel less heavy if I had a partner to help me deal with it. But in what world does it make sense to drag someone else into this mess?

As much as he wants to, Jackson can’t solve my problems.

I reach up and caress his cheek, and then I even take it a step further and cuddle against him. His strong arms come around me, and he kisses the top of my head. “Is it timing or ...” he whispers against my head. “Because I’ll wait if it’s—”

“It would be so easy to get lost in us for longer than a night.” Wrapping my arms around his middle, I hold him as close as I can, already knowing this is the end. At least for the time being. “That’s what scares me. I’ve been there, done that, and it never ends well.”

I release him quickly and force myself across the hall. “I need to fix my life, and I need to do it on my own while standing on my own two feet. I don’t know if you understand that, but relying on others is what got me here.” Holding the railing, I restrain myself from seeking the protection of his arms again. “I want to ask you to wait, Jackson. I want to, so badly. And I know you would. I need you to know that no matter how I acted in the past, I never underestimated who you were. You’re a good man and deserve to be with someone who can give you everything.”

“I want to be happy. I want what’s good for me.” He stares into my eyes as if I have the answers.

I don’t. I’m muddling through like he is. “I’m not sure I’m any good for you, St. James.”

“*Oh*, Ms. Marché, I wholeheartedly disagree.”

His smile warms my heart, making me feel good and whole again. That’s what I’ve been missing. I’ve been living with an emptiness that he manages to fill instantly. And the faith he has in me—faith that I’m not sure I’ve given him a reason to believe in—steals my breath.

I meant what I said. Jackson is a good man. Everyone knows it, especially me.

“Can I be honest with you?” I ask him.

“I hope you’ll always be honest with me.”

“I have trust issues.”

He smirks. “I’m shocked.”

I swat his shoulder, making him chuckle. “I mean it. I . . . I have a mess to clean up because the one person I trusted to always have my back didn’t. I’m cautious to trust anyone again.”

“You can trust me, Marlow. I’ve never given you a reason to believe you can’t. As a matter of fact, I’ve put up with a lot of your shit—”

“Okay, that goes both ways, mister.”

“But look, I’m still here.”

And so am I.

Does that mean anything? *Surely, it does.*

“Can I ask a favor?” I ask, my stomach churning.

“Anything,” he answers without hesitation.

I’m not sure what I’m getting into or if I’m strong enough to get into anything with him, but I can’t let this man walk out of my life. *And God knows I can’t walk out of his.* But I can’t be with him like I want to either. *Not yet.*

“Hey,” he says, catching my gaze with his. “What do you need?” His voice is unflinching.

I reach out and touch the side of his face. “Can we pause this conversation?” I fist his shirt. “Only for a little while? Like I said, I have a lot of things to figure out, and I can’t possibly deal with all of that at the same time as your impossibly kissable lips.”

He grins. It lights up my world as I bite my lower lip and take him in. Such a gorgeous man, but that heart of his ... he’s the best of them.

“Only my lips are kissable? I think you’ve forgotten how you can’t keep your lips off another part of my anatomy.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but we’re not talking about your ego right now.”

His hand covers his chest. “Damn, Marché. You wound me.”

I laugh. “Well, I’m trying to stay focused here, but you’re making it very hard.” The moment I say it, I know I shouldn’t have. That is quite the setup.

Jackson seizes the opportunity like he always does. “*I’m* making it hard? I think you’ve got that backward, babe.”

I snap twice. “We need to stay on topic because if we veer off from here, we’ll be in bed before we finish this conversation.”

He chuckles. “I’m not seeing the problem.”

Scoffing, I laugh. “Naturally. As for this convo, let’s just take a pause, okay? I don’t want to lose you, but I can’t commit how you want just yet. I can’t do this and fix my life all at the same time.”

Coming forward, he holds my chin between his fingers. “You’re not doing any of it alone. You know that, right?” He always knows what to say and what I need to hear.

I could love this man, I think.

My grip tightens on the rail, and I take a steadying breath. “Thank you for saying that.”

“Just don’t forget it, beautiful.”

“Stop charming me when I’m trying to be an adult.”

With a shrug, he takes a step back. “Sorry. I know that’s new for you,” he jokes.

I try to shoot a glare full of daggers but fail miserably.

“For the record, I’m not happy about this,” he says, taking my palm and kissing it.

“Me either.”

“But if that’s what you need, then what can I say? I respect you wanting to get things in order. And I know you can. You’re much stronger and more capable than you know, Marlow.”

His belief in me gives me strength. No one has ever believed in me so resolutely. It fuels my desire to figure it out even more and much quicker.

“You’re the best,” I say. “You know that?”

“I know.” He releases my hand and walks backward toward the door. “I’m going back in there to eat that damn queso. You can do whatever you need to do. I have a busy week at work, so I’ll give you some space. Just check in occasionally and let me know you’re okay. Deal?”

My heart beats strong in my chest, his words the balm I needed to help me move forward in the right direction. “You’ve got yourself a deal, St. James.”

“I’m going to hold you to it.” He sends me a wink, and don’t think for one second that I don’t get weak in the knees. Fortunately, I’m already holding the railing.

“I hope you do.” I laugh, but just before the door closes, I call, “Hey, one more thing.”

Holding the door with one hand, he stops. “What is it?”

“We can still have sex, right?” My smirk can’t be restrained.

“I would never say no to you.”

“Good. I don’t want to blow this whole thing.”

“You blowing this thing has never been our problem.” With a click of his tongue, he laughs again. “Now, go get ’em, tiger.”

Feeling on top of the world, I start down the stairs, but a whistle has me turning back before I’m too far to catch sight of him once more. I could blame the stairs for my heart racing, but that would be a lie. It’s him and the smile that reaches those blue eyes that has me all worked up. He says, “Looking good.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” He goes inside, and I hurry the rest of the way home. Knowing I have him in my corner, I feel ready to conquer the world.

Jackson

IT'S BEEN A LONG FUCKING week ... *and it's only Wednesday.*

I scrub a hand over my face before massaging my right temple. It's not like I regret going after Marlow yesterday. I'm glad we aired our issues and know where we stand with each other. I also gained some insight that I didn't previously have when it came to her finances. I don't think any of us realized how bad things had gotten for her. She's really good at putting on a smiling face and faking it till she makes it. It's been easy to assume all the pieces would fall into place for her. *Like they always do.*

It makes me realize that instead of assuming everything was going to work out, maybe the others and I should've stepped in sooner. I would give her the money for the down payment if I knew she would accept it. But she won't. And the even larger concern here is that even if we helped her buy the property, she couldn't afford the mortgage.

Real estate is an investment I'm willing to make, but I think that's the last thing Marlow would want in this case. Ultimately, it would be up to her to ask me for it. Not to hear her beg or grovel, but to hear her plan, to be a part of a solution and not just be someone else who sets her up for failure.

When I said she could trust me, I meant it.

A window pops up on my monitor, reminding me of my meeting. I grab my portfolio and push away from the desk. It's been too easy getting sidetracked by Marlow lately. I need to shake this off and get my mind back in the game. With millions on the line, I can't afford to fuck up a deal like I'm fucking up my personal life.

With so many employees taking another few days off after the holiday, I like the quiet and moving about the space freely without having to deal with the tasks that come with regular weekdays. It also keeps this potential investment under wraps a bit longer, which I appreciate. A startup team has flown in from California. They're under major deadlines to hit their goals before their next report is due in two weeks.

Let's see how badly they want to make this happen.

My brother-in-law walks ahead of me down the corridor to the conference room. My sister chose a guy I'd be happy to call my brother. He stops and turns back. "Hey, Nick," I say.

Nick Christiansen is one of the owners of Christiansen Wealth Management. He and his brother, Andrew, took over after their father retired a couple of years back. The messy part of his family taking over my family's financial business was resolved, and we all came out winners. And by winners, I mean millionaires, and we're still on good terms. So yeah, winners.

He asks, "You ready?"

"Sure. I usually know within a few minutes if it's worth my time and money."

"Investments shouldn't always be based on gut, Jackson. Don't forget that their mission and history matter to predict their outcome. I looked over the contract, and fortunately, they're good on paper." *Did I forget to mention he's a lawyer?* "Andrew said it was a solid investment, and he would feel comfortable with the transaction."

"Based on?" As I know Andrew Christiansen is a financial whiz as well as a CEO, my instinct to bring these guys in for a meeting seems like the right one since they've done so well.

He's a bit older than me and somewhat wiser, so I've learned from the best.

"You know he only cares about the bottom line and forecasts." We start walking again.

"There's no one I trust more to look out for my financial well-being than Andrew. That's why I'm ready to drop some money on this deal if this team doesn't fuck up the presentation. It's not all paper. It's about the people involved as well."

He stops again. "Don't know if Andrew messaged you, but he can't make the meeting. He had a conflict with another meeting that had to be rescheduled and shifted to today. The Everest Brothers. At least two of the three—Ethan and Bennett—could only meet this morning."

I'm not worried about running an investment meeting anymore. I've done it enough to go off instinct and bottom lines on the reports to guide me. The Everests are titans of the industry and billionaire entrepreneurs. Bonus, they've become friends. And although it's not normally wise to work with friends, you don't say no to managing wealth at that level. If you do, someone else won't.

Our steps are silent against the low-pile carpet, but I also want to keep our conversation between us when I say, "What do you think about pulling in the Everest brothers?"

He chuckles. "Damn, dude. You know how to shoot for the stars."

"Always." I can cover some of the investment, but I think this company could do wonders in their field with a partner." When we reach the conference room, I stop him from going in. "Unless you're interested?"

"I might be. I have eight million coming in from closing out some shares from a startup in Chicago. What's the buy-in?"

"I'm going in twelve for twenty percent. Their goal was thirty with the options closing out at forty-nine percent."

We stand eye to eye as he studies my expression. “It might be fun to work this deal with you. If I drop six on this, where are you finding the other twelve mil?”

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he says, “I’ll text Andrew to see if they’re interested in coming to hear the pitch.”

Before opening the door, I say, “I’ll go warm up the crowd.”

SETTING his beer on the table, Ethan Everest says, “Oh, shit.”

I follow his gaze to see a woman walking in. I recognize his wife since I’ve met her a few times over the years, but I’m confused by his reaction. Singer’s always been a lot of fun to be around. “What’s up? You in trouble for going out?”

He chuckles as he stands, angling toward her. “No, I’ve just fucking missed her, and she shows up looking like spending time alone might be better.” Moving to greet her, he takes her in his arms and kisses her.

We’re in a private room of the restaurant, and it’s all adults, but if there were kids, I’d be making them close their eyes. “You’d think they were still newlyweds by that greeting,” Bennett says, shaking his head in admonishment.

Then his chair goes skidding behind him when he sees his wife walking in behind Singer.

Next to me, my sister, Natalie, joined us to show support for Nick and to celebrate my newest investment. Andrew stopped by for a drink but had to meet his wife, Juni, at an event at a public garden space she oversees.

That leaves me as the ... I scan the long table. *Ninth wheel?* Oh joy, I think sarcastically, and then I take another long pull of my beer.

The Silicon Valley team caught a flight back to California, not wasting a day or a dollar of our investment, leaving Ethan,

Bennett, and their wives to join us for dinner. Sitting with friends and their girls, now their wives, was never an issue before, but after the past few days with Marlow, the empty seat next to me taunts me even more.

Our conversation might be paused, but I've still had it playing on a loop in the back of my mind. She's right. Not everyone is meant to couple up, but not everyone is meant to be in a long-term committed relationship either.

But if that's true, why am I still pining over her?

Pining might be a bit of an exaggeration, but if she texted me right now, I'd be catching the next cab out of here. I used to want to date around to see what was out there. I never took anyone out more than a couple of times. *Why don't I want them?*

What's changed other than a gorgeous blonde with a short fuse and a tight ass giving me a hard time for the past six months? And although we don't tease each other as much, I still have plenty of hard to give her.

Fuck. Not only do I miss Marlow, but I'm fucking horny.

Setting my phone on the table next to me, I pull up her name in my contacts list. With her, it's not just a sex thing. It's a comfort in our friendship, peace in her presence kind of thing. She's whip smart and knows what she wants and needs, which is incredibly sexy.

"Jackson?"

My shoulder's poked, and I turn to find my sister staring at me. "What?"

"The server is waiting to take your order."

I look between Bennett and his wife, Winter, to see a guy with a name tag reading Ralph standing behind them with his pen poised on a pad. I glance down at the menu, then ask, "What's the special?"

"Lobster—"

"I'll take it." Everyone returns to whatever they were doing, the noise level rising through the various conversations.

“Very well, sir,” Ralph says to me. “And I’ll bring you another Stella Artois.”

“Thanks.”

When he leaves the room, Natalie nudges me with her arm. “What’s going on with you, little brother?”

She uses that nickname whenever she can, but I haven’t been little for a long time. I lean over and nudge her with my elbow. “Can’t a guy just get lost in his thoughts?”

“Sure, they can, but I was just checking on you.”

I drop my shoulders, trying to relax. “I have a lot on my mind.”

I find comfort in her smile like I did when I was little. “I know what will help.”

“Yeah?”

“Playing with your niece,” she says, and then doesn’t miss a beat. “Speaking of, you should come around more. Your niece misses you.”

Natalie always knows how to lighten the heavy in my chest. “I’ll stop by this weekend.”

“Good. Come for dinner.”

Winter leans in from across the table, and says, “I met friends of yours last week, Jackson.”

“Oh, yeah?”

She smiles kindly, her eyes volleying to Natalie and then back to me. “Tealey Bell came by because Singer and I reached out on another fundraising effort in February—one that we can collaborate between the Everest foundation and Tealey’s women’s program. She’s the sweetest, by the way. Her friends were with her.”

I perk up as she continues. “Cammie brought us homemade cookies. And Marlow—”

The server interrupts, causing her to look up when he cuts around her to set a bottle of wine on the table. *Just when it got*

interesting ...

After a group toast, I drink the remainder of my beer and then pull the fresh one closer. Leaning in, I dig for more. “Winter, you mentioned Marlow.”

She sets her glass down and smiles. “She’s amazing. “

“She is,” I reply effortlessly, though my grip on the glass could argue otherwise. I set it down before it shatters in my hand. No one twists me up like Marlow Marché.

“Marlow’s trying to organize a special night to preview the Kyoto exhibit. It would be a chance for the highest bidders to see the show before anyone else. That could raise a lot of money for our cause.”

Sitting back, I nod. “That’s great. She hasn’t mentioned it to me, but I know she’s been working hard at the gallery.” I’ve never truly seen Marlow in action, and now I feel like I’ve been missing out. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve taken her at face value. I know she works hard and sometimes long hours, but have I underestimated her all along?

Tealey’s organized a few events when we helped at different charities, and we’ve run a lot of races to raise money, but Marlow’s not been at the forefront of them. She loves to cheer us on from the sidelines instead. So hearing Winter talk about Marlow leading the charge in fundraising for a good cause, I can’t help but wonder what else I’ve missed out on.

Thinking about her work at the gallery, I bet she’s pretty fucking impressive.

Propping her chin in her hand, she smiles with curiosity filling her eyes. “Have you gotten a sneak peek of the exhibit?”

“No, I haven’t, but I bet it’s spectacular if Marlow likes it. She has great taste.” In art. Designers. Men. *I have to give myself props.*

She sits up again. “Well, she was so lovely to chat with. All of them were. You have a great group of friends.”

“I do.” I take a long pull off my beer, thinking about how I’ve been so sidetracked by the pitch today and Marlow every other day that I haven’t been able to think about my best friends. This week’s been such a blur that I don’t even know if we’re getting together again. I text Rad and Cade: *Are there plans for the weekend?*

Cade doesn’t leave me hanging and replies: *Being between seasons sucks. No games are on. Are the girls forcing us to brunch on Sunday because I wouldn’t mind sleeping in?*

Rad: *Tealey was asking me earlier. I think she’s organizing something—possibly a shopping trip to the farmers’ market. Please save me. I can only eat so many Kabocha squash, and that’s all they seem to have lately. Tealey loves squash like an addict. She needs her fix. Did you guys know that?*

Chuckling, I type: *Can’t say I did. Sounds like you’re living the good life there, old man.*

Cade: *I don’t even know what Kabocha squash is, and I don’t think I want to.*

Me: *Enough with the squash talk. Wanna go for a run? I’ll need it after this dinner.*

Cade: *Count me out.*

That came without a second passing. He never did get into running, even after we forced him to cover some miles with us.

Rad: *You’re a no just from the suggestion?*

Cade: *Yup. Pick a gym, and I’ll strength train because this bulky body isn’t made to hit the pavement. I’ll leave that to you guys.*

Although I have a state-of-the-art gym in my building, I usually go over to his house once a week or so to work out in his garage since it’s hard to get him out of Brooklyn. Married a year and he’s settled so far down that I’ve started to wonder if we’ll see him once they have the baby. Like my sister. I don’t see my sister as much anymore. She’s busy. Nick’s busy. I’m busy. It’s strange how the people who were your whole world

for a period in your life—my mom, dad, and sister—become like a second family once the kids create their own.

I haven't built much of a personal life for myself. What's the point when I'm ... alone. Alone was something I thought I was content with, but being around so many couples, friends who have found their own happiness ... maybe this is part of becoming an adult. Figuring your shit out.

Cade: *Cookies are ready. Gotta run.*

Rad: *Thought you didn't run?*

The joke lies there for a few beats as I chuckle. Cade finally texts: *For Cammie's cookies, I do.*

Me: *We don't need the details of your sex life, man.*

I laugh at my joke. Cade: *Do we need to go over the birds and bees again, St. James?*

Rolling my eyes, I text: *I got it covered. Literally. Lobster is served. I'm ducking out from this convo.*

Rad: *Speaking of the good life ...*

I'm still laughing under my breath when another message from Rad appears: *Let's get a plan together for the weekend. Maybe a game of basketball down at the gym. Have a good night, gentlemen.*

I eye the plate set before me and the company around me. It's a good night, but it could be great if the first thing my mind didn't detour toward is that damn empty seat next to me again. I start eating and refocus on the conversation before me instead of what I'm missing out on.

Bennett raises his glass. "To our new venture and that it pays off threefold."

Ethan says, "To Jackson. I have a good feeling about this investment and that there are more deals to come."

Everyone follows suit toasting to me, but for some reason, it feels hollow without the one woman I want to celebrate with. I hold my glass up anyway. I've had a successful day and

should celebrate this big step in the right direction for my career.

Doesn't work, though. By the time we're ordering dessert, I'm done and toss in the napkin leaving them to continue drinking into the late hours.

As I make a quick round to say goodbye, Natalie adds, "Don't forget about dinner."

"I won't." I find Ralph on my way out. Handing him my card, I say, "Cover the bill and thirty percent tip, okay?"

"Absolutely," he says, grinning ear to ear. He runs the card and hands it back to me along with a pen. I sign, and he says, "Thank you so much, sir."

"You're welcome. But you make sure they're taken care of. Got it?"

"I will."

Glad the restaurant has cabs waiting for customers, I hop in one. I'm tempted to detour to Marlow's like she did to mine yesterday. But we left things in a good place, and I told her I'd give her space.

Would it really be so bad if I went anyway?

Marlow

EXHAUSTION TAKES HOLD OF ME, and I lie back on the concrete floor.

Under most circumstances, I would never lie on a floor, but I'm hot, bothered, and tired. I check my watch. 11:38 PM. No wonder I'm so tired. I've been going nonstop since the gallery closed four hours ago.

Staring up at the industrial ceiling of the gallery, I feel my eyes grow heavy, and my body begins to sag against the unforgiving concrete. I roll my head to the side and wonder if I can get away with leaving the paint cans for Baker to pick up in the morning. I know I can't. There's no room for error with my eyes set on a promotion, so I shove myself back to my feet and start cleaning up the mess.

Painting the gallery is something I've never done, but I feel accomplished and proud as I stand in front of the wall that now sports the perfect shade of white. This is not how I'm used to spending my nights, but it feels good to be so productive.

It beats sitting at home and researching how much my bags will resell for.

I close the cans of paint and then lug them into the storage room one by one. Picking up the drop cloth, I wad it into a ball and add it to the pile in the back.

Now I can really appreciate the effortless beauty of Swan Lake White. Hope my boss approves of the change. Nicole prefers Stark White. I'll give her that it has a time and place, but it's dated, which is the last thing a gallery should be.

I grab my bag and hit the lights on my way out. After locking up, I walk down the block to a pocket-sized Japanese restaurant that sits in the corner of a large building full of legal offices. And it's open, so I don't have to rush.

After ordering, I occupy one of the stools at the bar and wait, trying to keep my thoughts focused on the moment—a couple feeding each other sushi, a man hunched over a table by the window, and a few college-aged kids lining the other end of the bar while sharing loud laughter and being boisterous.

During college and for the first years after graduation, Cammie, Tealey, Rad, Cade, Jackson, and I were busy getting our feet wet in the working world, hoping our hard-earned degrees would pay off. Call it ignorant bliss, but life felt wide open for me to conquer back then. My bills and credit cards were paid, and we'd party into the wee hours, laugh until our faces hurt, and dance until our feet ached.

I never felt happier, more protected, or safe than I did in those days.

Jackson always had girls hanging around him like he hung the moon. I don't remember their names. Only him with his eyes on me. It didn't matter if we were at a party or hanging out at Rad's place. I would always catch those blue eyes aimed in my direction. I thought he was so annoying back then, but how could I be so blind to what was right in front of me this whole time?

Pulling out my phone, I'm about to text him to just tell him he's on my mind, but I hear, "Can I buy you a drink?" The voice is deep with a soft Italian accent by way of Jersey more than Italy.

When I lay my eyes on the guy who slid on the barstool next to me, I'm pleasantly surprised. I mean, he's not my type, but he matches his voice—large build, enough scruff has

grown back after a long day. That reminds me of Jackson. I don't hate a coating of scruff on him. In fact, I love it. I just can't tell him, or he might never shave again, and if I had to choose, the sight of that jaw would win every time.

The sound of dishes clattering together grabs my attention, but then I look next to me again. This guy's light-gray suit lacks a tie, and the collar is unbuttoned. Leaning against the counter, he says, "I ordered a scotch."

"Good choice. I'm having wine, but I can cover it." Just barely, but he doesn't need to know that. "Thanks, though."

As if she heard, a server hops behind the counter and asks me what I want.

"Chardonnay. The house wine will do. Thank you." I'm tempted to tell him I'm on a budget these days, choosing the four-dollar six-ounce glass of wine over the larger size I usually order, but I don't owe anyone an explanation for my choices. Especially not a stranger. I temper my embarrassment and take a quick breath to swallow it down.

Living on a budget might be new, but it's respectable. It's what I should have been doing my entire adult life. I just didn't know I needed to.

He leans over, not breaching the middle between us, and whispers, "I was supposed to get married today."

My mouth falls open, but I catch my expression before my eyes bug out. Besides it being the middle of the week, that's quite a bomb he dropped on me, again, a total stranger. He waves as if he's tired of explaining. "New Year's would have been nice, but everything's cheaper on Wednesdays."

Ah. Yes. "Why are you sitting here at this hour when you should be with your wife?"

Glancing at me, he's quick to avert his eyes, revealing guilt or sadness. I'm not sure which one, so I try to break the ice again, feeling sorry for him. "Where's the beautiful bride?"

He finally scrubs a hand over his face, his slicked-back hair starting to loosen. When he looks at me, scanning my

face, he smiles as if he doesn't mind what he sees. I've never had trouble attracting men. I have trouble trusting them.

Angling toward me, he says, "Having sex with my best man, Barry."

"Oh." Maybe I should have left this guy alone.

"She had sex with him before the ceremony. They were found in the church office."

Our drinks are set before us, and I pull a bill out of my wallet. It doesn't matter if it's one of my last. The man deserves a drink. "I think I need to buy you a drink."

"Thanks." He tips his glass to me and laughs before taking a gulp. "You ready for the kicker?"

I take a sip of my chardonnay. "I don't know, am I?" This story is riveting. I take another drink, my body finally easing from the tension I've felt all day.

"They hit the microphone for the sanctuary."

Practically spitting out my wine, I cover my mouth with my hand and swallow it down. "Whoa. I was not ready for that."

"See? And whoa is right." He takes another gulp of the liquor and then says, "Did I tell you that our families and friends were already seated?"

I know I shouldn't, but I laugh, then cover my mouth again. "No, you failed to mention that. I have so many questions. Do you mind if I pry?"

He's smiling, even laughing. That's good, all things considered. "No, I have nothing to hide, but I never want to hear the name Barry again in my life. You would have thought it was on repeat."

"Sounds like it was."

He cringes just a little but grins again. "She never called out my name."

"Sorry to hear that."

“That my fiancée didn’t call my name out in ecstasy?”

“That and the whole fiasco.” Twirling the stem of my glass, I ask, “How did you end up here, especially at this hour?”

He glances out the window. I thought he was a lot older earlier, older than me, but I’m now rethinking my guess. I’d say early thirties at most once he relaxed. “I was heading from a bar down the street where a large group of us went to celebrate—”

“You were celebrating?”

He shrugs. “Figured I dodged a bullet. Was I hurt? Pissed off? Yes, of course. I loved her. I’ve also had a few hours and some drinks to reevaluate the relationship. The image of my best friend and fiancée fucking before marrying me, and then everyone I know hearing them kind of tainted that love. Now I wonder if she loved me at all.”

He looks down for a moment, and I wonder if he’s secretly grieving. Or whether more anger and grief will come in time. He looks up again, and adds, “When she chose Barry, she made the decision regarding our future. I may not have had a say, but I know I dodged a bullet, and if I’m meant to have a second chance to find my soul mate, I’m taking it.”

He smiles then, and it does make me wonder why his fiancée was such an asshole to cheat on him. His food is delivered alongside mine, our orders in bags and ready to go. His dark eyes take me in again, and he says, “I can’t leave without asking. You want to get a table and eat together?”

The air thickens as I take another sip. He’s entertaining, and it’s been nice not to live in my own problems for a few minutes. “This has been unexpectedly fun—”

“But?”

I nod as the smell of my food wafts, making my stomach growl. “But I’m sort of stuck in a mess of my own that I’m trying to work out.”

This time, he nods. “Read the signs. Good or bad, they’re always there.”

I slip off the barstool and take my bag in hand. “Since we’re strangers, I should tell you that I’m terrible with directions, so reading signs isn’t my forté.”

Swirling the liquid around his glass, he laughs again. “Oh, yeah?”

“Do you mind if I ask you one more question before I go?” He tips his chin in permission. “Is it possible to see the signs before the bad happens?”

A heavy sigh is released from his chest before he finishes his drink. Setting the glass down, he finally looks at me. “Don’t waste your time on the bad. Look for the good instead.”

I’m not sure what to make of that, but that could be because of the hour. “Good luck with that new lease on life.”

“Thanks. Take care.”

“You, too.”

When I walk out, I’m still starving, but my mind is now on other things. Using a rideshare app, I’m picked up quickly and settle in the back. Thinking about the turn my night just took, and the even crazier story, I soak in the words of wisdom. I mean, I figure they must have some wisdom in them, considering what he’s been through.

The signs are always there, but don’t waste time on the bad ones. How ironic because I’m starting to believe that I’ve been the one throwing obstacles in my path all along.

My apartment.

Honestly, I should have never moved here. The apartment always had more space than I needed for just me.

My job.

I could have left when I lost the last promotion, but I was determined to prove myself like I hadn’t already in the previous five years. I can’t let my boss dictate my career prospects anymore.

My ... Jackson.

Is he mine?

I've worked so hard to convince myself that we're no good for each other on a more permanent basis, but I can't believe that line of thinking. *Jackson feels too good to be bad for me.*

Inside my apartment, I rip open the plastic bag and pull out the two containers of food before grabbing a spoon from the drawer. I could be polite and pour my soup into a bowl, but who am I trying to impress? *No one anymore.*

I move to the couch with my soup and dumplings, getting comfortable, but the handbags I have lined up against the hall wall waiting to be photographed, priced, and uploaded for sale make me feel guilty for taking even a minute to myself.

No one's going to save me but myself, and I'm finally accepting that I'll be moving. *Where will I go? Who knows?* I'll find something, even if I have to sleep in Tealey's or Cammie's spare room for a while.

The thought makes me wince. It's hard to wrap my mind around a lifestyle that involves thinking about money, or that doesn't include spontaneous weekends away, or buying something simply because I want it. Insult to injury, now I have to add begging my friends to let me scrounge off them.

My belongings—purses, jewelry, furniture, and clothes—have always defined who I am, and shopping gave me a purpose. It's where I developed my keen sense of style that will serve me in the art world. But that's not all I am.

Nice things made me feel beautiful, or at least that's what I was told to feel. Luxury items made me important in circles that mattered once upon a time. They don't anymore. It's just so hard to part from those lingering feelings and thoughts that have embedded themselves deep inside me.

The thought of parting with my stuff has my chest tightening. I love it all. It's all I've had to take care of throughout my life, and it feels like I'm losing a part of my identity. Since my small art collection will never enter the equation if I can help it, that leaves one burning question in regard to everything else. What's more important?

Save what used to define me, or do I discover the woman I am now?

I know the answer. Even if I don't like the decision I have to make.

You know what I do like?

Jackson St. James.

I wonder if texting him tonight is too soon?

Marlow

I WANT TO HAVE SEX.

I send the text before I have a chance to delete it, and then gulp down the rest of my red wine. In the past four days, I've discovered it's not about living without sex. It's about living without having sex with Jackson. *And him in general.*

Of course, he'd probably get a good chuckle that I'm already missing him only twenty-four hours later ... what can I say? I find him entertaining in many ways.

I'm not even horny.

Well ... I am, but I can live with those cravings. I can even satisfy them battery-style. Jackson St. James is a great lover, and those skills should never be discounted. My insides flutter from the memory of his hands on me, the feel of him inside me, and the look on his face—something caught between devouring and savoring.

I appreciate both on him.

He takes his time and puts his attention into pleasing me, sexually speaking that is. He's into it, so into me when we're together like that as if no one else exists, time doesn't matter, and tomorrow is a world away.

Every inch of me is covered with kisses, and my body's drained of each wave of new sensation when released. I also

like the way he kisses behind my ear, so that's a bonus.

What can I say? I'm a simple girl with simple needs.

And let's face the facts. The man turns me on.

I lie back on the couch, staring up at my phone screen. I have plenty of offers and a phone full of messages inviting me out tonight. I could go to the ballet with Steven or a jazz bar with Javier. Mr. Casteleone would love to discuss his art collection over dinner at one of the most exclusive dinner clubs in the city. Even Chuck from receiving asked me to a movie.

Wining and dining have always drawn me in. Mixing and mingling in high society or even a cozy wine bar on the Upper West Side has the makings of a good night.

But I don't want wine or food. *I want Jackson.*

That's been my issue for a while now. Sure, we said we could date others when our proposition first came into play, but that ended not long after. At least for me, it did.

I didn't use to ask him if he was still dating because I was afraid of the answer. But if I had to bet my life on it, I feel confident we're in the same boat these days.

I'm not naïve enough to think sex and relationships are mutually exclusive. I've actually been a proponent of proving it's the opposite. It's entirely possible to have one without the other. We did that for years prior to hooking up. Neither of us has ever claimed to be angels.

But the comfort and encouragement he gave me to take care of my business has kept me warm all day. I can't imagine dating anyone else at this stage.

Holding my phone in my hand, I'm disappointed that he hasn't texted me back yet.

I remind myself that he has business to take care of as well.

Easier said than done because despite all the stuff I should be doing, I can't stop thinking about him.

I start to text again, but a message pops up first: *Wrong number.*

Oh, God! I sit forward, mortified, and double-check the number. Please tell me I didn't send an I want to have sex text to a stranger. I see his name above the messages. Oh, thank God! I text: *You're a jerk, St. James.*

He's quick to return a message this time: *Do you always tell jerks you want to have sex with them?*

I type: *Apparently.*

Jackson: *What's the plan for getting you sexed? You need a wingman at a bar, or maybe a hookup to the club tonight. My password to watch porn? What do you need? Like the insurance, I'm there.*

I slide lower on the cushion, kicking my feet up on the arm of the white leather sofa. Me: *You'd help me pick up another man to have sex with?*

Jackson: *Fuck no. No other man is coming near you.*

Why is it such a turn-on when he gets possessive? There's just something so sexy when Jackson's territorial instincts kick in. Me: *But you just offered.*

Jackson: *Yeah, fuck that. Sexing you up is my job.*

Me: *You're hired. When can you start?*

A knock on my door has me bolting upright. I type: *Hold on. Someone's here.*

Jackson: *A little late, don't you think?*

I hurry across the apartment and lift onto the balls of my feet to peek through the peephole.

The smirk.

The deep-blue eyes.

And the little tousel of hair that's fallen over his forehead.

Before I open the door, I playfully ask, "Who is it?" but also start unlocking the bolts in my excitement to see Jackson again.

“The Big Bad Wolf.”

I might have once said I didn't believe in fairy tales. “My grandmother's not home.” I swing the door wide open, and add, “But I am. Will I do?”

He eyes me from head to toe and back again, his tongue dipping out to wet his lower lip. I hold the door a little firmer as the sight of that tongue teasing me has my legs weakening under me.

“You'll more than do, Marché.” Rushing in, he takes me by the waist and lifts me into the air. I wrap my legs around his waist and secure my arms around his neck. Our lips crash together, and then he pins me to the wall. A harsh breath is sucked in before a wry grin appears. “Why do you have to be so damn tempting?”

I lick my lips and find myself taking a deeper breath—the heat, the proximity, the man. I gulp and then shake my head. “I don't know what to say to that, Jackson.”

He cups my cheek. “It's okay. You don't have to say anything. You just have to—”

“Kiss me.”

Our mouths come together again in a flood of passion as his need presses hard against me. I tighten myself around him, wanting to feel this again, needing him, and wanting all of this, all of us again like we've always been.

When our lips part, Jackson dips his head to the side with my body, and whole being, still safe in his arms. He says, “You always did have the prettiest eyes.”

I get compliments on my looks all the time. So I'm not sure why my cheeks are suddenly heating under his gaze other than this compliment feels different coming from him. It's as if he's always felt this way but never shared before.

“Thank you,” I whisper, not having to pretend to act shy at all. I feel it for the first time, making me realize it matters what he thinks of me.

Kissing the corner of my mouth and then the middle of my lips, he has me melting between him and the wall, and then kissing him right back. Seconds pass before our mouths open, and our tongues begin to tangle again. He moves to my neck, leaving a surge of goose bumps in the wake.

His jaw is rough to the touch of my lips, but I kiss him, dragging myself across him to feel the burn of our connection. Pushing the tip of my nose against the shell of his ear, I whisper, “Why are we still out here when we could be in the bedroom?”

“I’m starting to think you only want me for my body.”

“Is that a problem?” I grin and bat my eyelashes.

A rogue grin glides into place. “Fuck no, it’s not.” He kisses my neck, and when I tilt back to give him more access, he kisses along my jaw. “I need to tell you something, though.” He slides his tongue over my skin and then blows, causing pebbles to rise in reaction.

“Yes,” I reply through unrestrained breaths.

“I’m going to keep kissing you. Now that I’ve had a taste, there’s no way I’m going back.”

“I’d already thrown that rule out the window.” I tighten my hold around him but smile because—*Gah*—he’s amazing. Not just his mouth, though that’s pretty magical, but the whole man. “Because I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

We’ve already crossed so many boundaries that there are no assets left to protect, except for maybe our hearts. But who cares when I have this incredible man carrying me into the bedroom?

He tosses me on the bed, leaving me laughing while he tugs his shirt off over his head. Kicking off his shoes, he starts on his dress pants.

“In a hurry there, cowboy?” I ask, propped up on my elbows and shamelessly watching him undress.

“Abso-fucking-lutely. I’ve been thinking about you all night,” he replies with a wink.

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“Good.” His pants drop to the floor, and he rips off his socks. Crawling over me on the bed, he kisses my mouth once more, and says, “Because I plan to be everywhere on this body of yours.” Kissing my temple, he whispers, “Even in your head. My name is all you’ll remember when I’m through with you tonight.”

My body shivers under his delicious threat, and I press my palm flat against his chest. No strength is needed when I push him to his back. He goes willingly and then holds me by the hips when I mount him.

With his hand slipping into my hair at the back of my head, he brings me down for another kiss that deepens quickly. My lids are closed as I begin a sweet surrender to him. But then he tilts me to the side and starts on my neck again. “Why are you still dressed?”

Reveling in his attention to detail, I smile with my eyes still closed. “I was just thinking the same.”

I torture myself by forcing distance between us, knowing the reward will come shortly if I’m quick. Getting off the bed, I start tugging my workout pants down my legs and step out of them.

Jackson moves up the bed and sits like a king on a throne with his back against the headboard watching me. I’m comfortable being naked in front of him and letting him admire me, but that look on his face has me squirming in anticipation to return to him.

When he licks his lips, I lick mine.

He rubs his hand over his erection, and I slip mine under the baggy T-shirt I was wearing to paint in. *Two can tease.* Unclasping my bra in the back, I slip it off through the sleeves, leaving the shirt to hide most of my torso.

His breaths lie heavy in his chest, the sound of each one becoming an aphrodisiac to my ears. “Take it off, sweetheart,” he commands without remorse. Suddenly, the nickname doesn’t bother me anymore.

The cotton rubs against my nipples, and I bite my lip as my body awakens for him. The look in his eyes makes me think I'm dancing the tango with the devil himself. God, I'm so ready to sin with him.

I drop the shirt to the floor and then crawl back onto the bed. Taking hold of the cotton wrapped around his thighs, I say, "You won't be needing these either." I pull his boxer briefs down and toss them over my shoulder. Repositioning myself, I hover over him and whisper, "You know what we really don't need?"

"What's that?"

"I'm on the pill. What if ...?"

Sexually, we've been exclusive since we started being together last summer, so I don't have doubts about our history. We took tests a long time ago.

With confidence in spades, he doesn't whisper, he growls, "You want to ride my bare cock?"

I seat myself above just the thought turning me on as the tip teases my entrance. "I want you. I want to feel all of you. And since we're breaking the rules—" I sink down and start rocking.

A gasp escapes me when I'm lifted by the hips and brought down over his thick length. The pleasure buries the pain of the stretch he induces, both of us moaning in unison as my head dips back from the sudden intensity.

I lean forward, leveraging my hands on his chest. The sight of his pleasure is caught in his face. He closes his mouth and licks his lips again. "You're gonna be the fucking death of me."

"Is there a sweeter way to die than in pure ecstasy?"

He grins, sitting forward as I lift and fall over him again and again. As he weaves his fingers into my hair, there's no fighting against his strength as he brings me in for a kiss. Our bodies slow, and each inch becomes achingly delicious.

With our mouths pressed together, he swallows every one of my breaths, leaving me panting. We rip apart, and I fuck him as he fucks me with the sound of our slick bodies engulfing me.

As he stares into my eyes, he's a man with a hunger only I can satisfy. Our bodies move in tandem together and smoothly apart again. His hands move to my breasts and squeeze before one goes lower to slip between us and slide the tip of his fingers through my lower lips.

As I ride him, our lips reconnect, our bodies coming together—sliding, grinding, thrusting—until his finger finds and then teases the spot that makes me sing his name as it slips from the tip of my tongue.

I open my eyes just to see that look in his eyes again. He makes me feel like the most beautiful woman he's ever seen. He stares at me in awe and wonder, his eyes traveling my body as if I might not be real, and he's afraid I'll disappear. I'm sexy under his gaze, devious, and desperate for his touch.

It's all too much to hold on to for long, and I don't. *I can't.* My breath is jagged, my heart beats uncontrollably, and my body hums, feeling so alive with him inside me.

Ecstasy pulses through my veins just as a growl surges through his chest. I cling to him, wanting him deeper, so deep that we lose sight of where my body ends and his begins.

I'm flipped onto my back. His head dips to my shoulder, his eyes closed and pumping so deeply that there's no getting lost. I feel every inch of him claiming every ounce of me thrust by glorious thrust. It's then that I know it doesn't matter how much I want this to last all night. There's no way to hold back. *Not with him.*

Our bodies meet with every pounding between us. Pushing. Shoving. Taking. Coming. I dig my nails into his shoulders, spurring him on.

Harder.

Faster.

“So good,” I moan in the hedonism of our bond.

“The taste of your sweat turns me on.” He whispers the naughty confession in my ear before he slides down to lick my collarbone.

His flattened tongue laps me up until his breath trips and his drive becomes erratic. His moans in my ear, his whispers of encouragement and good girl send me spiraling into the abyss once more until my body is nothing but thrilling tremors.

He falls right with me, prodding so hard that I know I’ll feel it tomorrow. I need this, though, to forget space and time, forget my troubles, and live in this bliss. Even if momentarily.

It’s over too fast as our breaths remain heavy and our bodies wake in the twilight of the aftermath.

As we lay together so entwined in each other, my wish was granted for just a little while. And I love that. *So much. I’ll never have enough of him.* The feel of him. The sound of him vibrating in my ears. The feel of his hard body joined with mine. This feels so right. *Every single time.*

The weight of his body consumes me, but I don’t push him away. I wrap my arms around him instead. After peppering small kisses on his skin, I lie there, appreciating that it’s only him and me. I’m willing to remain wrapped in his arms all night and well into the morning if he’ll let me.

Eventually, he rolls to the side, draping his arm across his forehead. My breathing evens again as my ribs expand. He looks at me with a smile. “You’re fucking amazing.”

I lean over and kiss his shoulder. “You are, too. So amazing.” Wanting to try to capture more of the closeness we just shared, I roll to my side and snuggle around him, resting my head on his chest. When his arm lowers around my back, I claim more of his real estate by putting my leg over his, taking full advantage of what this position brings me.

Despite how great the sex is, the pieces of our physical connection aren’t holding us together. It’s our communication and understanding of what the other needs. I’ve never been so in tune with someone else as I am with him. The fear and

doubts I've been carrying around, even the uncertainty, have evaporated under the sweet kisses of this man.

A YAWN OVERCOMES me as my earlier exhaustion returns.

I take a mental note of his scent—where the ocean meets the shore of the deep woods—and the feel of his hard muscles against me, memorizing all I can about him before I fall asleep so I can remember everything about this moment forever.

The steady comfort of his beating heart gives me the peace to rest in this bliss without worrying about what tomorrow brings.

Jackson kisses the top of my head. “Are you hungry?”

Jackson

“I’M STARVING.”

Marlow sits up, resting her hand on the mattress, tits exposed, so comfortable in her skin around me. “Was I not satisfying?” she asks, quirking an eyebrow.

I’m quick to pull her back down by the waist and lean over her. Slowly dragging my tongue along the side of her neck, I reply, “You were phenomenal, but now I need food.” I push up and pop off the bed, much to her dismay.

“What do you have?” I ask, walking into the bathroom to clean up. I turn on the shower, deciding I could use one after the long day.

“Not much.” Her voice carries from the bedroom, but soon, she’s walking in behind me and heading toward the toilet. “I have soggy dumplings on the coffee table if you want them.”

“As tempting as that is, I’ll pass.”

She slips inside the small room and closes the door. “We can order something.”

Sticking my hand under the water, I find it’s already hot, so I step under the showerhead, tilting my head to the side since I’m too tall. I close my eyes and let the warmth wash through me. “What are you in the mood for?”

I don't see her, but I feel her close by. "*Wellllll* ... if you're asking me ..."

Opening my eyes, I pull her against me and under the water. Usually, she gets pissed when I get her hair wet, but not tonight. She closes her eyes with her body pressed against me and lets the water rain down over her.

I say, "I'm asking you. I always want to know what you want." Tapping her nose, I then kiss it. "And what you're craving."

She swipes away at the makeup that's started running down her face and then reaches for a tube of cleanser, squeezing some of the contents into her hand. "Something small for me. I started eating before you arrived, but that doesn't seem appealing anymore." Scrubbing the cleanser over her entire face and her closed eyes, she continues, "Just order whatever you want. I'm sure I can find something on the menu."

I'm sure she'll say a salad, but I know her well enough to know she'll pick at my food. From fries to tacos, she'll order what she thinks she should, but then devour the junk I order. She's lucky I'm a sharing kind of guy.

When she rinses her face, I can't stop staring at her natural beauty. Cupping her cheeks, I kiss her forehead, lingering there for a moment. "I'm glad you texted."

Holding my wrists, she replies, "I'm glad you mentioned that. How in the world did you get here so fast?"

I chuckle, leaning back and reaching for the shampoo behind her. "You want the truth?"

"Always."

I squeeze the shampoo in the palm of my hand and then set the bottle down before I start running it through the length of her soaked strands. "I was already here."

"That's a good party trick." Her body is so relaxed as I massage her scalp, but then she asks, "Are you a mind reader?"

“I wish. Selfishly, I just wanted to see you.”

The gentle smile that resided on her lips falters as her hands find my middle and hold tight to my ribs. “Jackson ...” It’s not a question. It’s not even a statement. It’s just her emotions all wrapped up in my name.

“You busted me. I can’t stay away from you.”

She pauses, her gaze fixed on mine before she grants a peek inside her thoughts, and her smile grows again. Between kisses to my chest, she says, “I’m glad you can’t because I can’t either.”

I’m tempted to say maybe we shouldn’t force something that feels so unnatural to both of us, but that’s repeating the past, which I don’t want to do. We’re finding our way on solid footing. I’m just going to have to learn patience.

We finish showering and dry ourselves before she slips on silky pajamas, but I’m relegated to putting on my boxer briefs. Leaving her to climb back under the sheets, I grab my phone and start making my way to the kitchen. Passing every color of handbag imaginable, I stop to ask, “Why are your purses lined up like this?”

“Because I have to sell them.”

Whether it’s her casual response or her even tone, I don’t know why that makes me pause. Standing in her living room looking at what seems to be a solid twenty or more high-end bags, I recognize the logos and signature styles. This collection would be the envy of any woman in Manhattan. My mom and Natalie even own some that are similar.

That’s got to be close to six figures or more in value. I scratch the back of my neck. No way is Marlow going to part with these. “You love your bags?” I don’t know what I’m asking, but this comes as a surprise.

“I do love them, but I need the money,” she says, her voice traveling from the bedroom. “Besides the furniture and a few art pieces, my designer items are all I have to sell.”

Does anyone need a bag that costs fifteen or twenty grand? If you’re asking me, the answer is obvious. No. But I

understand the investment. These purses, if taken care of, can bring in a lot of money. Some even appreciate more than the price of gold, diamonds, and stocks.

But it once again cements what an asshole her father is since most, if not all of these, were gifts. Every birthday, another one would arrive when we were celebrating. On holidays when he was out of town filming, he sent a package. I'm not sure where her mom's been, but her dad was buying her affection when she took him for being sincere. Now he's left her to clean up this mess.

I don't know why I take several photos of the bags, but maybe there's something I can do to help her out. Since my phone is out, I start searching for which restaurants are open to deliver at this hour. "What's her address?" I mumble, staring at the screen. I've been here a million times, but it's a habit by now, and I don't even pay attention. I just know where she lives.

She must have something to tell me her street address, a piece of mail, or a package lying around. I start searching the vicinity, but she keeps the place pretty damn clean. I'm about to ask her when I start pulling open drawers, figuring she has to hide stuff somewhere. Don't we all have a junk drawer?

Bingo.

A large envelope that has confidential stamped on one side has her address on the other. I pull it out and type in the location and apartment number since the maps pinpointed us at the building next door. That would have sucked to have our food delivered to the wrong address.

"I'm thinking a burger and fries," I call out. "Sound good?"

"Just a small salad for me. Thanks." I chuckle while I place the order, upsizing the fries from regular to large, and then pull two glasses from the cabinet to fill with water. But that envelope ... That envelope doesn't look good. I set the glasses down on the counter beside it, and even though I know I shouldn't, I spread the ripped sides apart with my fingers,

and read the title in bold red across the top of the document—
Eviction Notice.

Shit.

“Is it too late to order some fries for me?” Marlow asks, padding toward the kitchen. “I’m hungrier than I thought.”

I drop the envelope to the counter like it burned my fingers and scramble to grab the glasses and hold them up. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll give you some of mine. Here’s some water.”

She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind but smiles. “Thanks.” Taking one from me, she sips, but then her gaze strays to the counter. *Shit.* The glass is slowly lowered, and I see her chest fill with a deep breath that she holds inside.

When she releases it, she says, “I forgot about that.”

“How do you forget about an eviction notice?”

Her hand goes to her hip, and she tilts her head. Accusations fill her eyes along with a spark of anger. “You opened my mail?”

“I was looking for your address to verify the order. And I might’ve also ...” *Fuck.* There’s no getting out of this. “Yeah, I looked at your mail. It’s an eviction notice, Marlow.”

“I know.”

“Have you read it because it doesn’t look like you got further than ripping it open.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“You can’t be so busy that you didn’t read a fucking eviction notice.” Running my hand through my hair, I can’t keep the strain of frustration from tainting my words.

“What do you want me to say?” Her shoulders bounce in nonchalance as she leans against the counter. “I have a talent for ignoring things that make me sad. And eviction notices are really depressing.”

“They’re also legally binding.” I want to reach for it so badly, but I invest the temptation into squeezing my glass.

“When do you have to be out of the apartment?” I ask.

She grabs the envelope and reaches inside to pull out the documents. “Let’s find out.”

I’m desperate to look over her shoulder, to see if I can help her out of this mess, but I have a feeling if she’s had this for a while, her time has run out.

She keeps me in suspense as her eyes trail across the document. When she shoves it back into the envelope, she takes another sip of water. At this point, I think she’s doing it on purpose to get back at me for reading it.

She turns with her glass of water in hand and walks into the living room. “How long until the food gets here?”

I set the glass down and push the palms of my hands against the cold stone of the counter. Trying to calm myself, I have to remember that I may not be familiar with eviction notices, but she has even less experience in this department. “I put a rush on it. Twenty. Thirty minutes tops.”

Standing in front of her row of bags, she says, “A week.”

“You have a week to be out?” I come around and stand next to her.

She takes another sip of water, and then her head bobbles. “Four days from receipt.”

I temper myself before speaking this time. Getting upset will not do her any good nor will it help my position in her life, which is something I’m not willing to risk. “When did you receive it?”

She turns and looks at me. “Technically, on New Year’s Eve. Right before you picked me up.” There’s no tension in her shoulders as she laughs like it’s an inside joke. “It’s a funny story, actually. I thought it was you at the door. Nope. It was some guy serving me papers.”

“Wait, how did he get into the building?” *Some security system.* That irritation can be dealt with another day.

“That’s still a mystery, but weasels always find a way.” She nudges my ribs with her elbow. “Am I right?”

“Marlow,” I caution. “This isn’t a joke. It’s Wednesday.”

“Trust me, Jackson. I don’t think this part of the story is funny at all, but it’s just another hit at this point. Also, it’s Thursday if we’re going by the actual time since it’s after midnight.”

“Do you mind if I look at it?”

She moves around me and heads toward the kitchen again. “Go right ahead.” She picks it up and hands it to me.

I pull the document out again and do a quick scan for dates. “I’m not even sure this is legal. Did you contact your lawyer?” When she doesn’t respond, I look up to see her shying away. “Do you have a lawyer?”

“Not anymore. Not since I can’t afford the retainer.”

Fuck. I take a deep breath and then exhale loudly. Looking back at the notice, I say, “Okay, so four days from Monday is Friday. You must vacate the premises by Friday evening. If you don’t, they can lock the doors on you and sell your belongings for payment or throw it out on the street.”

“What? No. That can’t be right.” She snaps the notice from my hands and starts reading it again. “I thought it meant I had to move out.”

“It does, but I’ve never heard of someone being given such short notice. Did you receive any others? Say forty-five days or a month ago? Or even ten days ago?”

She’s shaking her head. When she looks up at me, she says, “Oh, no.”

“What?”

Flipping the paper around, she taps it. “Look at the address for billing.”

My gaze rolls down until I see it. “Beverly Hills.”

“My dad.”

“Your dad got the other notices but didn’t tell you.” We didn’t know he could treat her any worse, but he succeeded.

As soon as I see tears of that realization welling in her eyes, I pull her to me, wrapping her frame in my arms.

The paper falls to the floor as she takes another hit from her dad's disregard for his own daughter's welfare. Her arms come around me, and I feel the slight shake of her shoulders as her emotions get the best of her.

Rage wants to fuel my reaction, but that won't help her. I kiss her head instead, and through gritted teeth, I growl, "Fuck him."

She doesn't say anything, but I feel her tears against my skin. Leaning back, I grasp her face in my hands, waiting for her eyes to reach mine. "You're moving in with me."

Marlow

THE RAYS of dawn sneak in through the cracks in the curtains, stirring me awake.

The eviction notice.

The realization that my dad has managed to screw me over once again.

The fries that Jackson so kindly let me eat all of.

Everything comes back in a rush that has me conflicted to what I should be feeling. I don't remember the last time I was this happy, and that's because of Jackson. But then the reality of my situation returns and dumps water all over everything.

My last memory had me safe in Jackson's arms when he finally forced me back to bed to rest, but I'm not prepared for what this day has in store for me and can't stave off the tears any longer. But an empty space in bed and an abandoned pillow in the light of the new day feels monumentally worse.

While rubbing my eyes, I can clearly acknowledge that I've messed my priorities up. A lot like my life.

I'm not sure where Jackson went or even when he left. I don't think it could've been long, and giving him the benefit of the doubt, I bet he just wanted me to get more rest. It's not something I would have previously admitted, not even to myself, but I miss him.

The only reason I got any sleep was because he was with me. I'm hoping that him leaving doesn't mean we're starting at square one again. I don't know what I would do without him.

What I do know, though, is that he said he wanted me to move in with him and live with him. His conviction was a command that I agreed to last night after I saw the determination in his eyes. He didn't hesitate to offer me a place to stay, but he did it with full intention.

So I don't know where he is this morning, but I know it's not because he changed his mind.

I roll out of bed and check my phone. No messages.

I text Jackson instead: *Morning.*

When the dots don't appear, I set it down and go into the bathroom to fix the rat's nest of hair I twisted into a scrunchie on top of my head. Taking a comb, I start working out the tangles. I can't help but notice the dark circles under my eyes and how my skin is a little sallow. Stress does that. And here I thought ignoring my problems for so long would allow me to work them out. The opposite happened.

My fate is now sealed when it comes to the apartment. There's nothing left to do but sell everything and move. After going through my weekday morning routine, I call into work to let them know I won't be in today or tomorrow. I'll make up for it this weekend by going in.

Jeans, a tank top, and a cozy sweatshirt are my comfy choices to get me through this move. A knock echoes through the apartment. I rush to answer it, hoping it's Jackson. A quick peek reveals his grin.

I open the door.

With a dolly tucked under his arm, he grins as if the sunshine injected the brightness right in. "Good morning."

"You sure are chipper this morning."

"It's a great day." He gives me a little wink, the flirt, and then kicks the dolly to balance it on its wheels. "You ready to

move into my place?”

“I am.” *I think*. No use putting that last part out into the universe. It will only stir up trouble. Especially because I have no clue if we should be doing this, but I also have no doubt about this transition. I’ve never lived with a man before. *Should I be worried about how this will affect us?* I say, “I know you like your space and work a lot at night. I promise not to get in your way or be an imposition.” I hold the door open for him. He pulls the dolly over the threshold.

“You’d never be an imposition, Marlow.” He kisses my head and then passes in front of me. He can’t even restrain his smile, like it’s absolutely impossible for him. I roll my eyes before smiling as well.

A smile is the last thing I would think I’d be able to manage while hitting rock bottom, but he has a gift, and his happiness is contagious. *How can I possibly be mad when he’s so happy to have me move in?*

The bottom line—*I can’t*.

Even when I have so much to be nervous about regarding the uncertainty in my future, this man ... this man has me sharing in his excitement.

“It’s only temporary, and then you’ll have your life back.”

He stops and looks back once he reaches the living room. “There’s no hurry. You can stay for as long as you’d like.”

A bashfulness sweeps through me, and my face flushes. I don’t think I could invent a more amazing man. “Thank you, Jackson. I appreciate that.” Shutting the door, I ask, “You don’t have to go to work?”

“I’ve cleared my schedule. This is more important. And,” he says, shrugging, “I couldn’t wait to get you over to my place.”

I stop when a crazy idea enters my head. “Wait, do you think you’re getting sex on tap or something?”

Chuckling, he replies, “No, but a man can dream.” He clicks his tongue. I have a feeling he’s seeing the upside to my

predicament, and I can admit, I'm starting to see the same.

I roll my eyes, though, because I can't make it that easy on him. But now I'm thinking about that aspect of the arrangement, too. This might be a better idea than I could have ever plotted on my own. Think of the time we'll save by not having to travel back and forth to each other's places. I mean, logistically speaking. "I only have a few boxes, so where do you think we should begin?"

"The bedroom." *Packing never sounded so sexy.*

"If we start there, we might not get very far. Not that I'd be upset about that or anything."

He rests his arms across the top of the dolly and laughs. "You don't think you're getting sex on tap, do you?"

"Touché, St. James."

"Because you can. I'm happy to give you orgasms. Anytime. Day or night."

He's incorrigible. I laugh, still thinking about that tap, but then start to stare at him a little differently. The offer of orgasms is nice, but this is real. I'm about to move in with him. Instead of fear or worry, though, a thrill runs up my spine. "Good to know," I mumble and then bite my bottom lip. I'm moving in with Jackson St. James.

This is a turn of events I never saw coming. *And I'm not upset about it one bit.*

With a wave of his arm in front of him, he says, "After you."

But I still need to focus on my goals. The last thing I ever want to be is a burden. Cutting across the room, I start down the short hallway. "How are we going to do this all on our own?"

"We're not," he says, "I hired a crew. They'll be here in two hours, so we better get to work."

It helped that I'd been making some progress over the past few months by clearing out some of the clutter and crap,

packing my most treasured possessions besides the ones I need to sell.

The movers blew through the door and made quick work of packing my two paintings that I'd purchased over the years from favorite up-and-coming artists I'd met to the drawings that date back to the renaissance. They were extra careful with my Tiffany vase that my mother gave me when I turned ten.

Holding it in my arms, I decide it's probably best if I transport it.

"Hello?"

"In here," I call when I hear Tealey walk through the door.

She finds me in the second bedroom, angling around the corner. "The place is almost empty."

I close the flaps on a box. "Jackson took charge."

"Impressive."

Taping the box closed, I ask, "What brings you by?"

She holds up two boxes. "I brought coffee and donuts, but I might be too late."

I cross the room and take the donuts. "Thanks. You brought them just in time. I'm starving." I start to laugh as we walk into the kitchen. "The roles have reversed."

Her eyes light up. "That's right. You brought coffee when I moved out of my last place." She starts laughing. "Instead of helping."

I hop up on the counter. "Consolation prize?"

"Nice try."

Still giggling, I lift the lid to the box and am greeted with the prettiest confections. Just as I choose a lemon frosted cake donut, she asks, "Where's Jackson?"

"He's supervising over at his place." I greedily take a bite.

Taking one of the paper cups of coffee, she takes a sip, and then asks, "Where are you putting all the furniture?"

“The couch, coffee table, chairs, and dining room table were sold to a neighbor on the twelfth floor.”

“Already?”

I lick the frosting from the corner of my mouth. “She stages homes going on the market, so she’s always looking for great pieces. I met her in the elevator a few years ago and then showed her my place.” I pick some of the cake off and pop it into my mouth. “She’s always loved my style, so she was happy to take the pieces to use for her business. At a discount, of course.”

“That’s a score.”

“Mm-hmm.” It’s so good, so I shove the rest of the donut into my mouth. Dusting my hands together to rid them of the sugar, I contemplate having another.

With her leaning against the peninsula, she asks, “So you’re moving in with Jackson. You know Rad and I would love to have you.”

“You’re sweet, but for one, I know Rad wouldn’t like me invading your lovebird space. Two, he made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

“Really? What was the offer?”

“I get more time with him.” I smile, and my cheeks heat as I remember how Jackson stepped up for the challenge last night. The challenge being me. “I also think it’s a good fit. We’re getting along better than ever and—”

“And you’re dating?” *Her note of hope isn’t missed.*

“I think defining what we are or what we’re doing might be jumping ahead a few steps.” I hop off the counter. “This may come as a surprise, but for the first time in my life, I’m okay with letting things be and letting this unfold however it’s supposed to, naturally.”

“That’s a big step, my friend. I’m happy for you.”

“You know what, Teals? For the first time, me too.” Picking up one of the cups of coffee, I turn it around in my hand, smiling to myself. “He dropped everything for me. With

less than twelve hours' notice, he had a team organized and was ready to help me. No questions asked. No harsh judgments. Just rolled up the sleeves and made this happen.”

“I’m impressed but not surprised. Jackson’s always been reliable and a good guy. But it’s also quite the gesture of—”

“Friendship.”

She starts laughing. “Yes, indeed.” Moving around the counter, she asks, “How can I help?”

TO BE STANDING in the middle of my empty apartment feels surreal.

Not mine. *The bank’s.*

I’ll never forget the years I lived in this palace in the sky.

I walk the perimeter of every room and meander. So many memories were made, from getting the call that I got the job at the gallery to this past summer when Jackson and I returned from the Hamptons and christened the white couch I sold this afternoon.

I remember the call I made to my dad telling him I found my dream apartment and how he outbid another potential tenant to make sure I got it. My mom even flew in to help me decorate before she was off to her next adventure. I think she was going to Thailand right after. My memories from that whirlwind visit are fuzzy since she’s always traveling somewhere.

That might have been the only time she saw the place.

I don’t even know where she is. Should I send her an email to tell her what happened? I don’t think so. She’s as involved as she ever was or wanted to be. I’ve probably seen her more online or in photos for ads than I have in real life.

She abandoned me a long time ago. Giving her access to my problems will only earn me an, “*I told you so.*”

This is it, apartment. “So long. Farewell. It’s been nice knowing you.”

I walk to the window to take in this incredible view once more, finding it ironic that this apartment will eventually become a symbol for the time in my life when everything fell apart.

“Are you ready?”

I turn back to see Jackson standing in the doorway. A smile still shapes his expression, but it’s not as broad as before. The long day is wearing on him, and if I’m not mistaken, there’s sympathy built into the curve of his mouth.

I nod, taking one last look around, and then walk to the door with him. He takes hold of my hand. “I’m ready,” I say, closing one chapter of my life and beginning the next.

Jackson

“WHAT ARE THE RULES?”

“No rules,” I reply, studying Marlow from the kitchen. She’s not exactly made herself at home. Though I see potential once her excitement has worn off. Currently, she’s a kid in a candy shop acting like she’s never been here before. Maybe it’s because when she has been here prior, we had very specific plans in mind. It wasn’t just to hang out and watch TV.

Still, it surprises me how content she appears to be when she’s used to five-star hotels.

My place is great. It’s the opposite of hers in almost every way. Hers was clean, almost to the point of sparse except for the art. It reminded me of a gallery in some aspects with the white walls. It was a canvas for her art ... for her probably as well. She always loved the spotlight and stood out.

Mine stands in contrast as it wasn’t just a place to lay my head but an investment and one that’s paid off. I could make a two-million-dollar profit if I sold today based on the current market. It’s a two bedroom in a swanky part of the city. I know it’s up to snuff, but it makes me glad that she likes it.

What some would call more masculine with a cognac-colored leather couch and rich-wood floors others might call boring, Clutter doesn’t cover my surfaces, but I have a few things out and about that I’ve collected or put on display like a

fishing lure my dad gave me to keep when I caught my first fish at five years old. We don't get out to fish much anymore. It's probably something I should make the effort to do again with him.

A photo of my friends, all six of us, from junior year at NYU when we stayed at Rad's mom's house in the Hamptons over spring break. We felt damn fucking fancy since it's oceanfront and a chef had been hired in.

Oh, shit.

I set my glass on the counter, debating if I should make a run for it and snatch up the hairpin before she sees it. I didn't even remember it was there until now. It must have fallen from her hair when she came over a few months back. It was a good night—the sex fantastic, as usual, but she stayed since it was the weekend and had a cup of coffee with me in the morning.

Later that day, I found the hairpin with the jeweled M next to the couch where I had her bent over the night before and must have set it down there for some reason. I'd forgotten about it until now. But if she sees it, she won't understand because it will look like I've put a piece of her on display, and I'll be called a creep for keeping it.

Distract her. “More pizza?” I cut across the living room as casually as I can and pocket the pin because let's face it, I am a fucking creep because I have no intention of giving it back. Has she even missed it?

Maybe not.

Maybe I'm making a bigger deal of this than I should? Fortunately, she's too caught up in listing her bags online to care what I'm doing.

I return to pour another short glass of whiskey. I'm not looking to get drunk, but the amber liquid has taken off the edge and allowed me to sink into the exhaustion instead of fighting it.

Looking up at me from the couch, she almost seems disappointed. “Is anything off-limits?”

“Nothing is off-limits. I have nothing to hide.” I look up and add, “Except that closet.” I point at the one near the second bedroom-slash-office because I like fucking with her.

Marlow’s eyes go wide, intrigue shaping them like flying saucers. “Really? What’s in the closet?” She’s on a mission and makes a beeline for it. Not that I’m going to stop her.

“I wouldn’t open that if I were you—*Ah, too late.*”

As she stands there staring, her jaw drops just a little. “I thought I’d find a skeleton or two, but nope,” she says as her eyes find me across the distance that divides us. “It’s even better. The records aside, you have an impressive number of versions of Monopoly. I didn’t know you were so into games ... board games, that is, and Monopoly specifically.”

“It was my favorite game growing up.”

“That explains your job. What do you do again?”

I chuckle. “Finance. I started as an intern at my parents’ company, and then became a stockbroker. Eventually, I moved into wealth management with the Christiansens.”

Her brows cinch together, and she says, “I knew you dealt with money, but why did I not know the details?”

“Guess you never asked.” Shrugging, I take a pull of whiskey.

“Hmm.” She reaches into the closet and starts touching things. “And that’s what you do now?” When she glances back at me, she asks, “Wealth management? I could have used some advice.”

“Debt abatement, consolidation of assets, bankruptcy consult, your situation isn’t my specialty.” I pull a bottle of wine from the wine fridge and set it on the counter.

She bends to get a closer look inside. Popping back up, she crosses her arms over her chest and shifts her weight onto her right side. “So you advise wealthy people how to get wealthier?”

I pluck the cork out using the corkscrew and grin. “No, I used to.”

Marlow's eyebrows shoot up. "Then what do you do now?"

"Sit on the other side of the desk."

It takes a moment, but I see when it dawns in her eyes like a sunrise over the blue ocean. Her arms lower, and she looks around the apartment as if she's seeing it for the first time. Really seeing it.

"But you still go into work when you're not saving damsels in distress," she says so matter-of-factly.

"First, I didn't save you, Marlow. You're going to do that. Secondly, I like my work. I invest in companies that are changing the world. Sometimes, people just need someone to believe in them. That's what I do."

Satisfaction grows her smile, and she nods. "Thank you for everything you're doing for me."

"You don't need to tell me thanks."

She finally comes closer. Leaning against the counter with only an inch or two at most between us, she dips her fingertips under my shirt and into the top of my pants. "What if I show you instead?"

"I'd be okay with that."

I'm whacked on the chest. "*Only* okay?"

"What do you want me to say? If you want to thank me with a blow job, I'm not going to stop you."

"God, Jackson," she says with a pretty epic eye roll and matching grin, "you're so crude sometimes."

Before she escapes, I run my hand around the smooth skin of her neck to the back and hold her there with her sass and snark intact as well as her eyes fixed on mine. She's enjoying this more than she'll let on. Fucking gorgeous, even in her irritation. "You can just call me Jackson, no need for the formal God part." I'm whacked again, causing me to burst out laughing. "So that's a no on the blow?"

She snatches the glass of wine and then returns to the couch, giving me a little wiggle of that ass as a tease. Settling back down into the leather, she sips after leveling me with a glare. “Is this how it’s going to be around here?”

“You mean awesome and fun?”

Finally giving in, she laughs and tugs her computer to her lap again. “I think I could settle for a few blow jobs for all you’ve done for me.”

“Nah, I don’t want payback. I’m only into it when you are.”

“Good thing I’m into it.” She takes a quick sip, but then her expression widens like she forgot something. “Just not right now, but don’t worry, I got ya covered.” She gives me a wink.

I think this woman is going to be the end of me. In the best of ways.

Although her focus is on setting up the sale of her bags, I don’t want to leave her. I need to, though. Taking off today will only cause me headaches tomorrow if I don’t squeeze a few hours of work in. “Mind if I get some work done in the office?”

“Why would I mind?”

“Don’t want to be a bad host.”

Resting against the arm of the couch, I like how she looks like she’s belonged here all along. I start toward the office, but stop when she says, “Jackson?” and look back.

“Yeah?”

Her voice is suddenly serious, which draws her expression down with it. “This is the part about me not wanting to be a burden on you or your life. I may not know every detail of what you do, and I actually regret and feel embarrassed about that now. I’m sorry I didn’t pay more attention or ask questions.”

“You don’t have to apologize. We all live busy lives.” I lean against the corner of the wall. “The six of us used to be

inseparable, but we've grown up. I still consider them my family, even if we don't see each other or talk every day. Like we talked about the other night, it's just life happening. We either let it happen to us or we lead the charge."

Dipping my head, I rub the back of my neck and peer at her. "I'm proud of you, Marlow."

"Why?" The question is so genuine I'm almost surprised by it.

I join her on the couch, sitting near her feet. Taking one, I start rubbing the arch with my thumbs. "Because you've been going through hell and none of us knew the extent of it. You showed up. Every day. And you're still participating like you don't have a mountain of problems weighing you down. You're still leading that charge, even if you don't feel like you're making much progress. You are." I swap feet and continue rubbing. I see the water glistening in her eyes, and it makes me realize that I don't think she's been given the kinds of affirmations that matter, the ones that speak of who she is on the inside. *And that's just fucking sad.*

She sets the laptop down and curls herself around to hug me. Her arms are tight as she angles into my lap. "That was the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me." I hold her just as tight in my arms and kiss the side of her head.

Snug in my lap, she grasps my face and kisses me. "Is this your way of getting me in bed on my first day as your roommate? I don't usually put out until at least a week into a lease."

We both start laughing. "The levity feels nice, but I meant what I said."

"Oh, I know you do." She giggles. "But I'm thinking you prefer me naked."

I kiss her and then lean my forehead against hers. "You read me like a book."

"Like a fairy tale."

Leaning back, I need to read her eyes. "Thought you didn't believe in those."

She sighs with a little swoon at the end. “Because of you, I’m starting to change my mind.”

“My work here is done.”

Sitting up, she says, “Speaking of ... you go work. I have more bags to list anyway.”

“Are you listing them all tonight?”

“No. I can’t rip off the bandage entirely, not yet.”

Nodding, I see the worry creasing her forehead. But I’m reminded of what she said minutes earlier. I don’t like that she thinks I’m saving her, so I don’t add to her stress or take away from what I know she’s capable of doing on her own. I’d never want that. “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

THE EMAIL thread shifts into excuses. That’s not something I have a high tolerance for, so I reply, reminding the Michigan team that my funding is based on results. Our agreement was six months.

“Why are you working in the dark?”

I look up just as I push send. “Huh?”

The shape of Marlow is a silhouette with the dim light from the living room just reaching the doorway of my home office. She comes in behind me and starts rubbing my shoulders. “You’re tense.”

Taking a deep breath, I rest back and let the massage work in, closing my eyes and slowly exhaling. “Some days are better than others.”

“Is this a bad day?”

I cover one of her hands with mine and spin while pulling her onto my lap. She’s smiling, and even though there’s not much light from the city reaching in, I see the glimmer in her eyes that comes from within. “Today is a good day.”

“I agree.” Tilting her head, she whispers, “We didn’t discuss the living arrangement. Since we donated my bed to the shelter, I have nowhere to sleep—”

“You have a bed. It’s right there across the hall.”

“That’s yours.”

I take her hand and bring it to my mouth to kiss. *The palm. The top. Her wrist.* And then our fingers fold together. “It’s ours. As long as you’re here, that’s your room, your bed, your ___”

“Jackson.”

I don’t know why that catches me sideways, but I feel like that’s what I’ve been waiting to hear for so long. “Everything here is yours for the taking.”

She dips down and kisses my cheek. “What are we doing?”

Although I’d like to play dumb, I can’t. I know what she means, and we had this conversation, which was followed by a trail of reasons we’re not meant to be just yet. I cup her cheek and run my thumb over her soft skin. “We’re adjusting the plan based on new information. That’s all. There’s no pressure to be more than we are.”

Bringing her legs up closer to her chest, she’s smaller when she’s uncertain and balled up in my lap, making me feel even more protective of her. “What are we?”

“Hey?” I tip her chin up. “We’re Marlow and Jackson. That’s all we need to be.”

It’s not the best answer, but it’s all I can give her, and what she needs to hear. I won’t pressure her because I don’t even know what I want. I didn’t expect her to be living here, but I can’t deny how good it feels to move in a new direction.

What happens happens and all that. “We’ll just play it by ear.” Standing up, I set her on her feet again. “It’s late. You ready for bed?”

“Bed? No. But I’ve been ready for you all day.” She takes me by the hand and pulls me from the spare room and into the bedroom. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she slides them

down my chest and then even lower. With a snap, she releases the band of my jeans. Wearing a devious little grin on her face, Marlow starts to dip down to her knees. “Now, let’s get back to that thank you ...”

Marlow

THE THUD of Cammie's handbag landing on the wood bench should have been an early warning sign for her mood.

"Rough day?" I ask, pushing the chips closer to her just in case she's hangry.

"Yes." She slides into the booth and rests her arms on the table. "Why am I the last to know that you moved in with Jackson? Hello? That's huge news."

"You're not the last. I haven't told Rad."

"He knows because of Tealey."

"Or Cade."

"He's the one who told me because Rad told him." Sitting back, she crosses her arms over her chest. "By the way, Tealey is stuck working. The fundraiser committee called an emergency meeting. The caterer wants oysters, and apparently, they're out of season in February or something like that."

"Of course they're out of season. Oysters spawn in the summer months."

"How do you know that?"

I shrug. "I've been to a lot of parties. I never eat oysters out of season."

“Good to know.” Her skin takes on a greenish hue, and she looks tired for someone so fired up this evening. Cammie’s usually the level-headed one between Tealey and me, too.

I raise my hand up to flag the server down. I’m thinking she needs a drink to help relax, and more importantly, because I need one under the friendly fire.

Unfortunately, the server is nowhere to be found, so I lower it again.

“As for Jackson and me, I wasn’t hiding it from you. I was literally in my apartment two days ago, and now I’m not. To say it happened fast is an understatement.”

She rests forward again as if the news is too much to sit still. “You claimed you didn’t want anything more with him but sex, Marlow. I’m worried.”

“Are you more worried about him, me, or the group?” I lean forward and lower my voice so only she can hear instead of the eavesdroppers that keep peeking back in the booth behind her. “Because it was a pause regarding the relationship stuff, not an end. And a discussion, not a commitment.”

“This isn’t *Friends* with one deeming they were on a break and the other free to do as they please. I’m worried if this goes south—”

I push up, my irritation getting the better of me. “You’re worried about the group dynamic and not my happiness?”

“That’s not true. Please stay.” Releasing a breath, she reaches for my hand. “You have every right to put yourself first. I’m not worried about the rest of us. We can handle ourselves.” She squeezes the top of my hand. “I’m worried about you and only you. Not us and not Jackson. You’re going through so much—”

Flopping back down, I’m exhausted from this conversation. “Now you’re scaring me because I know you like Jackson.”

“He’s a good guy, and maybe I’m getting soft, but I kind of like you two together.”

It's hard to stay mad at her. "This conversation may have started off on the wrong foot, but I know you care about me, Cam. I think this just hit a nerve because we were supposed to be pausing, but now, we're living together. It's like zero to eighty in one point five seconds."

"How does that make you feel?"

I take a chip from the basket and swirl it through the salsa, giving myself a hot second to touch base with my feelings again. "The past two days have been a blur." When I look up, I shrug. "I'm not upset about how things are working out."

She smiles. "That's progress." Her voice is soft with kindness laced in, and I sense her support may have gotten off track under my defenses. "I always want the best for you, whether that's with Jackson or not."

"I know. I just don't want to make big decisions on that part of my life when my attention needs to be figuring out the rest first. But I'll tell you," I say, unable to stop the swoon that overcomes my tone. "Twenty-four hours in and I'm finding myself weak to that man. And I'm not just talking sexually," I blurt, probably too loud for a restaurant. She's too busy laughing, so I go on. "Why did it take me all these years to see how incredible he is?"

She takes her napkin out from the silverware on the table. "You two have been oil and water for so long that I almost don't recognize you when you're together."

"Guess we're turning a corner in our relationship."

"It will be a lot more peace for you guys and the rest of us if you do." She fists the napkin in her hand, and her eyes begin to plead before she speaks. "Marlow? I need to tell you something."

Just when I thought we could enjoy the rest of our time together. "What?" I ask, feeling sick to my stomach.

She takes a shaky breath, and now I'm really worried. "What's going on, Cam?"

The tears form so fast in her eyes there's no stopping them from falling. "I'm pregnant."

I jolt like I was slapped across the face. “What do you mean?”

Giggling, she replies, “I’m pregnant, Marlow. I’m having a baby.”

This was not what I expected despite the tears that flood my eyes. “A girl needs some warning for major news like this.” The purest joy I’ve ever felt fills my chest, and I jump out of the booth and slide in next to her. “Cammie, this is amazing news.” Wrapping my arms around her, I rest my head on her shoulder as she rests hers on mine. “You’re pregnant.”

“I am, but I’m scared.”

“You don’t have to be. This is wonderful.”

She cries, but I can’t tell if they’re happy or sad tears, so I pull back and grasp her face. Her hair is smooshed under my hands as her eyes look into mine. Then a smile appears, and she starts crying again. “We’re having a baby.”

“We are.”

She cracks up laughing. “I meant Cade and me.”

Now I’m laughing. “Eh, it’s always been the six of us.”

“It has,” she replies, nodding. Taking my hands, she holds them in hers. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Everything’s changing and ...” She pauses, letting her gaze drift down. That’s when I realize what just happened between us wasn’t about me at all. I’ve had those same fears. She may have been projecting, but she would never hurt me. Not on purpose. But this wasn’t about Jackson and me, though she had a right to be mad that she was the last to know. This is about the group changing and never going back to how we once were.

“Changing for the better, Cam. We’re all changing for the better.” When she looks up again, I add, “This baby will be loved by so many.”

She nods again as if her emotions have clogged in her chest. I give her hands a squeeze but can't help that my gaze lowers to her belly. She covers it quickly and says, "Don't judge. I had a big lunch."

I laugh when she does. "There's a baby in there."

"There is." Her smile falls just a little. "I'm not sure what I'm doing here, Marlow."

"It will come so naturally for you. Trust me. You're going to be an amazing mother."

"No, not about that. Have you seen the size of my husband? He was a ten-pound baby."

We laugh again. I pat her hand and then slip out of the booth and return to my side. "Well," I say, taking a chip from the basket. "I'd say you knew what you were getting into, but that won't do you any good now."

She grabs a chip. "Did you know Jackson is two inches taller than Cade?" Crunching down on the chip, she smirks. "Just think about how big that baby would be."

My mind wanders. Us having kids together is something I'm definitely not ready to consider or even think about. Talk about putting a kibosh on a relationship before it has a chance to begin. Her smile grows wider, and then she starts laughing. "You're messing with me."

Holding her fingers an inch apart, she's still laughing. "Just a little."

"You're evil, you know that?"

"I do."

"Good thing I love ya."

The server pops around, and she asks, "What can I get you?"

"I'll take a large water," Cammie says.

"Out of solidarity, I'll have the same. We're having a baby," I say proudly and then realize how that sounds and

laugh. “Well, she’s having a baby, but I’m going to be an aunt.”

“Congratulations,” she says, grinning. Her eyes dip to Cammie’s stomach.

Cam’s quick to drape the napkin over her lap, tugging it higher. “Thank you. We just found out.”

After we order our food, I say, “You know I’m going to spoil her rotten, right?”

“I’d expect no less, but what if it’s a boy?”

“My gut tells me it’s a girl.”

“Of course, it does.” She laughs. “If she has any fashion sense at all, I’ll know she got it from you.”

“Thanks.” Caught up in this exciting news, I lean forward again. “What are we going to name her?”

“OH, MY GOD!” I push my laptop to the couch and rise to my knees. Throwing my fists into the air, I say, “Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yessss! I did it.”

Jackson comes running from the office. “What is it? What’d you do?”

I bounce off the sofa and throw myself into his arms. “I sold my handbags.”

“What? How? All of them?” He sounds skeptical instead of excited.

“Yes.” I flatten my feet on the floor. “The five I listed.”

“Oh. I thought you meant all of them.”

“No way. I’m not ready to part with all of them. I’m taking things slow and only listed five to see if this would work.”

He’s grinning, and although I feel shy in the limelight of the pride he appears to hold in his eyes, he takes me by the hips and wiggles me back and forth. “Congratulations.”

I slide my hand up his chest and around his neck again. I'm not used to always having someone around, but I think I could, especially Jackson. "Want to celebrate?"

"At eleven at night?"

"I didn't know you were such an old man, Jackson. You do realize it's Friday, don't you?"

The realization hits his expression as his arms tighten around me. "Fuck, that totally slipped my mind. It's been a week. I'm sorry. I was thinking I had to go into the office in the morning."

"It's okay. It should be good news that you don't."

"It is," he says, smiling. He leans down and kisses me as if I'm the fresh air he needs to reset for the weekend. "Really good news."

"Dinner with Cammie was fun." I take a breath and fold against him, resting my eyes. "But I'm too tired to go out tonight."

His big hands slide under my shirt and unclasp my bra. I giggle. "When you asked me if I wanted to celebrate ..." A kiss is placed on my head and one to that spot behind my ear that awakens the goose bumps on my arms. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking that maybe we could take a break from the work and reconnect."

He slides a hand around to the front of my baggy sweatpants. Technically, they're his, but he didn't say anything when I plucked them from his closet earlier. So I now think that makes them mine.

Back to his hand ...

As he kisses my neck, I roll my head to the side. He whispers, "No underwear?"

I reply with a shrug but gasp as soon as his fingers find my clit. My throat thickens as I lift so he can go deeper. Doesn't matter that we're in the living room with no window

coverings. A lot of New Yorkers are into the exhibition of it all. At least a little.

There's nothing that the outside world can see. To them, it looks like Jackson is embracing me. To me, I'm about to come on his hand if he keeps touching me like this.

His cologne lingers on his skin, and I inhale him, taste him, need more of him when I press my mouth to his neck. My grip is tight, but I already feel so close to the edge of ecstasy. My breathing is heavy in my chest, and when his fingers enter me, I lift higher onto the balls of my feet to give him better access.

"Jackson." His name is a murmur that I chant as my throat goes dry and my body wet for him. He pumps faster without a reprieve until I lose my hold on him and this reality, chasing the tremors zipping through my body until I moan in his ear, and then I'm scooped into the air.

There are no seconds or minutes before he's filling me. We're just bonded instantly.

Kisses.

Thrusts.

Moans.

Breaths.

Every move and thought becomes only about us. Just like always.

We rock together and apart until we're falling onto the bed, our bodies weak and depleted.

Throwing my arms wide from under him, I kiss his cheek. "Promise me it will always be like this."

"God, yes," he says, rolling beside me.

"You don't have to use the formal title. You can just call me sweetheart."

He chuckles and looks at me. "Did you just think of that comeback?"

I know he's teasing me, but I answer honestly. "No, I've had it pocketed, waiting for the perfect time to unleash it. How'd I do?"

"Fan-fucking-tastic." He kisses my chest. "The comeback wasn't bad either."

We take turns in the bathroom and then return, ready for bed. Call us boring, but I don't mind turning in early when it's with him.

It takes a few minutes before his body eases, which makes me happy to see. The man is all brawn and brain. He works hard and carries so much tension in his body that I like when peace takes over his face. I eventually turn toward the window with my back to his chest. But a few minutes later, I roll to my back and turn my head to face him.

Jackson is so attractive that I don't think I'll ever not stare when I get the chance. I smirk. What have we gotten ourselves into? And then I remember how Cammie was worried about the size of her baby and nudge Jackson. "How big were you at birth?"

His eyes fly open. "Where did that come from?"

Cammie's worried about Cade, but she's right. Jackson's bigger all around, like a giant. How the hell did his mom birth him. "Like length and weight. Did you have a big head?"

"What the fuck, Marlow? Why are we talking about this?"

"Cammie's pregnant."

He lifts up on his elbow, his head nudged forward and jaw dropped. "Cammie's pregnant? I just talked to Cade today. The asshole didn't say anything."

I wince. Was I allowed to share that news? As a group, there's an understanding that if one knows, we all know. What if Cammie doesn't remember? I'd forgotten, and see, it all worked out without me jumping on the gossip grapevine. "Maybe he's waiting to tell you guys. Don't tell him I told you."

"This is big news."

“I know,” I reply with a smile. I’m game for any reason to go shopping. “I bet the clothes are adorable.”

“Is that why you asked about me as a baby?”

“Yes.” I reach over and start doodling on his chest with my finger. “I’ve been thinking.”

“I’m not ready for a baby, Marlow, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“No. Me?” I lift up, shocked that would even cross his mind. “I don’t even have a place to live. No way am I ready for a baby.”

Reaching forward, he brings me closer and then dips so our eyes are even. “You have a place to live.”

“Temporarily.”

“But you have one.”

Pushing forward, I kiss him on those glorious lips. The scent of our bodies coming together still lingers like an aphrodisiac before the main course. How does he manage to make me so freaking horny all the time?

By simply existing.

We lie there in the dark for a minute that feels like ten, the silence killing me. “What are you thinking about?”

His body starts rocking with laughter. “How you wore me out?”

“Really? You relive the sex in your mind afterward?”

“Hell yes, how could I not?”

This time, I laugh but lighter. I quieten, and then he asks, “What are you thinking about?”

Normally, I’d smile, but I don’t have a good answer like he did. “I can’t stop thinking about how Cammie and Cade got married last year and bought a house two years prior. They’re settled in their jobs and now having a baby, and I was just evicted with nowhere to go and no money.”

“You sold the bags.”

“My life is just ...” I take a staggering breath, not wanting to get upset. “It’s no reflection on their lives and not jealousy, but in comparison, it kind of makes me feel like I’m a mess.”

He pulls me into a strong-arm embrace, and I rotate into the little spoon position. Jackson kisses the side of my neck. Although he gets hot at night, I love being this close to him. *With him.*

“You’re exactly where you should be, Marlow.”

As we lie in the dark, his words running on a loop through my head, I can’t stop thinking about how easy it is to be here. Not just in his bed but also in his life. His apartment. His hours and days. And how seamlessly we’ve come to an understanding with space and peace between us.

Just knowing he’s near has given me a new level of comfort that I’ve never experienced before. It makes me regret not letting him into my life—*and my heart*—sooner.

Jackson

“I UNDERSTAND, Mr. Morgenstern, but the market is not open on Saturday.” I pace to the other end of the court and turn back. Even though we’re outside, I’m heated from the basketball game.

I didn’t get to sleep in as long as I would have liked, but the only time we could score at the courts is midmorning, so we booked it. Leaving Marlow in bed naked was harder. Literally. But she shooed me out the door and pulled her silky eye mask back down over her eyes. She was sleeping soundly by the time I left.

I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to stay in bed so badly before. Until I return home to her, I need to deal with Morgenstern and then show the boys how real men play the game.

Rad and Cade are shooting free throws and missing every damn shot. They’re an embarrassment. I need to end this call and show them how it’s done, but Morgenstern is going off about a drop in value and losing his shirt in stocks. I say, “I’m not a broker anymore. Even if the stock market was open, I didn’t renew my license.”

He says, “But you’re still registered. That must mean something.”

“The registration with the SEC is not current. There’s nothing I can do for you other than recommend you call your broker and have him ready to sell on Monday.”

“Is that what you think I should do? Sell? I thought you’d want me to hold on to the stocks like bonds and let them mature.”

“Mr. Morgenstern, I’m not making any recommendations. It’s not a stock I’ve been following to be in a position to give an opinion one way or the other. As I said, you need to contact your broker—”

“He’s in Jamaica celebrating his honeymoon.”

Fuck. He trusted me when I had no clients as a new wealth advisor and was trying to build my portfolio. I owe him for taking a chance on me. “Here’s what I can do. Since you’re still a client with Christiansen Wealth Management, let me make some calls. I’ll find out who’s covering for your broker. If they’re good, I’ll have them call you. If I don’t think they’re ready to handle your transactions, I’ll bring Andrew, the CEO, on to help you. Will that work?”

“If you trust them, it works for me. Thanks, Jackson.”

Cutting across the basketball court, I reply, “No problem. Have a good weekend.”

As soon as I pull my phone from my ear, Rad asks, “You up for another game?”

We understand that business tops time on the court, so we don’t generally give each other too hard of a time when we have to take a call. It’s part of the job description when we signed up, and we all get fucked out of a game here and there. “One more game?”

“Me against the two of you?”

Bent over trying to catch his breath, Cade chuckles. “Cocky as ever, dude.” He waves us off. “I’m sitting this one out. You and Rad go ahead.”

Rad laughs as he throws the ball to me. “He can’t hang like he used to.”

I turn and shoot, banking the ball. Rad runs to retrieve it. Taking it, he does a layup. I'm thinking we're not going to play to score but fuck around, which is probably best. I'm still thinking about the secret Marlow shared with me.

After Rad throws the ball to me again, I dribble to the bench courtside. Overheated and red in the face, Cade wipes the sweat from his forehead but looks up. "What are you and Cammie doing tonight?"

He shrugs. "I don't know."

"What about going out to dinner instead of brunch tomorrow?"

"It's been a while since we've gone out on a Saturday night. I know she'd like that. I'll talk to her when I get home." Resting back against the wood-planked wall with a smirk in place, he nods. "So you and Marlow, huh?"

It's my turn to shrug. "She needed a place to stay."

"It was nice of you to offer your bed."

I throw the ball at him. "Funny guy."

"What can I say? I'm funny." When he tosses the ball in the air between us, I catch it.

"Are we playing?" Rad asks, getting annoyed from the court.

Cade stands. "Maybe one more game."

He tries to swat the ball out of my hands, but I make a fast break and then sidestep around Rad to dunk it. "Piece of cake."

Rad grabs the ball, throws it to Cade, and says, "Now try when I'm not on my phone."

FUCKING HELL.

I stand when Marlow walks into the living room as if she didn't just knock the breath right out of me. Long legs with black sky-high heels, the blue dress that matches her eyes hits mid-thigh and wraps over one shoulder. Holding her bag in one hand, she spins. "How do I look?"

"I thought you wanted to go out?" I tease, hoping to the high heavens that this woman will change her mind and want to stay in ... in bed, that is.

Her brows pull together in concern. "We are." And then her expression loosens into a carefree smile. Beautiful. "Ah." She laughs as she comes closer. Lifting to her toes, she kisses me.

"I wouldn't be opposed to staying home with you looking that good."

"Only good, St. James?" She straightens my jacket, picking a piece of lint from the lapel.

I grab her, pulling her against me so she can feel just how good I think she looks. Squeezing the rounds of that sweet ass, I take in her face. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and here she's looking at me like I'm something special. What kind of crazy world do we live in? Her breathing shortens, and she says, "My lipstick is an all-day wear and stays on."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means I want to put it to the test. Kiss me, Jackson."

I do as the lady requests. I kiss her and slide a hand into her hair. I tilt her head back so we can deepen it until our tongues are tangling, and our bodies are grinding against each other. "We can't," she says, pulling back and lowering her heels to the floor again. "I don't want to miss this. We rarely go out on Saturdays as a group anymore. I'm sorry, do you mind?"

"No. I mean, yes." I crack a smile. "I want to make love to you, but going out will be fun, too."

Her eyes stare into mine as if she's searching for a lie that she'll never find. I said what I said about making love to her,

and I meant it. She clutches her bag tight in her hands and then shoots me a mischievous grin before walking toward the door and slipping on her coat.

“Hey, Marlow?” Stopping to look back over her shoulder, she finds my eyes across the room. “You look beautiful.”

A sweet smile finds its rightful place, and she says, “Thanks.” Nodding toward the door, she holds out her hand. “You ready?”

“As ready as ever.”

I lock up, and we start down the short hall. I’ve already learned that we don’t take the stairs if she’s in heels, which is most of the time. I punch the button. Standing in silence isn’t awkward. We’ve found comfort in just being in each other’s presence.

It’s nice to be with someone you don’t have to entertain all the time like most women I date.

The elevator door slides open, and the eyes of the high school girl from the tenth floor widen when she sees me. *Like always*. A smile starts to embed in her expression until her gaze shifts to my left, and then annoyance takes over her face, and she moves to the corner of the elevator.

“Hello,” Marlow says, stepping on.

The girl stares at her shoes and replies, “Evening.”

With our fingers still intertwined, Marlow doesn’t even flinch from the exchange.

I say, “Good evening,” to her as the polite thing to do, but her eyes meet mine briefly until I’m situated next to Marlow. The door closes, and now it’s awkward. We haven’t descended even two floors when Marlow moves closer, pressing our arms together.

Grinning, I try to restrain myself from laughing out loud. I can’t say I normally care for acts of jealousy, but I’m living for this one. I bring my fist to my mouth to hide how I’m failing miserably.

An elbow taps into mine, and Marlow squeezes my hand. Thank fuck we've reached the lobby. I step aside with my hand on the edge of the door to let the ladies exit first.

The neighbor hurries out the front door, but Marlow stands not five feet away with her arm stretched toward me. I could really get used to this with her. I take her hand again, and we walk out together. It's cold out, and she rearranges, wrapping her arm around mine. Just before we hop in a cab at the curb, she says, "I can't take you anywhere, St. James."

"It's not too late to turn back."

She rolls her eyes and laughs. "Come on, lady-killer. Let's go meet our friends before I get swayed."

We slip inside the cab, and I tell the driver the address. She nods but doesn't seem too interested in us. "And what would said swaying look like for it to work?" I ask Marlow.

"Hey, speaking of Billy Joel."

The whiplash cricks my neck. "I wasn't aware we were talking about Billy Joel."

"I saw you had his album in the closet."

"This has got to be the most indirect loop into a conversation I've ever been a part of." I glance out the window to see where we are in the city before turning back to her. "I inherited the Billy Joel album from my parents when they gave me their collection. You have thoughts on it?"

"No, not really. I don't know his music, but anytime I hear or see that name, I'm reminded that my mom once dated him. Thank goodness it didn't work out, or I wouldn't be here."

"Thank God for that."

She rubs my cheek. "Aw, thanks."

I take her hand and kiss it. "There's got to be quite the age gap between him and your mom." I know who her mom is. Everyone does. She's not the same role model I had in my life, but I guess not everybody gets so lucky. Just would've been nice if Marlow could've had at least one reliable parent in her life.

“Yeah, that stuff doesn’t matter when you’re in love. They weren’t in love, by the way, but I’m told he had a massive ...” She holds her arms wide. “Bank account.”

“I’m proud to say I don’t know about his assets.”

The joke was lame at best, but it tickles her, making her laugh. I love seeing her in such a good mood. The troubles she’s been dealing with for so long had started camping in her irises and dragging her down. It’s good to see the light shine in them again.

When we arrive, I help her to her feet on the busy sidewalk. We walk to the door, and I fasten the button of my jacket. Placing my hand on her lower back, I step forward, but she stays put, not moving an inch. I look back. “What’s wrong?”

Her chest is rising, and her eyes don’t reflect her smile like they did moments earlier. I pull her off to the side, out of the way of the entrance to the restaurant. Dipping my head, I try to block out the rest of the world for her, so she only sees me, hoping I can give her comfort. “What’s going on?”

“Jackson,” she says on the inhale of a deep breath. “I think we should—” She shivers from a cold breeze gusting down the avenue. I rub her arms to warm her up, which has her moving even closer. “I want to be with you, Jackson.”

Smiling, I reply, “You are.”

“No, Jackson, I want to be with you in public like we are at your place.”

My place. The sound of it being only temporary sours on my tongue, but then the rest of what she said sinks in. Tempering my feelings on the matter, I need clarification before jumping to conclusions. “What do you mean?”

“I want to be the woman on your arm, not for show or as a fill-in date like we’d sometimes do. I want us to be real like when it’s just the two of us.”

“You want to date?”

“Yes.”

“Exclusively?”

“Mm-hmm.” She brings my hand to her mouth and kisses my palm like I’ve done to her so many times. “Our friends are in there waiting for us. They’ll have questions and probably tease us relentlessly, but I won’t pretend I don’t care about you on a deeper level than sex. Because I do. I care about you, Jackson. You can be crude and even tell awful jokes sometimes, but you’re thoughtful and kind. You make me feel safe, and you stepped in when you didn’t have to.” She holds a finger to my lips. “I know what you’re going to say, and this isn’t about payback. This is because I want to be your girlfriend.” She looks away, and then her head lowers.

Tucking two fingers under her chin, I lift it until our eyes meet again. “Do you think I could ever say no to you, Marlow?”

“Sometimes, I need you to. I’m just hoping now’s not one of those times.”

I take her in my arms and kiss her. I kiss her so hard that, for a moment, I forget we’re not at home and ready to move this into the bedroom. Leaving her breathless, I lean my forehead against hers, close my eyes, and whisper, “You’ll be the death of me.” I pull back and take her hand proudly and publicly in mine. “Come on. Our friends are waiting.”

Jackson

DON'T THINK I didn't walk like a damn lion, the pride of my tribe, into the restaurant holding hands with my girlfriend. Because *I did*.

Although Rad is laughing while shaking his head, I overhear Cade grumble, "Oh fuck." Tealey and Cammie are on my team, sitting there rooting for the hometown hero.

Tealey says, "Hi, guys."

Marlow glances at me and then replies, "Hi." Her smile is so wide that I know it's not embarrassment but happiness.

I pull her chair out and help push it in when she sits. "I see you guys ordered without us."

Rad sets his drink down. "We had to. Who knows how long you two would stand out there trying to figure your shit out."

"Don't mind them. We only ordered drinks," Cammie says.

I sit down beside Marlow and rest my hand on her leg. Her hand covers mine, and when she looks at me, I don't think I've ever seen her this beaming with joy, like she stole the shine right out from under the sun. A damn thief in the night. Makes me wonder what she'll steal next. I'm not one to get into the mushy stuff, but I might check on my heart later.

The server not only arrives to take our drink order but we also order four appetizers.

Cade finishes his beer and sets it down with a thud, grabbing our attention. “Should we round-robin the news? I have a feeling we have some items to get through on the agenda this evening. Jackson? Marlow? Want to go first?”

I wish our drinks were here first, but I’m not sweating it. It’s the announcement they thought they’d never hear from us, but I won’t hide it. I do double-check with Marlow first, though. A blush has colored her cheeks, and she elbows me. “You tell them.”

“Marlow and I are fucking.”

“Oh, my God, Jackson!” I’m whacked on the back of my shoulder. She drops her head into her hands as those same sweet cheeks flame red. “You’re the worst, you know that?”

“I do.” I take her hand and pull it onto my lap, holding it between mine. “But you just can’t resist me, baby.”

She’s laughing when she says, “I knew making it official would have everything going to your head. Now we’re adding pet names?”

“Well,” I say, cocking my head to the side. “I know how much you love my head. Both—”

“You’re insufferable, St. James.”

“Hello?” Cade says, snapping two fingers. “You do realize we’re here, right?”

I kiss Marlow on the closest hot cheek of hers and then turn to the others. “Marlow and I are dating.”

“Yay!” Tealey cheers and claps excitedly. Cammie joins in, causing patrons from other tables to look over because of the noise. I don’t care. These women are my personal heroes.

Our drinks arrive, and then Cade pipes in first, holding up a pint glass. “Here’s to you two. It’s about fucking time.”

Six glasses swoop above the middle of the round table to clack together before we pull back and drink to us. To top it

off, as if it couldn't get any better, Marlow leans over and says, "Kiss me."

"I'll kiss you all right." I cup her face and lean in and kiss her like I'd kiss when there's no audience around to witness.

Cammie laughs nervously. "I'm pregnant."

Silence sweeps across the group, and we all stare at Cammie. Then, in unison, we turn our attention to Cade when he says, "We're having a baby."

Tealey practically treks across the top of the table to get to her friend. While they lock in an embrace, Marlow rushes over to join in. I stand and move around the chairs, holding my hand out to Cade. "Congratulations." When he shakes my hand, I pull him into a hug and pat him on the back. "Great news, man."

"Thanks," he replies and then turns to Rad, who is waiting to do the same.

It takes a minute for us to get around each other, but I finally get to hug Cammie. "Congratulations, Cam."

"Thanks, Jackson," she replies with her chin just barely reaching my shoulder.

When we settle back in our seats, Rad raises a glass in their direction and says, "We've been there since the moment you guys met ... not when Cade showed up to deliver a pizza, but pretty much since then you two were inseparable. I know I can speak for everyone and say, we couldn't be happier for you. Here's to the soon-to-be new parents and to the crew expanding into the next generation."

"Cheers," echoes across the table.

With so much good news, the night flies too fast, and we're all heading off in our own directions right after. With my arm around Marlow's shoulders in the back of the car, I ask, "Did you have fun?"

"So much fun." Her head rolls to the side as she looks at me. The outside lights trapped in her eyes. "Tonight was wonderful."

I kiss her because she's my girlfriend. Damn, I love that I can finally call her mine. "It was pretty fucking fantastic." We have a few more blocks to travel, so I figure I might as well make the most of the time. "Do you have plans tomorrow?"

Tilting back, she grins. "You already trying to get rid of me?"

"No, I'm trying to devise plans to spend more time with you."

"I like that. I'm all yours. What are we doing?"

We stop at a light, and hoards of people cross the street in front of us. One bangs on the hood of the taxi, but that's normal in the city. I turn my attention back to Marlow, and ask, "I'm having dinner with my family tomorrow. I'd already promised my sister at dinner on Tuesday since I haven't been around in a few weeks. Will you come with me?"

She slides upright, her expression soft like her skin. "You want me to have dinner with your family?"

"It's not like you don't know them."

"But this is different."

My arm tightens around her shoulders, and she moves closer, snuggling in. "This is different. That's why I want you there, not as a friend but as my girlfriend."

Lifting up, she kisses me and then rubs the gloss she applied after dinner from my lip. "I'd like that." A quick breath is stolen between us, and she kisses me again, deepening it this time. I reach to hold her, her frame almost a wisp compared to mine. Pressing her against the seat, I hover over, kissing her as deep as she'll let me.

The car comes to a sudden stop. I look back at the driver. Not amused, she says, "We're here."

I lick my lips and then pull my wallet from my pocket to pay. The interruption doesn't last long. Marlow and I pick up where we left off as soon as the elevator door closes. Pinning her in the corner, I cage her in with my hands on the wall next to her head.

Her hands slide over my shoulders, digging in even through the thickness of my suit jacket. The elevator reaches my floor, and we're rushing toward my door. I unlock it and toss the keys on the table. With our lips still locked, I strip her coat off and kick the door closed. While she's scrambling to remove my jacket, I can barely free myself enough to lock the bolt. My shoes are coming off as I spin her to the side to find the zipper under her arm.

As she reaches down to release the buckle at her ankle, she's steady enough for me to unzip her dress, which runs the length of the material. When the dress falls to the floor and reveals her tight and curvy body, my dick twitches.

I leave her balancing on one heel and using my shoulder to hold while I drop to one knee to undo the other strap around her ankle. While I hold the shoe, she slips her foot out. I set it aside, but I stay kneeling in front of her.

Taking in every inch of her body until I reach her eyes, I lick my lips, thirsty for this woman. As soon as I take hold of one of the sides of the lace on her hip, her hand grabs me. "You never did replace the last pair."

"I'll buy you the fucking store."

I don't get more than narrowed eyes as her mouth twists in contemplation, but then her shoulders drop, and she grins. "Okay. Do it," she says, sounding a lot like she's compromising.

With a smirk, the lace is shredded, causing her to laugh. "You're wild, St. James."

"Wild for you, Marché."

Dragging her fingers through my hair, she says, "So cheesy."

"I'll give you that. It's not my best work. You know what is?"

Her hand runs down the side of my face, and a finger then grazes over my bottom lip. "Don't tell me. Show me."

With my hands anchored to the wall on either side of her legs, I lean forward and lick her thigh, stopping just at the apex. Then I move higher, closer to where I know she wants me. Her hands just reach my shoulders until I'm high enough for her to rest her palms over my muscles.

Running my nose along her seam, I let her fill my senses, inhaling her deep into my lungs, covering my tastebuds in all that this woman will give me. Her moans fill my ears as her nails scrape my skin.

I stop, sitting back on my feet, and look up at this goddess before me. I thought I was ready to fuck her, but my thoughts changed like a song on an album, switching from fast to slow.

Questions fill her eyes, but I don't want her to feel anything less than I'm feeling for her right now. I stand, bringing my jacket with me, and wrap it around her shoulders. "Jackson?" Her voice is so soft, but there's no shame entwined.

"I want to make love to my girlfriend." Taking hold of her hand, I lead her into the bedroom.

A bedside lamp is already on. I close the blinds because she once told me this is how she blocks out the world. Tonight, I want the same. When I turn back, she's slipped off her bra and sits on top of the bed. She makes it so fucking hard to be good and not ravage her. But I control myself, and say, "Just you and me."

"You said make love." She slides under the covers.

Unbuttoning my shirt, I grin. "I did."

"You said that earlier tonight, too. You said you wanted to stay home and make love to me." I nod. She cocks an eyebrow while a restrained smirk belies the playful look in her eyes. "I never thought I'd hear Jackson St. James, former player of Manhattan, use terms like 'make love' instead of fuck."

"I use the words that fit the situation."

"Turning a new leaf." She licks her lips, knowing exactly what she's doing. The vixen.

I'd tell her that making love is just a gentler version of what we do already, but that would be a lie. Emotions are involved and growing exponentially with every day I get to spend with her. "I wouldn't give me too much credit."

"You never disappoint me. And as the benefactor of your actions and words in this bedroom, I like this new side of you."

"As long as you don't get sick of my other side."

"Never." She flips the covers open as an invitation. "Now hurry up. Get over here and make love to your girlfriend."

She knows how to get me moving. I strip down and climb into bed next to her. We both settle in, lying next to one another and staring into each other's eyes. The starter gun is shot when she smiles and then taps my wrist with her hand. We roll into each other's arms, our lips finding purchase as our limbs tangle together.

I roll on top of her, kissing the curve of her neck. The deep-seated desire to mark this woman as mine is strong. I restrain myself in that way, but in others, I don't. "I'm so fucking glad you're on the pill."

"You feel so good when you're inside me." She tilts her head into the pillow, and says, "I need you. Please. I need you to fill me again."

I nudge her legs apart with mine and don't waste time pushing inside her. Her warmth engulfs my whole body and soul. She'll never understand how I'd sell my soul to the devil if I could stay here, just like this, forever.

The rush of losing myself in her becomes too much. I pull back, wanting to see her. When she opens her eyes, I slowly, so fucking slow, push back in. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she pulls me closer until we start kissing again.

As I taste her moans and we share our panting breaths, slowing down gives me the pleasure of enjoying the little things instead of racing to the finish line.

A small smile always comes after I kiss her behind her ear before it disappears, and her body seeks friction against mine.

A little cluster of freckles—three to be precise—across the left side of her collarbone reminds me of Orion’s Belt. I move down to kiss there before going lower to her nipples.

Taking the pink bud between my teeth, I gently clamp just enough to tease, causing her back to arch. Another trick I’ve learned with her.

But as much as I want to take my time, I can’t resist. Grabbing her wrists, I drag them higher on the bed. The first thrust is a warning. A fire flickers to life in her eyes, challenging me. I kiss her sweetly and then place another on the corner of her mouth before whispering, “I’m sorry. I can’t hold back with you. I need to be buried as deep as possible inside you.”

I push in so hard that her body jerks higher on the bed. I steal the gasp that threatens to leave her mouth and start fucking for pleasure, for pain, for her, and for my own satisfaction. Her nails scratch against the headboard as I rise higher over her and fuck with intention. “I’m going to make you come so hard.”

“Jackson.” My name falls from her mouth in a plea as her wrists wriggle free. Holding my head, she bounces against me, my thrusts taken and then her body leaving mine as she seeks her release. “I’m so close, babe.”

I thrust faster and then slide my hand between us. She’s so wet for me already that I run my finger through the slickness and start working her clit. Fuck my release. A promise is a promise, and I’ll keep the one I just made.

Her legs squeeze around my middle as I pump in and out of her. Her hands leave me and rub over her tits. *Fuck*. I can’t fight against the sight of her touching herself. “Come for me.”

I feel the constriction around me just before her body trembles. Closing my eyes, I keep fucking her until it’s too much for me to hold on any longer. I fall into my orgasm right after her, my body giving her every ounce of how I feel for her.

She fucking owns me.

But I fucking own her too.

When the electricity that zaps all my energy subsides, I turn, placing my lips to her ear. “You’re mine. You understand me, sweetheart? You’re mine, and I’m yours. There’s no one else anymore.”

Dipping her head, she brushes our cheeks together and tightens her arms around me. “Only us,” she whispers.

“That’s right. Only us.”

Marlow

“I’M NERVOUS.”

Jackson pulls me to a stop on the sidewalk outside Nick and Natalie’s brownstone. With our arms stretched between us, he asks, “Why are you nervous?”

I step closer, finding it hard to keep any distance from him. “Because I’m friendly with your sister, but that was when she thought I wasn’t dating her brother.”

“I’m confused. Why would Natalie not like us dating?”

I watch a car drive by, unable to express why my stomach is twisted. When I look at him, into his caring eyes, and the way he holds my hand, I know I’m not escaping this conversation about my fears.

He pulls me until we’re wrapped around each other. Looking down at me, he says, “It doesn’t matter if Natalie approves. None of their opinions matter when it comes to us being together. But if it makes you feel better, I prepped her ahead of time and sent a text.”

“Jackson?” I don’t even know what I’m asking. I don’t know if I feel prepared to face the family this soon after we made a commitment.

His hands are under my coat, holding my waist. There’s not an ounce of disappointment, only sincerity in his eyes. “If

you want to go, we'll go. Seriously, Marlow. I don't want you to feel pressured like you're having to perform or be someone else. That's not what this should be. We can always come another time when you're ready." He smiles, and in the shadow of a family gathering, there's such a boyish charm, something lighter, more playful today than usual.

I can't be responsible for taking that away from him.

Leaning toward the steps, knowing he'd never let me fall, I tug him with me. "Come on. Let's go visit the family."

He knocks on the door but then enters the code and opens it. I step inside the large home. I've been here a few times over the years. Natalie St. James, now Christiansen, is an amazing woman. Independent but lives for her family. A smart businesswoman who created her own empire when she decided she didn't want to go into the family's brokerage business. She's a sensational party planner involved in so many great causes, from supporting the arts to helping children in need.

She's perfect and one of the few people who makes me feel a bit of a failure in life. That's not her issue. It's mine. On the upside, I love when I get to see her because she's always inspiring.

Her home is no joke. I have no idea how much they paid in this market, but it looks to be worth every penny. Beautiful décor—understated with a neutral palette, preferring to let the natural light and sunshine flood the space. The enormous windows to the back allow nature to collaborate with the indoors.

My favorite part is the art. I can only dream to have this kind of collection one day. We pass what I swear must be an Ian Candor from his last renaissance before he gave it up permanently and became a teacher, finding more joy in the classroom than alone in a studio.

Natalie rushes out from the kitchen with a dish towel in her hand. She's dressed in black ankle pants and a red blouse, and her leather flats look buttery soft and comfortable. She's

always been fashionable, but I've noticed it's developed in a new direction—high end, but with practicality built in.

Is that what happens with age, new stages in life, marriage, and kids? Her style is still intact, but running after a little one could be dangerous in five-inch Louboutins. The latter used to seem almost foreign, but the idea isn't so odd anymore. They're actually kind of interesting when I think about it.

Slow down, Marlow. Take one stage in life and one obstacle at a time.

She throws her arms around me. "It's so good to see you again, Marlow."

The warm welcome puts me at ease, and I hug her back. "You, too. Thank you for having me."

"It's my pleasure." Taking my hand, she pulls me with her back into the main living space. "Tatum, Marlow's here!" she shouts after cracking open the door to the backyard.

If there was ever a living icon of fashion in my eyes, it's Tatum Devreux. Even after having a baby, she hasn't changed. Dressed in Yves St. Laurent, the New York Collection, her black and shocking pink suit with matching heels are stunning. I could shop fashion before it hit the runway. Designers even sent clothes for me to wear sometimes. I try not to let jealousy ruin this beautiful day.

I feel underdressed in fitted jeans and a sweater. I mean, sure, I look amazing, but not next to them. Even more impressive is how she's running around in those heels. "I was under the impression this was a casual get-together."

"It is. Please don't worry. I'd rather my guests be comfortable than ready to leave."

"What the hell?" Jackson says.

Natalie and I turn back to see Jackson stomping across the living room. "Hello?"

Laughing, Natalie goes to hug him. "Hi, little bro, and sorry. Tatum and I were excited to see Marlow. It's been a while..." She turns to me. "You have exquisite fashion sense. I

was planning to change but got caught up in the kitchen. Hope you don't mind if I keep it casual. Nick had to run to the store for me and Harrison—have you met Harrison? Nick's best friend. He and Tatum got married a few months ago.”

She heads back into the kitchen, rounding the large island. “It was the most stunning black-tie affair. Small and intimate, so beautiful.”

I glance at Jackson. “Didn't you go to that?”

“Yes. It was nice.” *Men.* I laugh. You wouldn't even know he and Natalie were speaking about the same event. He adds, “I went solo, for the record.”

I laugh even harder. “I can't judge you by your past, but I appreciate the info.”

She finishes off her Crostini and offers us one. “Hungry?”

Jackson's all over that. Shoving one in his mouth, he moans. As soon as he finishes chewing, he picks up another. “I haven't eaten since this morning. I'm starving.”

“When he says that,” I start, moving to sit on the barstool on the other side of the island from Natalie. “He's leaving out the fact that it was a huge omelet with homestyle potatoes and a side of fruit. I'm still stuffed, and I ate half the food he did.”

Natalie is laughing. “He was always a good eater. If I left my plate unattended, the good stuff would be gone from it.” She sets the platter in front of us. “I'm already seeing my son take after his father and uncle. James is a hearty eater for a toddler.” She wipes her hands on a towel. “What can I get you to drink?”

Jackson looks at me. I say, “Whatever you're having.”

“I'm having a glass of sauvignon blanc.”

“That sounds perfect.” She leans down to grab the bottle from a wine fridge tucked inside the island.

“Jackson?” she asks.

“Beer. I can get it.” He moves around and pulls a bottle of lager from the fridge. He sits next to me again and rubs my

knee. “Want to meet my nephew?”

Natalie says, “Make yourselves at home.”

The back door opens, and Tatum comes in with a little girl and a boy bundled like snowmen in thick parka onesies. She says, “It’s too cold to stay outside any longer.”

Coming around to greet her little man, Natalie kneels in front of James and kisses his rosy cheeks. “Did you have fun?”

He shakes his head and then spots Jackson, his eyes lighting up and a big smile. “Jack. Jack.” Jackson squats down and holds his arms out.

My ovaries are currently intact, but they’re on the verge of bursting watching this big hunk of a man embrace this kid.

Jackson swings him into the air and then catches him, settling him on his hip. Eyeing me, he says, “This is my friend Marlow.”

“Hello?” I say, holding out my hand.

He grabs my index finger. “Hi,” he replies shyly and then tucks himself against Jackson’s neck. I smile because it’s the sweetest sight. And because I get that same feeling of comfort from Jack Jack, too, kid.

Tatum comes around, and we finally hug. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You, too.”

Natalie says, “I could have had dinner catered, but I wanted to cook. I actually love cooking but don’t get to do it as much as I like lately with our family’s busy schedule.”

“What can I do to help?” Jackson asks.

“I’d love it if you could take James upstairs and get him out of that outfit. I have a sitter coming over to keep the kids while we have dinner.”

“I’m on it.” Jackson starts toward the stairs.

“How can I help?” I ask, knowing I don’t know anything about cooking or kitchen stuff in general. I shift, anxiety

kicking up a storm watching Jackson leave and wondering if I'm about to make a fool of myself in front of his sister and Tatum.

“Marlow?” Jackson stops two steps up. “Do you want to come with Jimmy and me?”

Tatum laughs, though Natalie doesn't look that amused. Handing Natalie her glass of wine, she says, “It's just a nickname.” Tatum's gaze lands on me, and with a smile still on her face, she says, “You go ahead. I'll help Natalie with dinner.”

Phew! Close call. “Okay.” I hurry to the stairs and follow Jackson up to the top floor, where there's not only a nursery but also a playroom and office.

We leave our shoes on the wood floor of the hallway before entering the carpeted room. It takes a minute to peel James out of the suit, but when we do, Jackson's face scrunches. “He needs a change.”

I head for the door. “I'll leave you to it.”

“Marlow?”

When I turn back, he chuckles. “You can stay. Do you want to learn how to change a diaper?”

“Nope. I don't.”

“Won't you need to know this one day?” The devious glint in his eye would give him away if I weren't already onto him.

“I see what you're doing, St. James.”

This kid is really great, perfectly entertained with a stuffed rabbit while Jackson hoists him onto a small blanket on the lower half of a full-sized bed.

Jackson asks, “What am I doing?”

“If you want to know if I want kids, just ask.”

“Do you want kids?”

“I don't know,” I reply, wandering around the room and looking at stuff. The room is decorated so sweetly with a

mountain mural on one wall with little goats on ledges.

That makes him laugh. “You tell me to ask, but when I do, you don’t know anyway.”

Instead of leaving, I walk to the chair near the window and sit. Soon, I have my feet kicked up on the ottoman, and I’m rocking. “Do you know?”

“I know.” James is free and runs to his bookcase.

“Boo,” he says, bringing me one with puppies on the cover.

I take the book and say, “Book,” softly emphasizing the hard sound of the ending for him. Tapping the cover, I add, “Puppy.”

His eyes are set on the cute cover, and he says, “Puppy.”

I look up at Jackson. He stands with a wadded-up diaper in his hands and sticks it in some contraption by the door. I say, “James is so cute that it’s tempting to get on the floor and read with him.”

“What’s stopping you?” It’s not a harsh judgment but a genuine question that has curiosity flickering in his eyes.

James is content to babble through the words as he points at each puppy on the book in my hands. “I’ve never been around little kids. Like ever. What if I screw it up?”

“Screw up reading a book with a kid? I don’t think it’s possible.” He sits on the floor next to the chair and says, “It will be good practice for when Cammie has her baby.”

That is a good point. I look into the handsome little brown-eyed guy’s eyes, and ask, “Want to read a book with me?”

I slide to the floor next to Jackson. James lands with a thump in my lap unexpectedly like we’re old buds. Glancing at Jackson, he grins, and whispers, “He’s pretty shy, so he must like you.”

I like him. We don’t get three pages in before the sitter pokes her head into the room with Tatum’s daughter, Poppy, on her hip. “Where’s my little Jamie?” He shoves away from

me like I'm boring news when he sees the two of them and takes off across the room. Glancing up at us, she says, "Hi. I'm Larissa." Picking him up, she blows raspberries on his cheeks. "I get to hang out with this little guy sometimes. It's even more fun when it's the two of them together. They are so funny."

Poppy heads straight for the bed. Larissa walks over and sets James on it and then helps Poppy on. Bouncing and giggles ensue.

"Looks like they keep you busy," I reply, feeling a little disappointed our time was cut short. I try to wrangle my thoughts back together as Jackson helps me to my bare feet.

I was just getting used to ... whatever this was, thinking it wasn't so bad. When we say goodbye to the kids, James is so cute when he insists on giving me a hug.

Closing the door behind him, Jackson comes into the hall with me. I slip on my shoes while Jackson sits on the steps to put his back on.

Saved by the babysitter earlier, I loop back to the burning question. "You never said if you wanted kids."

"You didn't ask. You asked me if I knew if I wanted them. I know." He stands and steals a kiss.

I'm tempted to steal it right back because of that answer. I laugh instead. "Are you going to tell me more or leave me guessing?"

"Guessing sounds more fun."

I roll my eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction. "Fine. Keep your secrets." I start down the stairs. "I've got mine." I don't even know if I have any secrets, but it's fun to tease him.

He's quick on my heels. "What secrets are you keeping?"

"Oh good, Marlow, Jackson, dinner's ready. I put fresh drinks on the table for you."

Saved by his sister. Nick and Harrison are here, and after quick greetings, the six of us sit to eat. Roasted chicken and au

gratin potatoes with a side of steamed and seasoned broccoli. It's such an unexpected meal—a little rustic and comforting.

I'm so used to ordering food that it's easy to forget that I could learn to cook and make something like this on occasion. Maybe ... I take a sip of wine after eating a couple of bites. "This is delicious."

"Thank you. It's simple but good every time. One of Jackson's most requested. He's always bugging me and my mom to cook for him since he's so busy. Sometimes, I'll just make two of the same dish to send over to him. Do you like to cook?"

"I don't. My mom doesn't either. I don't even know if she knows how."

Tatum says, "Sounds like my mom. She could close a multimillion-dollar deal, but boiling water was not her forte."

Natalie says, "My mom was a very good cook, but she worked a lot as well. Nick's mom, Cookie, showed me how to make the most delectable turkey at Thanksgiving. She's full of great tricks."

"She sure is," Nick adds, "matchmaking being her specialty."

Natalie reaches over and rubs his arm. "Cookie will take no credit for us getting together, and instead, she'll say the stars aligned because we were meant to be."

"That's beautiful," I say, cutting my vegetables and then taking a bite. Not once have they made me feel like an outsider. It's the opposite almost to a fault. I'm being treated like I'm already a part of the family.

I'm not sure what to think of that, but it feels so natural to me as well that I have no intention of rocking the boat. This is what I dreamed of when I was growing up. A family meal. Conversation over dinner. Catching up with each other.

It leaves me befuddled as to why my parents even had a kid if they didn't want this.

I won't let it ruin my time. This feels too good to want it to end.

"How's the gallery?" Nick asks.

Jackson's hand comes to rest on my leg. I'm starting to piece together the little things he does. Support and encouragement fill the leg touch.

"It's ... there. I have a big show that I'm working on that could be pivotal for launching my career into a gallery director position."

Tatum says, "That sounds exciting."

His thumb grazing back and forth is the pride he has in his eyes for me. I love seeing it as much as feeling everything he shares with me.

"It is," I continue. "It's wait and see in that area, but the planning has been really enlightening. Working on a global project has allowed me to learn so much from international galleries." I laugh to myself. "New York is cutting edge in the art world, but places such as Paris, Madrid, Italy, and Japan have something so stylistically unique that it's just breathtaking when I see some of their pieces in person."

I hadn't noticed that everyone stopped eating, only that my heart beat differently as I was speaking—quicker, my cadence of thoughts too fast to put into words. My love for art in all forms has been lost for the past two years. I feel alive, knowing it still exists inside me.

"I'd love to show you two photos I recently acquired. It's a newer photographer here in the city. Story Salenger. Have you heard of her?" Natalie asks.

"The name Story sounds familiar."

"After dinner, I'll show them to you. You can give me your professional opinion." She takes a bite.

"I'd love to see them. Photography and paintings are my specialties."

"Wait until you see the finger-painting James gave me. I have it framed in my office," Nick says.

“That’s adorable. I’d love to see his budding skills.”

Jackson’s hand was gone, and that’s when I clued in to what he already knew—I’m doing okay, better than the turmoil trying to drag me down.

The conversation moves on to the kids, and although I may not have all the answers about what life will bring or even what direction I’m headed in, something Cammie said returns. And just so I know what I’m getting into, I ask, “How big was Jackson when he was born?”

Marlow

“MARLOW?”

“In here,” I reply, spraying my hair and patting down the flyaways. The past month has been fairly quiet at work as I iron out the details of the next exhibit. And it’s been blissfully peaceful in my personal life. Living with Jackson has been a dream, so hearing him stomp down the hall and through the bedroom has me worried.

That can’t be good.

As soon as he stalks into the bathroom where I’m getting ready for the night, our eyes meet in the reflection of the mirror. Taking a hard stance, he crosses his arms over his chest as a scowl digs into his handsome face.

I turn around, and ask, “What is it?”

“Why the fuck is some guy picking you up for a date?”

“What are you talking about?”

Moving closer, he lowers his voice. “Some fuck is at the door waiting for you.”

I rub my hand over his chest. “I don’t have a date, Jackson. You know I have a business dinner. That’s it. But also,” I say, my shoulders rising, “how would anyone even know this address for me?”

“That’s what I’m wondering, but it’s Friday night, and he’s standing in the hall waiting for you.”

“Did you get a name?”

“Other than fucker?”

I give him a pointed look and try not to laugh.

“Casteleone.”

“Oh, no.” Panic sets in, and I scramble back to the mirror. “He’s here?”

Even in the reflection, I see the moment his heart sinks, and his blue eyes turn cloudy as if I lied to him. “So he *is* here for a date?”

“No. It’s not a date.” I shake my head and start applying my lipstick. “That’s my dinner date.” *Damn*. I shouldn’t have said that. “Not date. Business. *Only business*. You can even come with me if you want. Mr. Casteleone is the art collector helping me secure the Kyoto exhibit.”

The tension ticking in Jackson’s jaw finally eases. I turn around and then go to him. “It’s not a date, Jackson, and I’m not sure why he’s here. We were supposed to meet at the restaurant. If you don’t want to come with us, then what do you say about me introducing him to my boyfriend.”

He officially has me with that lady-killer grin, making it so much harder to leave because I know what’s waiting for me at home. He kisses me and says, “You go. I’ll get some work done and then meet you in that bed right out there later. What do you say?”

“I say I can’t wait.” I kiss him and then nod toward the front of the apartment. “He’s actually a really nice guy. I think you’ll like him.”

After meeting him, officially, Jackson doesn’t like him ... well, not so much dislikes, but more doesn’t trust him from what I’m gathering. Discussing the situation in the office, he says, “He’s way too old for you.”

“He’s forty-five, Jackson. Way smaller gap than Billy Joel and my mom.”

“I’m being serious. And I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

“How he looks at me doesn’t matter. It’s business. He’s the owner of the collection. You know what it means to me to get this project.” I untangle his crossed arms and lift. Just before I kiss him, I whisper, “We can’t lose trust in each other. Promise me, we’ll do everything to keep that intact.”

As his eyes search mine, he takes my hand between us and then raises it to his mouth. Kissing my palm, he then says, “I trust you.” When he lowers it, he leans close to my ear, the scruff on his chin scraping across my earlobe. “I promise you can always trust me, Marlow.”

A delicious shiver runs through me, and I close my eyes, letting his words and this closeness sink in. It’s not just his proximity. It’s us becoming so enmeshed together that it would be easy to lose sight of myself.

For the first time in my life, I don’t have any inclination to run.

No, I step right into this fire, willing to burn along with Jackson. “Hey?” The word is so soft that I’m not even sure I voiced it.

His heart beats strong in his chest under my hand, and I’m sure he can feel my heart racing as well. I’m so close, so close to telling him my deepest secret. “I—”

“We’re going to miss our reservation if we don’t leave, Ms. Marché,” Mr. Casteleone calls from the living room.

I squeeze my eyes shut and release a breath. “I’m sorry.”

Catching me by the hand, he says, “Wait.”

Turning back, I feel the moment slipping out from under us. “Yes?”

Our eyes stay locked on each other’s as if we’re both waiting for the other to say something first. I take a stuttering breath, and then say, “I need to go.”

He straightens his shoulders and releases my hand. “Have a good night.”

I nod, looking back once more before I round the corner into the hallway. Plastering on that fake smile I learned in LA, I say, “I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”

Mr. Casteleone says, “I hear this restaurant has a yearlong waiting list.”

“Yes, I’ve heard the same. It’s amazing you got a reservation.” I grab my clutch from the entry table and lead him to the door.

“Connections get you everywhere in this world.”

Opening the door, I look back again, my mind still on Jackson and leaving him after such an unfortunate conversation. Those three words, words I’ve never said to another man I’m dating, were on the tip of my tongue.

I hate that this moment was stolen from us. My chest aches to return to him.

There’s no sign of Jackson, but I’m not sure how to make this better anyway. He meets with women in business. I can’t tell him not to, even if I wanted. He goes to dinners, has lunches, even meets over coffee. This is no different, so I’m not sure why he’s upset.

It doesn’t take away that I’ve hurt him or, at a minimum, left him upset. I don’t want to do that. Not to him.

My head wars with my heart.

It took four months, endless emails, and countless calls to score this meeting. I need to keep my mind focused on this exhibit. I’ve worked so hard to get here. Mr. Casteleone can make or break my career. *Am I willing to risk it all over a misunderstanding?*

While we wait for the elevator to arrive, I look back once more at the closed door. Tapping my foot, I need to clear up something. “I thought we were meeting at the restaurant?”

“I thought we could take care of business first in the car. I’d rather enjoy the company of a beautiful woman over dinner than ruin it with business.”

My stomach drops.

The elevator door opens, and he waits for me to get on. I step forward and turn to face the hallway. That feeling in my stomach grows, dampening all the hope I felt before learning of his intentions. He steps in, and when he's too close for comfort, I know Jackson was right.

I step off the elevator and turn to face him. Just as the door starts to close, I say, "I can't have dinner with you."

"Wait." He reaches for the button, but it's too late. And it feels like more than an elevator door opening and closing. What am I doing? *This could be career-ending.*

He's a key player in the art world, and I just stood him up for dinner. But I can't leave the way things were left with Jackson. *That could be heart-ending.*

I rush back down the hall with my flood of giddiness and hope rolled up in one and unlock the door. He's not there to greet me physically or even with a hello. Flipping off my heels to move faster, I hurry down the hall to find him sitting in his chair with headphones on.

The scent of his cologne and a long day has me finding a little peace in the chaos, and I inhale, dragging him into my lungs in hopes of breathing easier again.

Since his back is to me, I spin his chair around, grabbing hold of the arms and stopping him when he's facing me. His hands are fast, but he lowers them when he sees it's me. "What are you doing?"

"I love you," I blurt like a feral cat, knowing full well I have no clue what that even means. "I love you," I repeat, much softer this time.

His brows pinch together, forming a line between them. "What?" Pointing at his headphones, he adds, "Noise-canceling." He lifts them off and sets them on the desk when he stands. "What are you doing here, Marlow?"

"I've lost control because of you, self-sabotaging thoughts telling me not to do this, but I need to. I have to—"

"Have to what?"

“I love you, Jackson.”

Nothing.

I hear nothing in response to pouring my heart out to this man. Did I make a mistake? Seconds feel like torturous minutes. I can't take the silence any longer. “I know it's too soon to admit—”

“I love you.” My face is caressed, and he leans in, kissing my nose, my lips, each cheek, and my forehead as if I'm the cross he must bear. Maybe I am, but I don't care. Nothing makes sense in my life anymore but him. *Only him.* “I've waited a lifetime to hear those words from you. I never thought I would.”

Holding his wrists as he still caresses my face, I lift on the balls of my feet, needing to feel his lips on mine, the pressure caught between something sweet and something sinful.

When I float back down to earth, I hold him with all of me and my cheek pressed to his chest. “I love you so much that I don't know how to explain it any better.”

“I love you works.” He kisses my head and then chuckles. “Sweetheart.”

He's lucky I love him. I look up, my chin set against him. “I'm not sure what's wrong with me, but I love that friggin' nickname now. Just tell me you've never called any of your other girlfriends the same name.”

“I haven't. I've never delved into a relationship deep enough to get to the nickname stage. But no one else has ever driven me as crazy as you have. So there is that as well.”

“I'm okay with that.” I laugh.

When he sits in the chair and brings me onto his lap, he says, “Want to talk about what happened?”

“Over dinner?” I run the tips of my fingers over the rough hair growth blanketing his jaw.

Taking my fingers, he kisses the tips. “Sure. What do you want to order?”

I get up and spin. “I’m all dressed. Let’s go out.”

“All right,” he says, already on his feet. “Where do you want to go?”

“I know just the place.”

Forty minutes later, we walk into the restaurant, and I scope out the host stand and who’s working it. *Damn*. Hair pulled back so tight that her skin looks stretched unnaturally. Burgundy lipstick. Black turtleneck. She looks like someone who’s not going to let us wrangle our way into using an expired reservation. Turning to Jackson, I say, “Tell her Casteleone.”

“We’re taking the reservation?”

My shoulders bounce reflexively. “No point in letting it go to waste. It’s all about connections, and I don’t have them.”

He looks at the host and then says, “Wait here.” I love when he plays dirty. Makes me feel less alone down here. Jackson never misses a beat and marches straight ahead. I wish I were a fly nearby to hear how this plays out, but I keep my distance, thinking I’ll only cause more of an issue.

Swiping across the screen, she snaps in response, but then bothers to look up. That’s all I need—her to see how hot my boyfriend is. Yep, her tune quickly changes. We may be over an hour late, but if anyone can get us past this checkpoint, it’s Jackson ... and all that sexiness.

He doesn’t flirt. Just stands there with his hands tucked in his pockets and that smirk I’m very familiar with seated in his expression as he answers what appears to be a barrage of questions.

Glancing my way, he gives me a wink. The host’s gaze cuts through the crowd to find me, pinning me to the spot with a look. She then smiles at Jackson and hands two menus to a man standing behind her. Jackson nods me over. I go, weaving through the others waiting for a table. I’m expecting to follow somewhat hidden not to blow this for us since he got past the gatekeeper.

But that's not Jackson's style. He holds his hand out for me. When I reach the stand, the hostess smiles. "Have a nice dinner, Mrs. St. James."

Taking Jackson's hand, I pass her and reply, "Thank you."

I follow them through the main dining room and farther down a hall of private rooms. We pass through a large doorway and enter an atrium bustling with more diners. It's pretty with twinkling lights shining above like stars.

We're shown our table against a wall of glass that overlooks a small garden on the other side. It's so romantic with touches of greens and an iridescence to the glass tabletops. Jackson's suspicions of the situation being more than business were confirmed

Our drink order is placed, and then Jackson lays the napkin across his lap and leans in. "Look at this place. Tell me that fucker didn't have other plans in mind for you."

I slide my hand across the table and hold it palm up. His gaze dips first, and then he places his hand over mine. "It doesn't matter what his plans were. I'm here with you, exactly how it should be."

He shifts forward. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"Nothing specific happened. I didn't even make it to the lobby. I just realized that what I considered a great opportunity for my career was not going to be good for us. He seemed to be leaning in a different direction that felt more personal than business." He knows without me going into the details.

He knew already.

Jackson's not the kind of guy to be jealous out of nowhere. He sensed it. I should have too, as soon as Casteleone showed up at our door. I won't trade my integrity for a promotion. It makes me mad that I was put in that position.

Jackson says, "I'm sorry."

"You did nothing wrong."

The sound of dishes being gathered and tables cleaned and the low hum of private conversation fill the atrium. It's airy but small enough to feel invested in the experience. His grip on my hand tightens. "I'm sorry that you've worked so hard only to be in a position you felt you needed to protect yourself from."

"You were right. He said business and then pleasure, and red flags flew up. I didn't want to be sitting at a restaurant with him when I could be curled up at home with you."

That smile that wins my heart every time joins the fun, and his hands angle up. "Best of both worlds?"

"I'd say so, charmer. Not sure how you got her to give us the reservation using your own name, but I'm grateful."

"I didn't want to lie."

He may not have wanted to lie, but I drop this little nugget. "She called me Mrs. St. James."

I've never seen him blush, and he doesn't know, but he does appear a little bashful. Holding two fingers up, he winks. "Okay, a little lie."

My heart feels bigger, more open wide around him. And he continues to fill me with so much goodness. "I don't mind."

The server returns and sets our glasses before us. As soon as we place our order and are alone again, I lift my champagne flute to tap to his glass. "To us."

"To ..." He pauses, and then smirks. "I love you."

Our glasses tap together just as I say, "I love you."

The liquid just coats my lips when I hear, "Marlow ... honey?"

When my gaze shifts to the woman heading my way, I spew what little I sipped. "Mom?"

Marlow

I'VE NEVER SPIT in my life, and now I'm wiping dribbling champagne from my chin in the middle of a trendy Manhattan restaurant.

I'd recognize Talia Marché's voice anywhere—the laid-back California pace mixing with the slightest of accent via France or Italy. It changes on an as-needed basis. But I can't say I ever expected to run into her in New York City. I stand in a rush, my cloth napkin accidentally falling to the floor before I can catch it. "Mom?" I say again as if my eyes deceive me and my nerves are kicking in.

She walks over with shock embracing her own face. Others might not catch the expression before she rights it into a smile, but I'm the last person she expected to see. Otherwise, she would have sent a text or even a wire to let me know she was in the city.

She embraces me like a daughter she's close to, a daughter who she hasn't seen in a long time and whose presence has been missed.

In reality, she hasn't missed me a single day of my life. Her lifestyle is a testament to her chosen path and my replacement.

I lift my arms, but they're slow to obey. I've been hurt before by her absence. Does her presence make a difference? I

hug her. “What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were in the city?”

“Look at you. So ... adult-like.” Pulling back, she holds my arms, swinging them wide so she can get a good look at me. I lost the five pounds she used to hound me about, but I’m pretty sure they returned in the last week living with Jackson. Happiness does that, gives one a sense of comfort when someone not only accepts you but loves you for who you are and not just for appearances.

When her eyes linger on my midsection, I yank my arms out of her hands. “That happens when you near thirty.”

“Thirty?” Her head goes back as if she’s going to need smelling salts to continue. “How is it possible that I have a thirty-year-old?”

“Not quite yet. I have a good six months.”

“Right. That’s good. I was starting to feel old. What a dreadful hand to be dealt.”

Jackson stands and says, “It’s good to see you again, Ms. Marché.”

Her entire body angles toward him, and she drops her wrist in front of him. I want to roll my eyes. Good Lord, this is over the top. She should probably take a break from the French Riviera. “Who are you?” she asks, giving him sudden interest.

And my friends always called *me* over the top. Guess the apple doesn’t fall far in that aspect. I’m tall enough for entry into the runway world of modeling but more muscular in build. My mom said designers would never want to fit clothes on that type of model. It seemed to bother her more than me.

At fourteen, I knew that life wasn’t for me, and I was happy not to follow in my mother’s footsteps.

My dad said I was pretty and could make it in Hollywood if I put in the effort. It was a constant fight between them. But I know my mom married him for his money, so I’m not sure she thought beyond the wedding. She left to get away from him after the divorce, but I wish she would have stayed for me.

None of it matters now, so why do I feel like a child begging for her attention?

“Jackson St. James. We’ve met a couple of times over the years. I’m a good friend of Marlow’s.”

“How good?”

My mouth falls open while Jackson takes the question in stride. Reaching for my hand, he holds it as he moves to my side. “Very good friends.”

“I see.” Her eyes shift to mine. “I didn’t know you were dating anyone.”

A server squeezes by, and I realize we’re blocking the walkway. “How long will you be here?” I hate that I sound like a little girl again, but I’ve asked her this same question many times over the years. It’s not so far-fetched that not much has changed.

She smiles. “Paolo’s waiting for me in the other room, so I should get back. We flew in to celebrate a friend’s birthday tonight.” Grabbing my wrist, she asks, “Lunch or dinner before I leave?” An air kiss is given to each cheek before she turns to leave. “I’ll text you tomorrow. Bye, darling.”

Reaching for my throat, I cover it, hoping the lump of pain she left in her wake doesn’t get stuck there forever.

Jackson rubs my lower back and angles me toward him, putting the rest of the patrons behind us. Whispering, he says, “This place isn’t so great. Why don’t we get our order to go?”

I manage a smile under the waterfall of emotions trying to drown me. I take a sip of my champagne and then just finish it because who cares about appearances anyway. Setting it down, I say, “I’m good without the food.”

“I think we should eat.” He sits down and then adds, “Please sit.”

Besides feeling numb from running into my mom in the first place, her blatant disregard hurts the most. I sit, and then I reach across the table to grab his glass and shoot the rest of his lowball of whiskey. *Why not?*

“As much as I don’t want you puking on the ride home, do you need another?”

“My throat is on fire.” It’s hard to catch my breath through the rasps and coughing. “I don’t know how you drink that stuff.” I sip water to douse the fire. Setting the glass back down, I say, “I want another round.”

Twenty minutes and two drinks I shoot like shots later, I’m feeling less—physically, caring emotionally, less of everything—which is what I wanted.

“What about tacos? We could get tacos on the way home or a hot dog. Mmm, a hot dog sounds so good. Doesn’t it, Jackson?”

“The food should be here any minute, but you might want to slow down, Marlow.”

I set another empty glass of champagne down on the table and rest back, trying to calculate how many drinks that’s been but start laughing, which, in turn, becomes a fit of giggles. “It’s Mrs. St. James, remember?” When he doesn’t crack a smile, I round my shoulders forward, and try whispering, “You’re not having fun.”

“I’m fine.” His reply is as flat as that line across his mouth. Doesn’t matter that he’s a sourpuss. I still want to kiss him silly. But even tipsy, I know that’s not supposed to be done in a restaurant. I roll my eyes. Society’s rules and all that.

Stretching my leg out, I rub the tip of my shoe under the hem of his pants. “Do you know what drinking does to me?”

Suddenly, he’s entertained. Amused, he sits there with that happy sexy face, his gorgeous eyes staring into mine. “I do. We’ve gotten drunk together many times over the years.”

“But why did we always fight? We’ve wasted so much time when we could have been having sex all these years.” My voice pitches, but I’m okay with it. *More than okay.*

“We didn’t really know each other until—”

“Until now. The *sex* is so good.” Struggling to stave off the slur trying to kick in, I narrow my eyes and try to be serious.

“Intense.”

“Marlow,” he whispers, leaning forward against the edge of the table. “People can hear you.”

I pick up my glass of water and take a sip. “It’s not my problem they don’t have sex like we do. Like animals who can’t get enough of each other.” I turn to look across the room, disappointed when I don’t see our server. “When’s the food going to be here? I’m starving. I need tacos.” The water sloshes in the glass.

“You ordered the fish.” Jackson reaches over and takes the glass from me.

My nose scrunches, and I reach up to uncrunch it. “I don’t want fish. I want tacos.” I gasp when I realize I can have both. “Hear me out. Fish. Tacos.”

He gets up and comes around to my side of the table. “It’s time to go. I’ll get you tacos.”

I stand and wrap my arms around him. “Because you’re my hero.”

“No, because my girl wants tacos, so she gets tacos.”

Poking him in the chest, I nod. “That’s hero stuff right there.” We start to walk, but my ankle wobbles under me. “Whiskey is strong, Jackson. Why’d you let me drink that? Especially on an empty stomach.”

“I didn’t let you drink anything. That’s all on you, sweetheart.”

“You could at least humor me.”

Chuckling, he replies, “I have been for the past forty-five minutes.”

Just as we leave the atrium, we see the server carrying the bag of food, and I’ve never felt so relieved. We follow him into the corridor, where he swipes the credit card through the reader. He glances at me like he’s never seen a woman under the influence before.

I'm not doing anything outrageous. I'm tipsy, at the most. This city's full of people partying at all hours of the night and day. I still need to hold tight to Jackson's arm to steady myself though. Maybe I am drunk. Approved flashes onto the screen. "Success!" I exclaim too loud for the server's comfort level.

Jackson chuckles while signing the receipt. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it." He takes the bag, and we head for the exit, each step becoming more troublesome.

But when we pass the last door in the row of private party rooms, I catch a glimpse of my mom and her boyfriend. The room is boisterous, and she stands to lead them in a rousing edition of "Happy Birthday."

Memories of sitting alone on my balcony, wishing on a star for one person to care, come flashing back. For the first time in my life, I wasn't being greedy. Just one. That's all I ever dreamed about.

I don't stare, forcing myself to look ahead instead. Looking back never did me any favors anyway.

The cold air outside is sobering, and I tuck myself under Jackson's arm until we find a taxi and hop in. "I don't want tacos. I just want to go home."

"You need to eat, and you said you didn't want the fish."

"I can find something at the apartment."

I hear the crumpling of the bag, and then he asks, "Do you want my steak? It came with a baked potato on the side. I think that would be filling and help absorb some of the alcohol."

"I don't want to think about food, Jackson," I snap, staring at my reflection in the window. "That's all I did growing up. I was never enough, or I was too much. I could never just be me." When he doesn't respond, I look at him.

Waiting.

I just wish I knew what he was waiting for. "Jackson?"

His eyes find me in the dark cab, and then his hand reaches over, barely touching mine. "I'm not going to fight with you,

Marlow. I know you're angry, and you have every right to be. No one should be made to feel less than, and that's what she does to you. I'm sorry she's hurt you. I'm sorry she doesn't see it. I'm really fucking sorry that she doesn't treat you how you deserve to be."

I loop my fingers around two of his. "Me too."

But then he continues, "I don't know that you'll ever get the chance to tell your parents how they've hurt you. But you can tell me. Yell if you need to. I'll listen. But I want you to hear me back. And come sunrise, I don't want you feeling like shit. I want to see the woman I love sleeping soundly next to me with this bullshit in the rearview mirror. It's not going to be easy, but you're stronger than they give you credit for. Do we have a deal?"

"That's a lot of words to process if you ask me." I start laughing, and then it becomes contagious when he joins in. "I'm drunk, Jackson," I say, rolling my neck in his direction.

"I'm not surprised."

"I'm drunk, but even in this state, I know you're putting yourself on the line to make me feel better." I take a deep breath and sigh. "Thank you. You're an amazing man—" *And then I vomit.*

Jackson

IT'S BEEN A NIGHT.

The fee to have the car cleaned was not an issue. I felt bad for the driver for having to deal with it, though. My shoes and the bottom of my pants have been wiped off as much as they could and are already in the cleaning bag with her shoes outside my door. I managed to get some plain baked potato and a little water in her before she laid down on the couch and passed out.

I plug her phone in next to mine on the kitchen counter to make sure it's charged by the time she wakes up. Grabbing a bottle of water, I lean against the counter exhausted and down the contents. The cool liquid feels good as it slides down my throat.

Dropping my head, I rub the bridge of my nose, thinking I should try to go to bed. I want to stay awake as long as I can to make sure she's okay, though. After holding her hair and rubbing her back as she threw up in the bathroom, I helped her shower in hopes of sobering her up. She grabbed my sweatpants and one of my T-shirts before saying she should stay on the leather couch "just in case" she vomited again.

I don't think it really works like that, but I wasn't going to argue with her. I'm just glad she's finally resting.

Refilling the bottle from the pitcher of cold water from the fridge, I put it back and turn to go check on Marlow when a buzz on the countertop stops me. I turn to see a message on the screen of Marlow's phone: *You're fired.*

Fuck.

I'm still not sure what happened with Casteleone, but using the reservation might not have been the wisest idea. Of course, I didn't bother with that bullshit. If I'm getting a table, I'm getting it on my name alone ... and the little lie that I was celebrating my wife's promotion. The hostess was endeared by the gesture.

Right time.

Right place.

It almost all worked out. *Until her mom showed up.*

I'm not sure where we'll stand when she wakes up. She was just getting settled into a new life that was created in her best interests, for her happiness, instead of curated by narcissists.

I'm best for her.

It took her so fucking long to see me as anything more than an extension of our friends' crew. Sex might have opened the door for us, but I walked through. Me. I fucking walked through that door and showed up for her.

Fuck her mom.

Fuck her dad.

Fuck her boss and anyone else who dares to mess with my girl. She doesn't need any of them because she's got me in her corner. I'll be there however she needs me if it helps her see she's better off without them.

I walk to the office and dig through the closet, pulling a pillow and my sleeping bag from the depths. Dumping them in the hall, I continue to the bathroom and brush my teeth. Running my hand over the rough hairs on my cheek, I know I need to shave, but I'm too tired. Dark circles are also highlighted in the unnatural light of the bathroom.

Standing shirtless in a pair of basketball shorts hanging low on my hips, I realize it's been a while since I've hit the gym. No big changes, but those dinner dates with Marlow and the holiday parties are starting to show a bit. I need to start exercising again—because it keeps me calm when my job is the opposite.

And it's something I want to start doing with Marlow. I'm not sure what her preferred form of physical activity is, but I hope we can find something to do together outside of the bedroom. Although that is my favorite form of exercise with her.

Exercise might be another way we can do life together. I'll bring it up to her tomorrow, and hopefully, she'll like the idea.

I finish up and scoop the pillow and bag when I walk down the hall. Moving the coffee table away from the couch, I set up camp on the floor next to her. I take the blanket that's started to slip and pull it a little higher, not wanting to disturb her sleep, then kiss her on the head.

Her life's a mess, but who doesn't have a rough patch here and there. I crawl into the sleeping bag and adjust my pillow under my head. Staring up at the ceiling, I listen to her breathing. It's quiet and steady, content even.

I look at her sleeping on her side, facing my direction. Her hair needed washing, but she didn't have the energy to blow-dry it, so she twisted it up on top of her head after running a towel over it. The collar of my shirt hangs over her shoulders, exposing the skin to the cool air. I reach up and tug the blanket higher. She doesn't stir.

Lying back down, I close my eyes, taking the time to rest. I'm not sure how she'll react, but I imagine seeing that text in the morning will feel like another blow to the life she's trying to rebuild. It's a life she's determined to define on her own terms for the first time. But it has me wondering where I fit in.

I close my eyes, steadying my breaths to sync with hers, and try to calm my mind. What happens tomorrow isn't a riddle I can solve tonight, but the sun will soon shed new light on everything.

WHEN I TIGHTEN my arms around her, my nose is tickled, and the scent of flowers fills each breath I take. Arms and legs, cotton, and a deep heat creep over me, making my dick get hard. “Marlow,” I whisper just before opening my eyes.

Sometime in the night, she squeezed right into the sleeping bag with me. She’s still asleep, but she stirs as soon as I move my head back to get a better look at her. Her hand hits my chin, and then her knee jolts forward. I’m quick to protect the boys, but there’s not much room to move.

Her eyelids flutter open, and my sweet girl doesn’t show any signs of the hurt she experienced last night. Right here as the sunrise sneaks in through the windows, we stare into each other’s eyes.

Tears start to fill her eyes, and I just can’t have that. Even if only for a short time, I’ll do what I can to keep her safe from the outside world. I kiss her and slide my knee between her legs. Her arms reach around my neck as I glide my fingers down her back.

Together, we roll so I’m on top of her, balancing my weight over her incredible body. It’s only a few seconds, but I look in her eyes, seeing the gray fade into the bright blue, a sadness tainting them in ways that the sunshine can’t fight. I whisper, “It’s okay,” and then dip my head to kiss her cheek.

Holding me, she presses the back of her head into the pillow as I cover her face in kisses and then move down her neck. Her middle wriggles beneath me, and then she uses her feet and legs to lower the sweatpants around her ankles. Using my foot, I push down until she’s freed.

She dips her arms down and starts lowering my shorts. Her knee and then her foot help me to escape them. She giggles when the shirt gets stuck around her head. I toss it, and then it’s just us, skin to skin and a connection that can’t be stolen from us. No matter who or what tries, we’re bonded together.

Our lips come together as I align myself on top of her again. I push in, causing her head to dip back and a quieter gasp to escape both of us. I'll never tire of the feeling of conquering the universe when we're tangled up in each other. There's no greater high than being with the woman I've loved deeper than I thought possible.

Pulling back, I take it slow when I push back in. Her hips meet me halfway, but then she squirms, and words are whispered encouraging me for more—faster, harder, to take her away to that place that we only meet when we're together like this.

My body moves on its own accord, driving forward, taking her to that special place where our souls become one, even if only for a few seconds. The love, the light, the passion, a forever we never planned—it's all there for the taking. All we have to do is reach that destination.

Together.

She kisses the side of my head as I drive us there, pushing us to the edge of this reality just to be lost in another. "I love you. I love you. I love you so much," I breathe on the cusp of that bliss, the abyss that will lead from the safest path and into the depths where we can't turn back.

With her legs wrapped around my middle, her moans reach my ears before her words, but I smile when she says, "I'm so in love with you."

I pull back and anchor my arms on the pillow on either side of her head, I push forward. We don't kiss. We grin.

Smiles and light.

A part of my soul is sacrificed at her altar; my demise offered on a silver platter to return the joy that's now returned to her eyes. She runs her hands over my shoulders and up my neck. She caresses my face as we move together, and then I'm kissed just as our bodies peak. Tiny quakes ripple through me as I push and thrust over and over until I lose my hold on ... *on* ... "Fuck," I growl as my release rips through me.

“Jackson,” she says, her voice weak as her orgasm hits, dragging her under when her eyes suddenly close and mouth falls open.

I kiss her. I kiss her, stealing everything she’ll give me—her lips and harsh breaths, hips pounding against mine, and ever tremble of her body—weightlessly returning to me and this new day.

And then I do what I promised myself I never would. I selfishly put my needs ahead of hers, cupping her face, and begging her, “Stay with me.”

Marlow

I DO.

That's what I would have told myself just over six months ago if someone had asked me if I deserved to have Jackson St. James in my life.

Why wouldn't I?

I felt deserving of everything I got. That's what being given possessions instead of love will do to a person. It distorts what's truly special, making you miss the extraordinary among the ordinary.

But he's not a possession I can keep. He's a person worthy of the love he so easily gives to me. *And so much more.*

Ask me that same question today, and I'll have a different answer.

No, I don't feel deserving, but I won't take him for granted.

Showered.

Dressed.

Makeup on and hair styled.

I feel better than I probably should, considering I expelled the contents of my stomach all over the floor of the cab ... in

the trash bin on the sidewalk outside the building ... and, as if I had anything left in me, the toilet for an hour.

Am I ashamed?

Utterly mortified.

Will I live?

Yes, with this embarrassment forever. The funny thing is that he still looks at me like the woman he's in love with. He even consoled me and told me it happens. But as I walk into the living room and see him standing in the kitchen smiling like the cat who ate the canary, it doesn't matter what he's gotten into or up to. I just know my heart has never been happier.

Even my mom can't ruin this. Only I have that ability. And I won't. I'll do anything to protect what we're building.

"What are you doing?" I ask as casually as I can despite the butterflies that have replaced the queasiness that had me praying for relief last night.

"You had a craving." When I enter the kitchen, he steps aside and presents a counter full of tacos.

I cover my mouth when it flies open. "You did not," I say, laughing while taking in the biggest display of tacos I've ever seen, even in restaurants.

"I did."

Lowering my hands, I lick my lips. I'm suddenly starving. "Did you buy enough?"

"Wanted to cover anything you'd want." He points at a corner and chuckles. "I even got fish tacos."

I shake my head and grab a plate. "There's everything. Ooh, even avocado."

"Figured a California girl would like that option."

Picking one up by the soft tortilla, I place it on my plate and immediately reach for chicken. Although each tortilla already has the toppings packed inside, there's an impressive

salsa bar at the far end. “I do. Very much, but I feel more New York these days.”

Jackson comes closer and kisses my cheek. Holding my hips, he asks, “How are you feeling?”

“Much better.” Before he moves out of reach, I hold him. “I wanted to thank you for all you did. I shouldn’t have drunk what I did, but I appreciate you not judging me.”

“I don’t recommend alcohol to make the pain go away, but sometimes, we need to set the shit aside and just live.” Kissing my head, he adds, “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

I set my plate down and embrace him fully, my arms wrapped around his middle and any inch of me that can be pressed to him. “You’re too good.”

“Trust me, plenty of people could argue otherwise.” Pinching my chin between his fingers, he lifts until I’m staring into the deep blue depths of his eyes. “But, with you, it’s different, Marlow. You make being good easy because that’s exactly what I want to be for you—good. Worthy of your love.”

Heat emanates from my chest and spreads quickly. I smile, realizing he’s the main reason I do these days. “You’re making me a mushy mess,” I say, looking away to hide the emotions that seem to want to overwhelm me. That’s what his sweetness does to me. I wipe under my eyes and try to blink away the tears threatening to fall. “Don’t go soft on me, St. James.”

As soon as he laughs, I roll my eyes. “No jokes. Just eat,” I’m quick to add through my own laughter.

I’m squeezed against him, and I love hearing him laugh like I almost didn’t blow it last night. I hop up on the opposite counter and start eating while he packs a plate full of tacos, some barely on with tortillas hanging over the side. Setting glasses of water down first, he hops up on the counter next to me and starts chowing down.

Jackson finishes one. Keeping his attention on the tacos, he asks, “Did you check your messages?”

My gaze goes to the clock on the oven. 11:53 AM. I take another bite and chew, the heaviness that had momentarily disappeared under the beautiful morning. I finally face what I had conveniently avoided. “No. I don’t want my mother to text me because I don’t know what to say to her. But if there’s not a message from her, I’ll feel worse. I wanted to give her time to make the right decision.” I take a sip of water, the condensation sliding over my fingers as the topic of conversation threatens my appetite.

“Which is?”

“Choosing me.” I set the glass down and stare out the window. “Choosing to follow through with what she said last night and getting together before she leaves.”

“I don’t think you need backup, but if you want me to go, I will.”

Reaching over, I rub his leg and lean my head on his shoulder. “Thank you, but I think I’ll be okay. It was just so unexpected to see her, to see her flying in to celebrate with friends when I know how many of my birthdays she missed and my graduations—both high school and college.” I snap my fingers. “But when a friend calls, she’s there in a heartbeat.”

He’s gone quiet after the second taco. I glance at him and ask, “Already stuffed?”

“No.” Setting his plate aside, he hops down and comes to settle between my legs. The air changes like his mood, the laughter gone along with his smile.

“What’s wrong?” I set my plate beside me, that queasiness returning.

He runs his fingers over the top of my hand, not looking at me. When he does, it’s as if he’s steeling himself. “You should check your messages.”

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach. Digging my fingers into the denim covering my thighs, I brace myself the best I can. “Why?”

His hesitancy only makes this worse. I slide to the right of him and land on my feet. “Where’s my phone?”

“It’s still plugged in over there.”

Though dread fills each step, I reach for it and pull the cord from the bottom. The screen lights up, and I just catch the name when it flashes before going dark again. Amelia. I whip back to look at Jackson. “My boss.”

“When did the message come?”

“I was getting water last night—”

“Last night?” Panic infiltrates my tone as I finally get the nerve to touch the screen to brighten it again. My chest was empty, but my sunken heart with the dwindling beats dwelling in the bottom of my gut finally ceases. My hand starts shaking. “I’m fired?” My tone not doing any better, I look at Jackson, needing any ounce of hope he musters to help me through this.

He’s there, picking me up before the words sink in and carrying me into the living room. I wrap my arms and legs around him, and when he sits, I stay the same, wrapped around and completely wrapped up in him.

I take a deep breath. It’s filled with the scent of his soap and the cologne he wears on the weekends. I start to laugh that he has weekday and weekend scents. When I tip my head back, my stomach begins to ache from the belly laugh.

Tears fall, but they’re not sad.

“Are you okay?” he asks, smiling at me, but I see the concern in his eyes.

“No ... I’m not.” I slide off his lap and stand. With my back to him, I put my hands on my hips as I catch my breath from the delirium that surfaced, making me feel at a loss of control of my own emotions. I stand, staring into the distance at the building across the four lanes of traffic twelve floors below.

His hands cover my shoulders, his warmth exchanged. I feel weak. Jackson catches me before I sink to the couch. Resting against him, I am secure in his arms. He kisses behind

my ear and then whispers, “You’re not alone. We’ll figure it out together.”

Turning in his arms, I look at him and wonder how his good intentions flow so sweetly from his lips without a second thought. “I lost my job, Jackson. I put my blood, sweat, and tears into that job ... and I’m fired. For what?”

“Fuck them. Find a place where they appreciate you.”

I stare at him as if he’s speaking an alien language. “Fuck them? I have the money from selling the bags, but nothing else. I still have bills. Expenses.” I back out of his reach and start pacing, my thoughts spinning faster than my feet. “I can’t live here forever. I’ll have to put down deposits and—”

“Slow down, Marlow. I understand this is another hit coming at you, but you’ll be okay. You can stay here as long as you like. Maybe you never have to—”

“And live off you?” Shaking my head, I say, “No. No. No. I can’t do that.” I hit him with a look. “I can’t do that.”

He holds my glare, silently staring back, but he’s better than I am. He always was. He refrains from allowing any judgment to color his expression and sits down. I lose sight of his eyes and thoughts, wanting to hear him talk sense into me.

He doesn’t.

In fact, he doesn’t say anything. He just sits there, letting my worry spiral out of my hands.

“Jackson?”

Looking back at me, he says, “You probably won’t remember discussing this last night, but I told you we’re not going to fight. You have a lot of pent-up anger, as you should. You have every right to feel like you do.” Wagging his finger between us, he continues, “But it’s not going to flow in my direction.” He stands back to his full height. “These are the times that determine if we make it.”

“Make what?”

“If we survive each other when one is thrown a punch. You tell me who threw it, where to find them, and when we go to

fight, I'll fight. But not with you. Do you understand me?"

His tone is abrasive and unkind, but not toward me. He's standing his ground not for himself, but for us. "I understand." I walk toward the hallway, knowing I need to talk to my boss. Before I leave the living room, I turn back and say, "We ride at dawn. Dawn being one in the afternoon in this circumstance."

"I'll be ready."

I head for the bedroom but then stop. Habits are hard to break, but if there's anyone worth breaking them for, it's Jackson. I turn back, and as soon as I see him, I run, flying into his arms, and I kiss his neck. "Thank you."

"For what? I only did what any good boyfriend would do."

"You're not just a good boyfriend. You're extraordinary."

Marlow

MY HEAD THROBS, but my heart remains intact.

That's Jackson's doing.

He didn't make demands. He showed me I had a choice.

My mom broke me last night. Today, without so much as a peep of a text and no calls at all, I'm *choosing* to put my energy elsewhere.

Stopping on the corner, Jackson takes hold of my upper arms and leans down so he's eye level. "Get in there. Figure out what happened. Address it and don't take any shit."

"That's quite the pep talk, coach. Take no shit. Got it." I bite my lip to stay in character. If not, I'll start laughing too hard. The release of laughter feels so good but feeling like a team with Jackson is an incomparable high.

Laughter rocks his shoulders briefly, then he digs deep. "I don't need to tell you what to do. You've been training for this your whole life or at least since college," he notes. "You're here. All you have to do is show them who they're messing with."

"You're very inspiring. Have you thought about hitting the motivational speaking circuit or starting a quotational meme business?"

"No, you keep me busy enough."

“Ha,” I say, barking a laugh, which causes my smile to break free thanks to the silliness. Incredibly, I was fired not twenty-four hours prior, but Jackson has managed to get me giggling like I have no cares in the world. I kiss him quick, clap my hands, and then rub them together, ready to take on Amelia. “I’m ready. Put me in, coach.”

With a quick shoulder rub, he says, “You got this. Now go get ’em, tiger.”

I remember him saying that to me not so long ago. Everything worked out great after that ... well, other than I got evicted from my apartment. But I got Jackson, so everything turned out better than I could have imagined.

Walking toward the gallery, I’m dressed to kill in one of my favorite outfits—pencil skirt, crisp white blouse, and my red-soled black patent leather platforms. I chose a bold red lipstick and the blackest mascara I have, keeping the rest of my makeup lighter. We barely made it out the door once Jackson saw me.

He’s so damn good for my confidence.

We left under the premise of promises of playing secretary later in his office. I’ve been wanting to check out his desk anyway. Maybe he’ll give me an up close and personal view while bent over the top. My stomach tingles in anticipation.

Best sex of my life, and now I get it on the regular.

I must be doing something right.

But my mood sours when I approach the doors, riled up because I know I didn’t do anything that would warrant letting me go. To add insult to injury, I was fired in a text with no explanation whatsoever. So riled might be putting it mildly.

I’m actually surprised Amelia took the meeting. She’s rarely at the gallery on the weekends, even if there’s an exhibit or showing. She saunters in for the big names—artists, clients, celebrities wanting private showings—and then saunters right back out. I scout the new talent while she steals the credit.

I glance back at Jackson, who’s standing exactly where I left him. He gives me a thumbs-up, and now I’m laughing

again. He's really taking this coach thing to the next level. I appreciate the dedication.

Straighten your face, Marlow. I take a deep breath and then pull the door open.

Inside, my heels click across the concrete floors announcing my arrival before I reach the back office. I'm met on the gallery floor by jet-black hair upswept in a taut chignon in the back and a three-inch high swoop that falls to the side over her left ear, red-framed glasses with matching boots that feed out from under her shin-length military-style black jumpsuit.

This might be an intimidation tactic, but I feel good in my outfit, so I raise my chin. "Amelia."

No smile or joy to see me, but that's not new. It's ironic how you can see things differently, sometimes for what they really are, when you come at a situation from a different perspective. Maybe this is just her opportunity to finally get rid of me.

A few people meander through the space, but for the most part, we're alone in this corner of the building. She says, "I'm short on time. As you can see, I have no help today." Interesting angle. Fire the employee and then complain you have no help.

I can work with this. "Why was I fired?"

"You stood up our biggest client."

"The client showed up at my home, which made for an uncomfortable situation. He further admitted that the business was not the point of the meeting. Why would I go to a meeting with someone who had no intention of discussing business?"

"Since when do you care?"

The shot at my integrity lands firmly where intended, my pride. That only drives me harder. "You know I care about the gallery, the art, my job. I work hard, sometimes at all hours to make sure a show goes off without a hitch. That doesn't begin opening night. That begins months, sometimes years prior,

when I not only find the talent but also pull the collection together.”

“You always did have a big sense of self-importance, Ms. Marché. This is not Los Angeles. This is New York, the epicenter of the world. Who controls the art world in this city? I do. Not you.”

Since this is going nowhere, I debate on how to move forward. Appealing to her softer side is not an option. She’s harsh in her appearance all the way to the depths of her soul. But thinking back on what she said, she expected me to go on that date. Sure, I set the wheels in motion and set up the meeting, but she was thrilled to hear I was going. And she’s never thrilled about anything concerning me.

“There’s something I just can’t figure out. Maybe you can fill in the blanks.” She tucks her hands in her pockets like she’s invincible, a slight sneer rolling down the bridge of her nose at me. Her limits are being tested. I’ve not seen it much, but this situation has the makings of a scene that neither of us wants to be a part of.

She says, “I don’t think we need to discuss this any further.”

“Did you tell Mr. Casteleone where I’m staying? The address and the apartment?”

Her gaze lengthens over my shoulder to a customer who’s touching the white walls. It’s annoying when they do it, but it happens all the time and is easily cleaned after the fact.

“Amelia, I think you had a hand in this. I had just changed the address in my file the day before. You are the only one here with access to that information.”

Her hard gaze darts to me. “What was the harm in getting a ride to the restaurant?” A hand so nonchalantly sways out. “You had an opportunity to seal deals for his other collections, and you blew it.”

“I have a boyfriend—”

“It’s too bad you let that stand in your way.” She removes her glasses and taps the arm against her chin. As if all the

potential she saw in me has been lost because I got a personal life, she hums in quick disgust. “My mind’s made up. I can’t work with someone who so callously disregards something I care about so deeply.”

A surge of anger rushes my veins. “And what is that exactly? It’s not the gallery. You’re rarely around, and when you are, it’s to pretend you’re running this place.” I realize how calm and even my tone remains. That gives me the strength to tell my truth. “I run it. If I leave, so do a lot of the artists.” I don’t even know what I am saying, much less if some of the artists I’ve built relationships with would follow me to some other gallery.

“You’ve always been disobedient. I can’t have mutiny from my crew, or this ship won’t sail. I’ll mail your final paycheck. Lola has paperwork for you to sign. I’ll make notes of this exit interview for your file ... just in case. Also, if anyone calls for a recommendation, I want to have my facts straight.”

“Who hurt you so badly that you’re taking it out on the rest of the world?” I don’t catch myself before using another line from Jackson. *But if the shoe fits.*

“Everyone, darling.” I recognize the anger. I’ve harbored the same for so long, but I’ve been given the choice to change my approach and the direction of my life. Maybe she needs the same.

“It doesn’t have to be like this. We can turn this around.”

She turns on her heels but stops not three steps away. “Your father’s criminal misdeeds have cast a shadow of secondhand embarrassment on the gallery. You are never going to get my job no matter what you do or your connections.”

The lowball shot to the gut is somehow not entirely unexpected, but it still hurts. “Trust me, Amelia, I’ve been blindsided as well. If you feel the need to hold his actions against me, do it. But let me remind you that you had no issue when he was buying fifty-thousand-dollar art pieces like it was a fire sale.”

It's tempting to leave in a blaze of glory after burning the place down—metaphorically speaking. I'm just not sure that I'll feel better after doing it because the reality is, she's never been a great boss or a team player, but somehow, I've been oblivious to the fact that she was harboring so much hatred toward me. As much as I feel the urge to dissect our relationship for the past four years, that will take some time to work through, which is not now while standing in front of her.

“Money's money, honey.” Her guard falls, her body seeming to find comfort between us as if we're good friends. Mine remains firmly intact. She says, “I suggest you focus more on your career than a boyfriend, Marlow. You've been given a gift with that face but looks fade, so you better hone your other skills.

“Another word of advice,” she adds as if she's doing me a favor, and I'm not still reeling from the last comment. “You should have slept with Casteleone. You'd be running his gallery in Madrid by now.” Her expression lightens as if she's not full of rage toward me. “Instead,” she says, shrugging and raising a self-assured styled eyebrow. “You have a boyfriend while I have a new investor in the gallery.”

“Guess honing your skills paid off.”

“They always do, my dear.” She walks away like someone actually summoned her. They didn't. She just needs the last word.

Normally, that would be me, but this conversation is already in the gutter. How much lower can we go? It's just best if I leave as well.

Lola gingerly approaches, sympathy woven into her features and holding a large envelope for me. “I'm sorry, Marlow.”

“Don't worry. I get it. You're only doing your job.” I want to tell her to watch her back, but suddenly burning bridges doesn't sound so appealing. I'll sell more bags, which can get me by until I figure out my next step. I take the envelope.

She says, “You can drop by or mail it back. I’ll make up some excuse instead of holding you here to fill it out.”

“I appreciate that.” Sighing, I look around once more. This gallery has been a second home for years, and now I’m losing it, just like the apartment. I hear things come in threes. I think I’m on my fifth or sixth hit. A break would be nice.

We come together and hug. I say, “Thank you and stay in touch.”

“Keep me posted with what you get up to. I know you’re going to do great things.”

“Thanks.”

When she returns to her desk, I take the scenic route and walk the gallery one final time before pushing into the sunshine of this unseasonably warm January day.

Jackson has moved closer to the corner of the building out of the way of foot traffic. Staring down at the phone in his hands, he doesn’t see me yet, which gives me a chance to study him.

I once heard Rad say Jackson was six-three. He used to be lankier. Athletic with lean muscle. He’s gotten bulkier in all the right places with broad shoulders and hard bicep muscles. Strong and long legs. I don’t know why I find it so hot how his body engulfs me. It must be the desire for the knight in shining armor fantasy. I don’t need it in real life, though he’s been exactly that. I’ll happily take it in the bedroom, though ... every single inch.

He didn’t shave, which I don’t mind anymore. By the way he rubs his hand over the side of his jaw, it seems to bother him. It’s funny how much he’s changed over the years. Sometimes, I still get a glimpse of that beer and flip-flop guy I’ve known since college. But lately, in the past year or so, he’s changing—becoming more serious, maturing maybe, stressed from work. It’s not like I miss the hard time he used to give me regarding my taste for champagne or the men I would date, not that that matters anymore, but the little remarks about me being only concerned with myself ... wait ... *dammit*. I

thought I had changed. Although I've been knocked down all these pegs, the errors of my ways weren't as prevalent to me.

As for the man who's been standing on a street corner waiting for me for no other reason than to make sure I'm all right, I don't think I've ever known how to love until he showed me, still showing me every day through his actions, words, and praise, the way we navigate any conflict. That's how couples become great. They work through life's troubles together.

So whatever has him scowling at his phone, I want to be there for him and fix it, just like he's been here for me.

He looks up and sees me, a smile following automatically. I grin because I can. I survived what I thought would be a challenge. Amelia made it easy for me to leave, even if she didn't intend to.

I hold the orange folder in the air and waggle it. He says, "You're still fired?"

"Sure, if she wants to call it that."

His large hands slide around my waist and settle on my lower back. "What do you call it?"

"A move in the right direction." I lift to kiss him. His lips are warm from the sunshine despite the slight chill in the air. When I lower back down, I say, "Thanks for waiting."

"Always." He takes the envelope to carry for me and to free my hand to hold it before we start walking down the street. He says, "You've had quite the start to the new year."

"No one can ever say I don't go big."

"That's my girl."

He's right.

I *am* his girl and so completely under his spell.

Marlow

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Jackson asks, cutting through to the kitchen while wearing nothing but a dark-gray towel that seems to be refusing to stay tucked.

I watch with rapt attention hoping the towel wins.

“I ... um.” I lick my lip and then bite it. I will openly admit that the man is ridiculously distracting, parading his body around like it’s not built to drive women wild. Especially after a hard workout. I’d like to take credit for that, but he went to the gym. Then he took a shower, and now this towel situation has presented itself in front of me. Even if he’s totally unaware of what he does to me, I’m well-aware. “How am I supposed to get anything done around here?”

As he looks at me from the kitchen, the counter hides his lower half so all I see is nakedness. Again, how am I supposed to work in these conditions when all I want to do is ravage the man?

His jaw ticks as he stares at me with his hands planted on the counter before him. “What’s wrong?”

“You.” I scoff and then roll my eyes.

“Me? What did I do?”

My eyes go wide, my eyebrows shooting toward the ceiling. “Are you kidding me right now?” When he continues

to stare at me with utter confusion written across his face, I say, “I can’t focus with you walking around in your nakedness. It’s hard enough when you’re dressed. But now this ...”

“You mean this?” He holds the towel in the air next to him and drops it. *Towel drop.*

I decided I wouldn’t spend my day searching for a new job or even worrying about the one I lost. There are plenty of days ahead for that business. Instead, I get to work on something that I control. I take a deep breath and stand, setting my laptop with the listings I was working on next to me on the cushion, and march into the bedroom.

I start stripping my clothes off, and then I walk back into the living room, knowing how to push every one of his buttons. I may have lost the battle, but I can still win the war. “Two can play that game.” I give it three minutes, four tops before he’s begging for me to meet him in the bedroom.

“I didn’t know we were playing a game?” he says so casually while restraining a grin. I’m not sure he even believes his own words.

“Oh yeah, buster. It’s game on. I know exactly what you’re doing ...” I don’t tell him his plan is working, and I’m total mush in his hands. Nah, I play it as cool as a cucumber. “Let’s see how much work you get done.” I walk to the couch and sit on the blanket before wrapping it around my lower half.

Taking my laptop, I sit back and continue listing the next five bags I begrudgingly decided I need to sell. But then he’s behind me, just a whisper between his lips and my ears, his breath tickling against my skin when he says, “I’ll be in the bedroom if you need me.”

The towel is dropped over my head, and I hear him padding across the floor. I pull the towel off just in time to get a glimpse of that great ass of his. He thinks he’s won, but I have one last trick up my sleeve. “I’ve been thinking the kitchen.”

“Oh, yeah?” he calls from the bedroom. Then the sound of his voice is closer. “What have you been thinking about the

kitchen?”

“The cold, stone counter and what that must feel like against a heated body—the contrast and how my body would react.”

I peek up to see him ready to take no prisoners, except me. I’m scooped up before I can fight it. Not that I would, but he tilts me down, and I leave the laptop behind before I’m carried into the kitchen. Setting my feet on the floor, he asks, “Which counter? Be specific.”

His tone isn’t playful. Jackson’s damp hair hangs over his forehead, and now that I’m so much closer, his skin has a slight glisten as if he never got around to drying off. Muscles flexed and an intensity darkens his eyes.

“I, uh, um...” I stammer under his stare, never felt like prey to a hunter before until now. Holy damn, he’s the sexiest man alive.

“Choose, or I choose, Marlow.”

Standing naked before him, I point since my voice seems to be failing me. He keeps the place spotless, so any counter will do.

“Move to the counter and turn around. I want to see you. All of you,” he says.

The game’s turned serious. It’s not that I’m not turned on. It’s that I don’t think I’ve ever been commanded to perform for a man before. So hot. I move a few feet, keeping my eyes locked on his, and then spin nice and slow. When our eyes meet again, I ask, “Do you approve?”

Running his thumb over his bottom lip, he says, “What do you think?”

My gaze dips to his erection and then back up again. I turn around, rest my elbows on the counter, and slowly lean forward. It’s cold. Freezing, in fact. This started as a tease, more of a threat to his patience and ability to resist what I bring to the table ... or should I say, counter.

My breathing has become irregular, and the need to be touched is rising inside. This scenario is quickly turning into one of my greatest fantasies.

Going all the way, I rest my breasts on the stone and keep my focus forward. My lids dip closed as I remain like this for his viewing pleasure. The heat of his presence starts to warm my backside, but he doesn't touch me. With anticipation eating at my patience, I finally twist my head to the side to see him. "What are you doing, Jackson?"

"Enjoying the view."

Turned on and annoyed, I start to push up, but my back is met with the palm of his hand. He leans over me, finally giving me the feel of his body against mine. He kisses my spine and then says, "I thought you liked to play games?"

"Only if I win."

Cold air sweeps between us as he takes a step back, and he says, "Turn around."

With a huff, I complain, "So demanding." When I do as I'm told, I'm lifted immediately and set on the counter I was just bent over. The shock of cold shoots through me as his hands part my legs. "Relax, baby."

His mouth starts on my inner thigh, and then he works his way higher until his tongue is fucking my center. And then my phone buzzes on the counter next to my arm, and we both freeze. "Damn," I say, breathless and already so close even though he just got started.

Just as I pull his head back to me, I make the mistake of glancing over.

"Ignore it," he says, dipping forward again and swiping his tongue between my lips. His hand comes up and squeezes my breast and then the other.

Closing my eyes, I focus on his hands and the feel of him kissing my clit. But after a few seconds, I start to sit up, saying, "I'm sor—Oh, my God!" The pressure is so intense that my thoughts muddle, and his mouth on me becomes my only reality.

Relentless, he kisses and licks, thrusts with his tongue, and sucks until I lose control, my fingers weaving into his hair and tugging as an orgasm rips through me. “Jackson, oh, God. Yes.”

Everything is given, but he takes even more as I lie back on the counter, my body now jelly. Splayed across the stone, I finally have enough energy to open my eyes. Coming around to the other side of me, he kisses me upside down and then says, “I won.”

As he walks back toward the bedroom, I turn to watch because damn, he’s fine. “I could argue otherwise.”

He chuckles as he leaves from view. “For the record,” I say loud enough for him to hear, “I wasn’t even in the mood for sex until you walked out here in that towel.”

“I’ll make sure to wear them more often then.”

I start laughing. Like he ever has trouble getting sex out of me. The man is magical in every way. As I lie there still struggling to even my breath, my phone buzzes again, and all good vibes disappear. I push up on one hand to read the message on the screen.

Mom: *I’ll be at the bar at Baccarat at nine. We can catch up. Just us.*

I sit all the way up and return the text: *I’ll see you there.*

“YOU SURE YOU don’t want me to come with you?”

I stop with the mascara wand in my hand and lengthen my gaze in the reflection of the mirror to where Jackson is sitting on the edge of the tub. “I appreciate that you’re always there for me, but I need to do this alone. She’s the life of the party to the world, but with me, she’s always been a bit skittish, so if I show up with anyone else, she’ll shut down on me.” Before he says anything, I add, “It’s a trait I’m trying to break myself, so I appreciate your patience while I learn to work through my issues instead of running from them.”

He grins. “Proud of you.” Standing, he says, “Another glass of champagne?”

“No, I’m being careful after last night.” The glass still remains next to the tub where I took a bath earlier. “Having a glass was good to settle my stomach and my nerves, but I won’t be drinking much tonight.” I lean in and swipe the mascara on my lashes.

“If you do, make sure you eat something first.”

Some might tease him about being a worrywart, but not me. I’m eating it up. Other than Tealey and Cam, I’ve never had someone care so much about my well-being. It’s new, and it feels good. “I will, but I’m not sure if we’ll be there long. It would be great if we turned a corner on our relationship. I just don’t want to be disappointed again.”

Jackson comes close and leans on the counter next to me. Looking me in the eyes, he says, “You have nothing left to lose, Marlow. You should tell her how you feel.”

“If I told her how I really feel, I’d never see her again.” I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. *Only truth.*

I drop my mascara in the case and grab a nude lipstick. One of the few things my mom ever taught me is when I go heavy on the eye makeup, go light on the lip, and vice versa. They shouldn’t compete. She’s one of the most beautiful women in the world. She knows makeup. I just wish she knew me.

He kisses my shoulder. “You’re a very beautiful woman inside and out. Don’t let her tell you otherwise.” Pushing off, he leaves the bathroom.

As I finish getting ready, I hold tight to his words. I’ll need his strength to get through this night.

Thirty minutes later, Jackson walks me to the car he ordered. I’m given a kiss and a solid slap on the ass before I get in. The heat and tingling have me smirking. “Save it for the bedroom, Romeo.” Doesn’t matter how much we try to resist each other physically, it’s virtually impossible. It’s what

brought us together and is still the easiest way for us to connect.

“Don’t you worry about that, baby. I have all kinds of stuff planned for the bedroom when you get home.”

Home.

Has a sweeter word ever been said? He’s opened his apartment, his arms, and his heart to me. Our hearts and—I can say with confidence—souls are emotionally entwined. We’re still learning everything else as we go along.

I’ve always been a little different from my friends. Not everything has to be coming up roses for me. I’ve never been much of a romantic anyway. But Jackson sure knows how to make me feel special. I blow him a kiss after sinking into the back seat. He shuts the door, but I tell the driver. “Wait.” Rolling down the window, I say, “Hey?”

“What?” he says with a smirk on his face as he shoves his hands in the front pockets of his jeans.

“I prefer you naked.”

He bellows in laughter. “And here I thought you were going to tell me you loved me.”

“That too, St. James.” I sit back and nod to the driver. Just as the car leaves the curb, I look back. “I love you. I love you so much.”

I don’t need to hear it back, although he says it without so much as a second thought. I know that man loves me. I feel it, and that rush is empowering.

The car ride is just long enough to let the nerves set in. I steel myself, wanting to go into this meeting with an open mind and heart. It’s hard, though, when I’ve been burned so many times. But she’s still my mother, and if I can make this relationship work, I want that. More than anything.

I enter the bar and start down the aisle of black-and-white checkerboard tiles, searching the dimmed bar for any sign of my mom. She stands out, always saying we were born to, but

she's not here. I turn back and look again as if I'd possibly miss her. Nope. Not here.

Checking the time, I was ten minutes late due to traffic a few blocks away. Is she fashionably late? Is that really even a thing? Or it's just a good excuse to use when you're running behind? I know I've used it, but it's a habit I've broken more recently. Now I just own my tardiness and apologize.

I'm here, so I'll wait a little while. Instead of sitting at the bar, I choose a table for two that has just come available. Slipping around, I sit on the cushioned bench that is the length of the bar, leaving her the chair.

Since I'm here, I order a glass of champagne and a water. Jackson would be so proud. Setting my phone on the table, just in case she texts, I'm tempted to bide my time and text him. But I don't. He's working while I'm gone. I'm hoping when I return, he'll be free to finish what he started on the sidewalk.

Twenty minutes pass. I check the time on my phone.

Thirty minutes ... I polish off a side of fries with a delicious aioli dipping sauce. Jackson would be proud.

Forty-five ...

An hour passes and I've had two rounds of champagne and water. Tired—emotionally, disappointment had settled in around nine thirty. Hurt followed shortly after. Anger has replaced the pain. That's it. I press my palms to the table and stand, ready to pay my bill and go home.

“Marlow.” My name is heard above the crowd.

Looking to the left, I see her waving in my direction ... with Paolo, her long-term boyfriend, in tow. “Just us” comes ringing back. But more importantly, the server hasn't returned to clear the dishes from my table. Dammit. I sit back down and wave, trying to act like I haven't been here drinking and eating my feels.

Her gaze does a quick sweep of my outfit before I receive an approving smile and air kisses. “Hope you weren't waiting long. Dinner ran over but you know how that goes.”

“No, just got here. It’s fine.”

“Started without us, I see,” she says, sitting down and plucking her glove from each finger before removing them and setting them lovingly across her lap since the table is dirty as she points out.

Paolo finds a server to add a chair to our table for two, but before he returns, I whisper, “I thought it would just be the two of us.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you said it would be.”

“Huh?” She pulls her phone from her clutch and studies the screen. “No, I said it would be just us.” Signaling toward Paolo, she adds, “It is. Just the three of us.”

I’m slow to catch on, but when I do, I realize she meant Jackson wasn’t welcome. *Ah*. She never did like an audience when it came to the uglier things in life. This is a setup. I should leave now, but the little girl in me needs to go through this.

I’ll never learn.

Nonetheless, I’m here, and the server has returned and taken her order. Turning to me, he asks, “Can I get you another glass?”

“Absolutely.”

My mom says, “So you have been here a while.”

“Yes, Mom. I’ve been here since a few minutes after nine. My car was stuck in traffic, or I would have been here on time. Now I see that was a fruitless concern of mine.”

Paolo returns and leans over the table to greet me. “So good to see you again,” he says with a kiss to the cheek. His accent is thicker than I remember, his hair darker as if he’s recently colored it. I have nothing against him.

He’s a former Brazilian model and the son of a telecommunications tycoon in South America. Late thirties. Paolo is everything my mom told me she wanted for me—

worldly, degreed, older, comes with family money and a legacy. The only things she values. Like modeling, she expected me to follow in her footsteps, and just like in that endeavor, I will fail her in who I choose to be with. I spent a lot of years dating many men Talia Marché would have adored. I'm not with them for many reasons. My mother's approval was never a factor.

I'm with a man who is more than she even realizes—kind, supportive, thoughtful, a great family who values people over money, but yes, he has some of the latter, too, even if I'm not yet privy to just that part of his life. He can't be doing that badly judging by his apartment.

Paolo's always been perfectly fine for my mom other than jetting her around the world and away from me. He sits as soon as the chair is delivered.

I set aside my hurt feelings, and tell her, "It's good to see you."

Pushing her blond hair with caramel highlights over her shoulder. It's sprayed stiff, but she still looks beautiful and caught every pair of eyes when she walked in with her pale purple YSL fitted dress showing off her figure. She smiles at me. "I didn't know if you'd show up."

"If it's the only chance I have to see you, I would say I don't have much of a choice."

"Why do we fight, Marlow? I hate it. What can we do to mend this relationship?"

"I was thinking the same thing. I hate the animosity I feel toward—"

Surprise takes over her expression. "Animosity? Why would you feel animosity? You've always been spoiled, Marlow. Your father did that to you. Set you up to expect people to bow at your whim." She leans forward, and I catch a hint of cigarettes on her breath. She told me she had given up smoking years ago. "I didn't spoil. I gave you a mother who chose to be independent. You should be proud. If anyone has a

right to be upset, it's me. You almost ended my career when my figure was wrecked to give *you* the breath of life."

The drinks are delivered, but the momentary distraction from her dramatics doesn't disguise the reality presenting itself before my very eyes. It doesn't matter what she wears or what color she dyes her hair. The flavor of the day accent she's choosing, or even if she would have come alone. I will never be anything more than a burden to her.

She will never change.

"*Tell her how you feel.*" I hear Jackson in my head. "*You have nothing to lose.*"

"I used to think we fought because we were too alike. That's what Dad told me. But that's not true, is it, Talia?" The other name has become too much to bear at the moment in spite of my strength.

"Your father never understood me, so what does he know?"

"It's what I know, and that's the truth. We can't be more different. I love you, Mom. I always will, but I don't need you in my life. Not right now." Holding my hand up, I continue, "You don't have to worry about me anymore. I know the feeling is mutual, and that's all right because I like who I am. My boyfriend loves me, every pound and flaw, and thinks I'm beautiful *and* sexy. It's not all the compliments he showers on me. It's the way he looks at me. Those looks, day by day, have started to erase the damage you did to my self-esteem."

She sips champagne like she's watching a play for entertainment. Paolo, at least, has the emotional capacity to shift uncomfortably in his seat.

My throat goes dry despite feeling ready for this. *Lay it all out*, I tell myself. "I already lost my job this morning, and I suppose I'm losing you as well. For now, this is how it needs to be. It's not forever. *I hope.* But our relationship, in the current stage it's in, is not healthy for me." I grab my purse, still holding tight to who I am and knowing my friends were always my family and they loved me.

“Are you finished?” she asks, staring at me.

“No. Order the fries. They were excellent with champagne.”

Standing, I shift out from behind the table and come around to give her a side hug since that’s all I’m given access to. “I love you, Mom. Text me next time you’re in the city. Maybe we can try again.”

“Marlow?”

“Oh, and send me a postcard when you think of me. Safe travels.” Walking out, I have to say, I don’t feel loss or the pain I felt earlier. I feel we have an opportunity to start again when we’re both in a better place.

In the back of the car, I smile all the way home.

Home.

The sweetest word that ever existed.

Jackson

FUCK ME.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and then rub, hoping to alleviate some of the tension causing my headache. “How am I liable?” I ask, holding the phone to my ear while I pace my home office. “I can’t make the market open on a Saturday because he dropped millions on a stock that I would have never advised him to invest in. I’m not his broker or his advisor. I haven’t been for more than a year.”

From the other end of the line, Andrew says, “The lawsuit came as a surprise, Jackson. We haven’t had time to read through it, but Nick and I just got to the office to look in the securities files. We’re hoping this is a case of someone getting the facts wrong, but I don’t have that answer at this time.”

Shuffling is heard, and then Nick says, “Hey, Jackson. Do you remember the last time you spoke with Morgenstern?”

“Yeah, I was at the basketball courts with Rad and Cade a week ago. Before that, briefly on New Year’s. He pulled me into a few meet and greets at his New Year’s Eve party. We talked a little business, but I didn’t violate any laws or ethical standards. I’m not his advisor.” I’m not one to panic, but this lawsuit threatens more than the company. There are allegations about me personally. I’ve worked too hard to build what I have to lose it to lies from an investor who got cold feet.

The sound of a book hits the desk, and then Nick says, “This filing is an inch thick. This isn’t frivolous. This is planned, and from flipping through it, unless they have a team of thirty, there’s no fucking way this was constructed in a week. This isn’t a lawsuit. It’s meant to destroy you.”

Andrew cuts back in, “Our contracts are airtight, but this suit is highly unusual. Nick’s leading the legal team to sort through this this weekend, and we’ll meet on Monday.”

“Is it of concern?” I ask, stopping and staring out the window. The living room has the better view, but no view of this city at night is bad.

He sighs, a mixture of frustration and annoyance built in, and then Andrew says, “No investor likes to lose millions but a company abruptly liquidating all its assets without notifying stakeholders is also as uncommon, and illegal. Their problems are now ours for every investor of ours that bought that stock.”

Nick jumps back into the conversation, “I’d tell you not to worry, but I haven’t had time to read the premise of the lawsuit, much less the role you played in this situation. I talked to your attorney on the ride over to the office. We’ll be working on it together as needed and sharing files that pertain to your case. But Jackson, I need to be clear that Christiansen Wealth Management is my top priority.”

“I understand, and I’d expect no less.”

“Clear your schedule for the next few weeks and try to get some sleep tonight because it’s going to be hell come Monday.”

“Thanks, guys.” I disconnect and cross my arms over my chest, still holding tight to the phone.

I didn’t build an empire, but I have enough money for myself and a future generation to live comfortably for the rest of our lives. I was given a leg up, but I took the money and turned it into fifteen times the value. I fucking did that, so there’s no fucking way Morgenstern is going to take it away. I won’t let him.

I have my own team of lawyers and will fight. I'll spend every dollar before I pay him for his mistakes.

"Everything all right?"

I turn back to find Marlow just outside the doorway. I plaster on a smile. She has enough going on. She doesn't need to hear about my problems. "Hey, I didn't hear you come in." I cross the room and bring her into my arms in the hallway.

"I wasn't trying to sneak up on you or anything." Her arms come around my neck, and her breath warms me. "I called your name, but you were—"

"I was lost in thought."

Her hands wrap around my head, and she tips her head even more, burying herself in me. "Right."

Dropping my forehead to her shoulder, we stay tangled in the silence and each other for I don't know how long. It just feels good to have her home and to be in her arms. She rubs her hands over my head. Pulling back, she asks, "What's wrong, Jackson?"

"Nothing." I answer too fast to be believable, so I blink and use a breath to loosen the tension I know she senses. "How'd it go with your mom?"

She steps back and leans against the wall. Searching my face, she finally shakes her head, and then says, "I can't make you talk to me, but if you do, I'll listen. I want to be here for you like you have been for me."

I should be happy to have the offer. She cares and has been doing the best she can to show me. It's enough to just have her here. She's enough. "Thank you, but nothing's wrong." I reach forward and kiss her forehead. Taking her hand, I lead her into the bedroom, and add, "I want to hear about your night. Are you okay?"

Sitting on the mattress, she starts taking off her shoes. I move into the closet, but hear her say, "We should get a bench for the end of the bed."

I can't be upset that she wants to decorate and add a piece of furniture that she sees as beneficial. I feel quite the opposite. Anything that tightens the bond she has to my place and to me is good in my opinion. I strip off my shirt and throw it in the hamper. "That's a good idea. You can pick out something you like and send me a link. I'll order it."

"Would you mind if I buy it?" she asks.

I'd just started on the fly of my jeans when I stop. With a smile, my shoulders suddenly don't feel so heavy. I walk into the room again to see her resting back on her elbows with her knees bent and feet propped on the mattress. Her skirt has slid down her thighs, exposing the smallest touch of white gracing her skin. My gaze travels higher not because she's not sexy or doesn't awaken parts of my body by the mere sight of her. No, it's that she lies there like she should be a permanent part of this space.

My heart thumps heavy in my chest. I gather my thoughts back together, and reply, "You don't have to."

"I want to. It will be a gift." She grins like she's keeping something from me, something good. "The listings for my bags all closed today. They were scooped up immediately, but I guess the sale site holds the money over a certain number of days until it clears. It's like payday. The ten bags have sold for just under six figures."

"That's amazing money."

"They were worth double, but I treated them like properties. I kept them lower in hopes of selling. At the higher price, I'd lose most buyers. And most buyers at that level would buy their bags new from the store." She falls back on the bed, her arms going wide along with her grin. "It was a strategy."

"It worked." I take off my jeans and lie next to her. Turning toward her, I add, "I'm proud of you."

She rolls onto her side with her hand tucked under her cheek. Her eyes are glistening despite the smile that tussles to stay in place. Reaching over, she rests her hand on my chest,

and whispers, “I told my mom goodbye. For now. That it was best if we didn’t see each other again until we’re in a better place.”

Covering her hand with mine, I say, “That must have been hard.”

“Not as hard as it should have been. I’m in too good of a place right now to keep harboring those negative feelings.” She sighs and focuses on our hands being together.

She sounds so strong, but that had to be disappointing. She went tonight to work through their issues, and now she’s walked away completely. She’s brave or putting on a face of indifference. I’m not sure either will serve her well in the weeks to come. But maybe this is a good thing. Maybe this will bring closure. We can only hope it turns out that well.

“Long story, but she always judged—my looks, my clothes, my achievements. I was never enough. But I found I was doing that to her. Sitting across the table from her and Paolo, judging her hair and the way she looked at me. I was mentally picking her apart to feel better in her company. It wasn’t working.” Her gaze slides up to mine again. “I don’t want to be that person anymore. I don’t want to be like her.”

Moving closer, she drapes her leg over mine. “Thank you for making me understand what acceptance feels like for the first time.” A light laugh trickles through her and escapes. “And I know Tealey and Cammie have always cared about me. So I’m not saying any of this to take away from their friendship.” Snuggling as close as she can, she kisses my chest, and continues, “I want to say this, so you know the impact you’ve made on me. Thank you, Jackson.”

There’s no great production put on. We’re just two people with our own troubles, finding comfort in each other. I catch her watching me when we’re brushing our teeth, a glimpse of a smile that looks like she has a secret when she’s winding her hair on top of her head for the night. While I lie in bed with my worries escalating, I watch her in the cracked open door as she puts lotion on her legs.

While these mundane things may have been a routine she developed over the years, it's new for us. Having her here for things like this—early morning talks and getting ready for the day together—these small things bring a sense of peace, safety, and love. This is our routine. Something we created together.

This means walls have been broken down, and her heart, once buried within a suit of armor, is opening to me.

She switches off the light and climbs in bed next to me. Slipping across the king-sized mattress, she kisses me and then rolls over to face away from me. I kiss her shoulder and the back of her neck, the gentle slope that leads to her shoulder. “I love you,” I whisper against her skin and then wrap around her.

Her hand covers mine this time, and she whispers, “I love you.”

It used to be about the big moments, the gestures that made a splash to get her to take notice of me. Now it's the nightly routine that has us returning to each other every night to fall asleep together.

REACHING the end of the path, I stop, tipped over with my hands resting above my knees. It's fucking freezing this morning, but somehow, Rad convinced me to go for a run. I wanted to say no, but he said he needed to talk to me about something important regarding Tealey.

The girl's like my little sister. If something's going on with her, I need to know.

I'm also desperate to get out of my own head and in need of the distraction from the situation with the lawsuit.

We start walking to catch our breath after thinking it was a good idea to race the last half mile to get to this finish line. Reality check: we are not young enough for this anymore.

“I’m blaming the thin air,” I say, glancing at Rad. He’s not doing much better. “I want to get back in shape.”

He says, “What are you doing? Weights?”

“Yeah, but I’m stiff. I need to run more.”

He reaches over and shoves my arm. “You and Marlow are settled into playing house. Next thing you know, you’ve packed on the love pounds. That’s what Tealey calls them.”

I rub my stomach, thinking he’s right on those pounds. *Fuck*. “So what’d you want to talk about?”

“Before we get into it, Tealey sent me on a mission to find out new details about you and Marlow. Apparently, quick glimpses into your relationship over brunch isn’t enough, so you gotta give me something to take home, man.”

I chuckle, running my hand over my hair. “It’s good. Is it bad to worry about jinxing it?”

“Why would you worry about that?”

“Because Marlow and I both suck at relationships—”

“Nah, don’t do that, Jackson. The past isn’t a reflection on the future unless you don’t learn from it.” He veers off the path into the winter grass and stands near the edge of the lake. Squatting down, he keeps his sights on the water when he continues, “I’m sorry works wonders if you mean it and not fucking up in the first place does an even better job.” He stands back up. “Trust me, I know. We all fuck up. All of us, but you and Marlow will do what you and Marlow do. If you start stressing about what will happen, you’ll lose sight of what’s happening in the present.” We get back on the path and start walking again. “Are you happy?”

“I’m happy.” Picking up the pace, we fall into a steady jog.

“Then just be happy.”

I like how it sounds like a decision I need to make. Maybe I’m overthinking it, and it’s just a choice I make. “So what’s going on with Tealey?”

Rad says, “I asked her to marry me, and then life got in the way. I want to remedy that.”

It’s not so much surprise I feel but fascinated that he’s bringing it up. It’s not been my business to ask about the pace of their relationship, but it seems like it’s been longer than either of them thought it would be. “What are you thinking?”

He stops again and replies, “I’m going to see if she’ll get married at the courthouse.”

I’m already shaking my head. “That won’t work. We’re talking about Tealey, right? Tealey Bell, the girl who used to make us watch *When Harry Met Sally* every Christmas break and who boycotted *Friends* for a season, which she still won’t watch because Ross thought he was on a break when he cheated. The same Tealey that just last year was crying because—”

“First of all, I was a stupid asshole last year, so we don’t need to dredge that back up. Secondly,” he says, ticking off each finger. “Ross and Rachel *were* on a break. I’m a divorce attorney. Dating someone else when the primary couple is not together is not cheating.”

I pat his back. “You should probably keep that argument from Tealey if you want to live another day.”

“She knows I wouldn’t. *I couldn’t*. That woman has owned my heart from the moment I met her.”

“Then stop being an asshole and marry her,” I say, laughing.

“She’s so busy with her fundraising events that she put me off twice.”

“Tealey is a saint—”

“She sure is for putting up with me.”

“Yes, for that, but also because she will always put others first, even if it means sacrificing her personal happiness. She has a heart of gold and deserves the same energy she gives others. She’d marry you at the courthouse if that’s what you wanted.”

“But how do I get her there? I want to give her the world, Jackson. I don’t know how to make her take it?”

“Despite your flaws, she’s chosen to love you. Because of that, tell me how I can help.”

“And here I thought you were *my* best friend.”

“I am, man, but I’m also hers. She looks out for me, and I look out for her. It’s just what we do. I have an idea that will help make this the day she’s dreamed of and get you two hitched. Well, not so much an idea, but the perfect person to make this happen.”

“Marlow,” we say in unison.

Marlow

“RAD NEEDS YOUR HELP.” The door closes, and Jackson walks in. His gaze darts from me to Cammie on the couch, and then to Tealey, who’s frozen to the spot in the hall. “Oh, shit.”

A few seconds of silence beat between us as the four of us are caught in a staring standoff. Tealey finally says, “What does Rad need help with?”

“Carburetor. His car ... *buretor*.”

“Huh?” I ask, setting my mug on the coffee table when I get up. I walk to greet him, still wondering what he’s talking about. “Why would Rad need my help with his car.” I lift and kiss him. His clothes are cold from the outside, but there’s a slight dampness to the front of his shirt.

The man knows how to wear a suit, but I can’t even resist him in workout clothes, sweaty, and acting shady. I whisper, “What is wrong with you?”

He grabs me and kisses me hard.

“Hi. We’re still here,” Cammie says.

I’m released—boneless and breathless—as he starts down the hall. “Hi, ladies.”

Tealey took my spot, a front row seat to the kissing scene, and says, “What’s gotten into him?”

Licking my lips, I taste the light saltiness lingering on my lips. “I have no idea. I’ll be right back.” They go back to chatting, and I even hear them giggling before I open the door to the bedroom and sneak inside.

The sound of water running leads me to the bathroom. Being murdered in the shower is still a fear of mine after my dad screened a horror movie when I was eight in a brief stage of his life when he was determined to introduce me to the classics.

I’ve not had an apartment with a shower that required a curtain since. I need to see the murderer coming through the glass. Assuming everyone has that same fear, I knock and then enter. “Jackson?”

“Yes?” I peek to see his sculpted physique covered in suds water as it runs over his muscles.

“What was that about?”

He dips his head under the water and rinses before cracking the glass door open. “I can’t tell you until they’re gone. I don’t want to ruin the plan.”

“What plan?”

Tapping my nose, leaving it wet, he says, “I promise to tell you later, but it’s all good news. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

So it involves Rad and Tealey, but that’s as far as I get in my deductions before he closes the door again. I have no patience, especially for good secrets. But this time, I’ll trust him and try not to think about it.

It’s only been an hour, and I can’t stop staring at Tealey. The secret that I’m not even privy to yet is burning a hole in my pocket. Okay, the yoga pants I’m wearing today don’t have pockets. But if they did, they’d be on fire.

Natalie asks, “Has anyone finished seasoning the chicken?”

Cammie, Tealey, and I are lined up on the other side of the peninsula, each with a whole chicken on a roasting rack in

front of us. Natalie adds, “We’re all done. This is fun.”

Cammie says, “This is such a great idea. I like to cook, but I wasn’t sure about roasting a whole chicken. Especially if it’s just Cade and me.”

“I’ve tried cooking one before, but it was a guessing game for me and was so dry that it was almost inedible. Rad was a good sport and never complained.”

I’m the last to wash my hands and am still drying them when I add, “Thanks, Natalie, for coming over.” I can’t say cleaning, patting dry, and seasoning a raw chicken has been a great pleasure, but I have enjoyed the bottle of wine she brought. She claims it makes cooking so much better. And I get time with my girlfriends. With so much going on in our lives right now, it’s good to spend time with them again.

She replies, “It’s so much simpler than it seems as well.” Lowering her voice, she asks, “I thought you wanted to surprise Jackson?”

“I did. I thought he’d be hanging out with Rad longer today. There is no keeping a secret in these close quarters.” Secrets. I feel like one’s written all over my face, and I don’t even have one. Well, other than knowing that there is one. I’m never going to make it.

As soon as I cover my chicken with foil and tuck it in the fridge, I leave as Cammie puts her chicken in the oven first. “I’ll be back in a moment. Make yourselves at home.”

Tiptoeing down the hall, I lean in before I knock lightly on the door to the home office.

“Come in,” Jackson says from the other side of the wood.

I open the door slowly and peek my head inside before sliding all the way through and shutting it behind me. “You need to tell me the secret. Guilt is written all over my face, and I don’t even know the secret yet.”

“You can’t wait, even knowing it’s a good secret?”

“Especially because it’s a good secret. Just tell me please, Jackson.”

Papers are scattered all over the top of the desk, a yellow legal pad with scribbles on it is near the computer monitor, which is lit up with what appears to be more numbers than words. He looks busy with something important this Sunday afternoon, but he still drops everything when I walk into the room and gives me his complete attention. I never knew what others meant by true love, but now I do.

Checking his phone as if he heard it ringing, he says, “Rad wants to surprise Tealey with a ceremony.”

My head jerks back. “What do you mean surprise her with a ceremony?”

Now staring at his monitor, he mumbles, “Exactly.”

Completely confused, I finally riddle through this. “What exactly? I don’t understand what you mean, Jackson.”

“He’s going to surprise her with the actual ceremony. He just wants to be married, but he wants her to have the wedding of her dreams.”

“Why didn’t you just say that in the first place?” Men. I shake my head. “Now we’re on the same page.”

“Same page. Great.” He flips through a pile of papers and pulls a sheet out. Looking back at me, he says, “Their schedules are so out of sync that he’s worried, or should I say, he’d rather be married to her now than try to coordinate complicated schedules for the next year. And he’s recruited us to help him make this happen. Well, specifically you.”

“Me?” I sit on the chair on the other side of the desk. “How can I help?”

“He wants you to help plan their wedding from beginning to end.”

“Tealey won’t want a surprise wedding. You know she’s a diehard romantic.”

Rocking back in his chair, a crease forms between his brows. The tension seems a bit much for talk about his friends getting married. Then he steepled his fingers. I ask, “Am I intruding? You seem preoccupied. The marriage wedding mix-

up. You keep looking at your phone like you're expecting a call."

"I'm always expecting a call."

"Okay, you're busy. I get it, but..."

Pushing back from the desk, he says, "Sorry. I'm present. Mind in this. Rad thinks Tealey will like the idea because she is a romantic. She's also busy with the foundation, so he was hoping you could take charge not only because of your party-planning knowledge, but also know what she'll love."

"I appreciate the flattery, but I'll need to think on this. I'm not sure how I'd feel about a surprise wedding." My friend has never been about all the little details of the party. She's told me many times that she'd prefer just being married to Rad than dealing with the rest. "You know, I'm starting to think this might not be such a bad idea." I get up and start pacing the room. "If I can get her to plan the details without planning the details, this could be Rad's greatest idea ever." Giddy, a giggle escapes and I clap my hands. "It's brilliant. Tell Rad, I'm in." I nod toward the door. "Now I need to get back."

"You can't spoil the surprise, Marlow."

"I won't. My lips are sealed." I pretend to zipper my lips and then toss the key to Jackson. He catches it and then shoves it in his pocket because he's adorable.

Returning to the kitchen, Natalie is demonstrating smashed potatoes. "This is one of Jackson's personal favorites that my mom made for us when we were growing up."

"I missed how long they bake before we get to smash them," I say, sitting on a barstool. I take a sip of wine and just happen to get a glimpse of Tealey, who's busy smashing her own potatoes to take home.

"Rad loves potatoes," she says.

I ask, "What about you?"

A quick bump of her shoulders appears to indicate that it might not be right for wedding food if she were choosing it. "I like potatoes."

“You don’t sound excited.”

She and Cammie look at me, and she laughs. “They’re potatoes.”

“Noted.”

“Why are you noting this?”

I pop to my feet and grab the bottle because how am I going to keep this secret from them? It’s impossible. “More wine?”

I’m in so much trouble. *At least it’s the good kind.*

Jackson’s still in his office hours later. He ventured out for water and spent a few minutes chatting with his sister in the living room. It seemed like a heavier conversation, so I didn’t want to invade their privacy, but my heart has hung a bit heavier since.

She had to leave shortly after, but it was nice to bond with her for a few hours and learn a new trick to Jackson’s heart. I hope he likes the meal tonight.

With the food packed up and ready for them to take home, Cammie says, “This was fun. I can host next time. I’d like to try beef bourguignon, Julia Child’s recipe, and take my basic skills to the next level. I think Cade will love it. He’s got to be sick of all the casseroles I make.”

Tealey, holding her tote bag of food, says, “I’m in. Oh, you know what I’d love to learn how to cook?”

“What?” I ask so fast, I startle her. I think I’ve taken this secret assignment too seriously. We start laughing. “Sorry. What would you like to learn to cook?”

“Sourdough bread from scratch.”

Damn. That doesn’t help me ... or does it. A bruschetta appetizer—simple and elegant. Man, I’m good at this. *Maybe I should change careers.*

Grinning, I say, “We could make this a regular thing—our very own cooking series. Once a month or whatever we decide.”

“That’s such a fun idea,” Cammie says, and then rubs her belly. “Maybe I’ll learn to make baby food.”

Tealey smiles, but if I’m not wrong, it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I should go. Hugs all around. Have a great week.”

She and Cammie walk out together. Closing the door, I lean against it for a few seconds before pushing off and then tending to the food. When I take the chicken I prepped earlier out of the oven, I then stick the potatoes in and pad down the hall in my bare feet.

With my hand raised, ready to knock, I stop when I hear him say, “Get the fucking lawyers in the office tomorrow. First thing, or they’re fired.”

I back away, unsure what to do. Pretend I didn’t hear him yell or be honest with him? Secrets seem to be ruling the day, and it sounds like he’s dealing with a Mount Everest-sized one.

I return to the kitchen and take two sips of wine before steeling myself and righting my expression. I want to lighten his load, not add to it. “Jackson?” I call, too chipper. I sound fake even to my own ears.

He comes out and walks toward me. “Smells great.”

“Thanks. Want to have a drink with me before dinner’s ready?”

“Sure. Yeah.” He grabs a baby carrot from the baking sheet before I put it in the oven and crunches down on it. “Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, it was a good time. I think I have an appetizer for the secret wedding.”

“You work fast.”

“It was a good setup to talk about food.” I take a sip of wine while he grabs a lowball glass from the cabinet. I reach down for the bottle and say, “Let me get the drink for you.”

Jackson stops and looks at me, it’s only a second, but then he smiles—leisurely like he’s taking me in and liking what he sees. “Thanks.” Moving to the barstool, he gets comfortable.

I fill the glass two fingers high and set it in front of him. “Neat?” I ask, ready to grab ice if he prefers the whiskey chilled.

“This is perfect.”

“How do you feel about secrets?”

“Secrets will always come out.” Sipping from the glass, he keeps his eyes on mine. “What’s on your mind? The wedding or something else?”

I return the bottle to the cabinet and then take my glass of wine and stand with the counter between us. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, just to say that up front.”

“That’s not a good start.” He takes a gulp like he’s going to need a crutch.

“When the girls left, I went to tell you dinner was almost ready, but I just caught the tail end of a conversation that you were having on the phone.”

He dips his head into his hand, his eyes leaving mine, and rubs his forehead. When he looks up, defeat has set into his shoulders, making him slump. “What did you hear?”

This time, I gulp, worried I’ve already upset him when tonight was supposed to be about me showing my appreciation. “I overheard you say something about meeting with the lawyers. And I know you only need lawyers when you’re in trouble. Are you in trouble, Jackson?”

His blue eyes study mine, but I can see the war raging inside. He shifts the glass around on the counter, but I don’t even know if he’s aware he’s doing it as if it’s a nervous tic. My stomach clenches as my mind starts to spin in concern. Finally, he says, “Are you worried I’m keeping secrets from you?”

“I’m worried about you. That’s all.”

“You don’t have to. You don’t have to worry about me.” He stands, taking the drink in hand, and starts back down the hall. “Call me when the food’s ready,” he says, shutting the

door to the office right after and leaving me in the kitchen with a romantic dinner for two.

Whatever secret he's keeping, is it big enough to risk destroying us? *Aren't all secrets?*

Do I listen and not worry about him?

It's too late for that. I'm worried and a little shaken. I don't know if I've ever seen this side of Jackson. He's allowed to have a crappy day, but shutting me out is not the same as shielding me, if that's what he's trying to do.

What I do know is that my plans for tonight just went in the garbage.

Jackson

“IMPLICATING YOU, even suing you, doesn’t make you guilty,” Nick says, sitting near the head of the conference table. “It doesn’t even make you the party responsible for the damages Morgenstern is claiming.” Tapping the file in front of him, he finds my eyes at the other end of a table full of attorneys. “But it does mean you will have to address the lawsuit and accusation either outside the courtroom or inside. Your choice.”

“Outside means a settlement,” I say. “Fuck him. I don’t owe him a cent.” We’ve been in this room for hours. I’ve missed two calls from Marlow, which adds to the stress. My leg has been bouncing from the last thread keeping my patience intact. My anger, though ... I’ve always had a temper when pushed into a corner. It’s starting to get the best of me.

Andrew leans forward, clasping his hands together on the table. “Inside the courtroom could cost millions to defend.” His head drops as he stretches his neck and rolls it back up. It’s been a long day, so I get it. “We all know it’s a frivolous lawsuit. He’s angry and lashing out, but his problem has become ours.”

I glance at Brent, Morgenstern’s wealth manager ... *former* financial advisor, wondering how this guy’s going to defend himself. He’s got like three years under his belt, a newlywed, and doesn’t have the same bank account I’m sitting with. I see

the fear in his eyes. I have enough of my own problems, but this guy deserves a chance to explain what happened. I start by asking, “Just so I’m clear, and my attorneys understand, the Monday you returned from your honeymoon was the same day that Morgenstern got ahold of you. Is that correct?”

He shifts, looking anxiously down at Andrew. “The company will cover it, right?”

“Cover what?” Andrew asks, sitting straighter on alert.

“I put in the order as he requested. He told me that Jackson recommended the buy, so we needed to take the loss.”

“Why would I recommend a stock that I wouldn’t be willing to invest in?”

Brent shrugs, trying to act casual, but the beads of sweat forming at his hairline tell a different story. “That’s what he told me.”

“I emailed you the Saturday before you returned to work that Morgenstern had called me in a panic. He wanted to sell the stock because it was plummeting. I didn’t give you an order or make a recommendation. I stated in writing what he had communicated to me, and if you weren’t going to be back to handle it, I asked who was covering your clients.” *Weasel*. “I have the email thread. You replied that you would be back. Did you handle your client’s business?”

He may think we’re fucking stupid, but he inches closer to the door when he thinks people aren’t paying attention. *I am*. I’m watching him. He says, “A lot was going on.”

Nick’s sigh is audible all the way down the sixteen-seat table. He then asks, “Are you telling us that you did or didn’t do what your client asked? So we’re clear? Because over the weekend, you said everything was done according to regulation. Is that still the case?”

“Yes,” he says before the question is fully out of Nick’s mouth. “I did everything right and by the book.”

The white noise of the team of attorneys murmuring to each other rises, but then I say, “What about the first question Nick asked?”

“I answered his questions.”

I press harder because I’m caught up in this mess. “You didn’t answer if you did as your client asked.”

He pops his neck and shoots a glare. “It’s all in the summary report, Jackson. Look for yourself. I sold the stocks when he authorized me to do so.”

“On Monday?”

He looks at Andrew. “Why’s he even here? He’s not a CWM employee.”

Andrew’s expression hardens. “As an employee, you should know the role he’s played in CWM’s success in this market. As a refresher, he helped navigate the changeover after the buyout from Manhattan Financial Group. He brought in not new clients but helped retain the current clientele that his family’s company had built. He was a broker and an advisor after working his way up from the mailroom starting in high school. So we give him an office to show respect and our gratitude. He’s a member of this team, even if we don’t cut him a paycheck anymore.”

“That was a damn beautiful speech, Andrew. Thank you. The respect is mutual when it comes to you.” I stand because although I appreciate the accolades and Andrew having my back, I think I need to consult with my lawyers privately. “As for Brent ... I think another interview will be needed. Try to have a good day, gentlemen.”

As soon as I shut my door, it opens before I can sit down behind my desk. Nick comes in and stands by the window. Crossing his arms over his chest, my brother-in-law looks at me and says, “Look, Jackson, the company can take the financial hit to settle. It won’t be pretty, but the press putting our reputation in jeopardy by letting this story circulate can do more damage to the future business if not contained. We’re having to weigh our options. But as family, I’m worried how much this will take to fight regarding your case.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, Nick.” Turning my attention to my monitor, I say, “You can see yourself out.”

“Nah.” He lowers his arms and sits across from me. “We’re not going to pull that bullshit, not between us. When I married your sister, I married into her family. I take family very seriously. When someone comes after one of us, they come after all of us. The company can’t protect you, but Andrew and I will to the best of our ability. If you want to fight, we fight. If you want to settle to make this lawsuit go away, we’ll respect that decision as well. But you have to tell us what it’s going to be.”

“Manhattan Financial recorded all the calls. I know times change and permissions need to be in place, but the system is still the same. You need to have that investigated to see if the system is still running in the background by chance. It will be an immediate end to this.”

“It won’t be admissible in court because we have no right to record a conversation without permission prior to the call beginning.” Standing again, he crosses the office. “I haven’t told Natalie about the lawsuit, but I think you should. This isn’t something you need to go through alone.”

“And what is my sister going to do about it? She can’t make it go away. She can’t make me feel better that some fuckhead is suing me for something I had no part of. Don’t you get it, Nick? You’ve seen the files, the emails, the summaries, and the interviews. It’s his word against mine, but either way, I lose.” I stand, grabbing my jacket and putting it on. “I’m sorry if I don’t have an answer for you in the time you have allotted.”

“Fuck that, Jackson. It’s not my timeline. I’m trying to be ___”

“Don’t. Don’t be anything but a friend or my brother-in-law. What I need right now is time to process this and to get my attorney’s advice before I can tell you how I’m feeling.” I tuck my keys in my pocket and grab my phone. “Because I’m feeling pretty fucked up over this. I’m going home. I’m going to ... I don’t know what I’m going to do. All I ask is that my sister stays blind to this situation until I know what I want to do. I don’t want to worry about her or my parents, and I will if they start worrying about me.”

“Understood.”

I pass him but then stop and turn back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Lock up when you leave.”

I cut through the cubicles on my way to the elevator, wanting to get out of here as fast as I can. I’d run home if it weren’t so far and I wasn’t in dress shoes. I take a car and wonder if I should give Marlow a heads-up.

I’m thinking she’s still mad about last night. I would be, so I won’t blame her if she is. I took out my problems on her when she didn’t deserve it. After debating whether to return her calls, I decide to try to change the direction we’re headed and apologize. I get dropped off two blocks down and rush through the store, grabbing what I need before walking through a crush of people heading home after work like I am.

When I open the door to the apartment, I already sense a shift in the air. I don’t like it. Neither does my gut. Her coat isn’t on the hook next to where I hang mine by the front door. “Marlow?” I call, noticing the perfume that usually greets me is fading. Lingering particles caught in the air are all that remain.

I put the bags and the flowers wrapped in tissue down on the counter. “Marlow?”

Her laptop isn’t on the coffee table, and the charging cord isn’t running from the plug on the wall to the couch. Walking down the hall, I know before I see it with my own eyes. I know she’s gone.

Pushing open the cracked bedroom door, I walk in and straight to the closet. The space I’d cleared for her to hang her clothes is full of empty hangers. When I look in the corner where we stashed her suitcase, it’s gone. “Fuck!”

But then a shoe bin catches my eyes and then another. I open one of her drawers and so much is still in there. Rushing into the bathroom, some of her beauty shit is still on the counter, so nothing makes sense. I pull my phone from my pocket and call her like I should have done hours ago.

My call is sent immediately to voicemail.

Is her phone off, or is she not taking my calls? Huh ...

Returning to the kitchen, I call the next best person to give me the answers I need. Tealey. Shoving the chicken, vegetables, and potatoes into the fridge, the meal I was hoping to make her as an apology is now on the back burner.

“Hello?”

“Tealey, it’s Jackson—”

“I know. Technology these days,” she says, and I can only imagine an eye roll accompanied that statement by the sound of her grimacing tone. “You can’t prank anyone anymore.”

“What?” I don’t know what kind of crazy conversation I’m in, but I can’t get sidetracked. “Look, where’s Marlow?”

“What do you mean, where’s Marlow?”

I hold the phone out to check the time, considering how odd she’s acting. It’s past six o’clock, so it’s reasonable that she’s drunk or on her way to an inebriated state. Putting it back to my ear, I say it slower, “Where’s. Marlow?”

“On her way to LA. How do you not know this?”

I run my hand through my hair. *Shit*. “I was in meetings all day.”

“And she didn’t tell you? I’m confused, Jackson, but I’m also concerned for Marlow. She’s alone right now.”

I go to the bedroom, not sure what to do with myself other than pace like that’s going to solve the issue. “She called me, Tealey, but like I said, I was in meetings all day and couldn’t answer. Why are you concerned for her? What’s going on?”

“It’s her dad. He’s in the hospital.”

“Shit.” So many thoughts and emotions are crowding my head. I’m not sure which one to focus on. More importantly, what must Marlow be feeling? “What happened?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t have any answers. His housekeeper called her.”

I move into the office and pull my suitcase down from the closet. “What? Why not his wife?”

“I don’t know. She told me not to go with her, to stay, but now I’m thinking she shouldn’t be alone.”

“I’m going.”

“Wait,” she says, causing me to stop as soon as my suitcase lands on the bed. She sighs. “I want to go, but I don’t want to get in the way. Are you going tonight?”

“I’ll catch the first flight.”

“Okay. She hasn’t landed, but she’s supposed to call me when she does. What do you want me to tell her?”

The question stumps me because I don’t have the answer. Does she want me there? She didn’t leave a voicemail, so I don’t know what she’s thinking. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I confess, “I was short with her last night. She made the food, but I had ... there’s stuff going on with my work, and I ...”

“She understands,” she says, no judgment in her tone. “We all have bad days. If your heart tells you to go, don’t think twice about it. Just go to her.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I go into the bathroom to pack my toiletries bag. “Do you know if she’s staying at his house?”

“I’m sure she will. I’ll send you the address before you land.” There’s a pause, and then she says, “I’ve never seen her happier than when she’s with you.”

My hand stops while packing my toothbrush. It’s not something she had to tell me, but I’m glad she did. I’m curious if it’s observation or ... “Has she said anything to you?”

“She doesn’t have to. I know Marlow better than she knows herself or used to. She’s really come into her own with you. I think you both bring out the best in each other. Text me when you land?”

I toss my cologne in the bag. “I will. Thanks, Tealey.”

“No problem. Now go be there for your girl and safe travels.”

As soon as we hang up, I pull up flights and book the first one that will give me enough time to make it to the airport.

LA, here I come.

Marlow

THE HOUSE WAS LEFT OPEN, a cheese sandwich sits like old times on the counter, and my room is just the same. Not that I expected much to change in a ten-thousand-square-foot house. I doubt my dad or Lorie have visited this wing of the house in years.

But it's still weird being here, especially alone.

Since the hospital said visiting hours were over, I had to decide between a hotel and home ... is this my home?

I know the answer. This isn't my life anymore. Jackson isn't here, so it's not home.

I set the plate on the vanity and push my suitcase sideways on the floor. It's just after nine o'clock, but I'm exhausted from traveling. And I missed a call from Jackson while in flight. I call him back, but it goes straight to his voicemail. I don't like this game of phone tag. It leaves me confused and a little hurt.

Flying into LA is one of my least favorite things to do. With the paparazzi everywhere, I usually mentally prepare as well as physically, but this time, I don't give a crap. Let them get their awful pictures if they want. I don't care. I'm only here for one reason. *My dad.*

I don't eat carbs much, though Jackson's gotten a few in me, but I take a big bite of the sandwich. I haven't had one of

these sandwiches in years. As I bite into it, I'm reminded of the simple pleasures in life, like cheese between two slices of white bread with just a little butter on the inside.

When I left the city in such a hurry, I grabbed what I had on hand, pulling the clothes from hangers without much thought. Throwing them in the suitcase without being choosy was probably not my best move. Standing in front of the open suitcase, though, I realize I didn't pack any pajamas.

My dresser is still against the far wall. It makes me wonder if the clothes are still folded neatly inside, just how I left them behind. I don't even know if I could fit into anything I wore back in high school, but it's worth a try.

I settle on a T-shirt I bought at a music festival and a pair of shorts that have the word spoiled written across the ass. Holding them in front of me, they look small, but it's my only hope, or I'm sleeping in my underwear. It's better if I'm dressed in something more rather than risk the staff walking in on me in the morning.

After stripping off my pants and blouse, I rub my feet. Traveling in heels is not ideal, but my mind was muddled when I was rushing to get to the airport. Once I brush my teeth, I wash my face, keeping my routine. Routine is good, but this isn't mine anymore. The routine, sure, but not the place.

My emotions have been running rampant, bouncing between the fear for my dad's health to how Jackson and I left things. Leaving without talking to him wasn't something I wanted, but I tried my best before almost missing my flight.

It's the anger, though, the pain my dad caused that kept me from calling him over the past six months, suddenly feeling like a privilege I shouldn't have assumed I had. Guilt answered that call from the housekeeper. Otherwise, I would have let it go to voicemail. It's been out of sight, out of mind for the past few months.

The distractions were a nice reprieve, but were they just doing more damage in the long run? I had to face my father sometime. I just wish it wasn't under these conditions.

It's so hard for me to reconcile the pain he's caused. I thought it was about the money, that the money being ripped away under lies and manipulations was when I hit rock bottom.

It wasn't.

It was living without any family.

Somehow, I manage to smile through all this chaotic mess just from the thought of Jackson. He's done his best to fill the holes my parents left. But that was never his job, and he shouldn't have been stuck doing it.

I climb under the covers of my childhood bed and rest my head back on the pillow. As I stare up at the white canopy, the little plastic stars I attached when I was eleven still glow for me. I didn't have many creature comforts despite being raised in luxury. There was a nanny down the hall, but I had the stars to keep me company at night.

Now I'm alone.

In this room.

In Los Angeles.

On this journey.

I miss the constant that is Jackson.

There was too much time to think on the flight, but the nugget I pulled from the chaos is that for the past two months, I've been trying to make up for all the years we lost. Was it my way of telling him thank you? *Maybe.*

Selfishly, I regret not giving him a chance sooner.

Highly probable.

Jackson St. James is so much more than I could have ever asked for, but I think I failed. I failed to realize that he wasn't loving me because I existed, or because I was simply there living in his space. He loved me because our connection has been built over the years. The stones we started laying from the moment we met have paved the way for us to be together.

What happened last night?

I don't understand why he felt he couldn't tell me. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt because I know he's always trying to protect me. He made a decision, though, and instead of letting me in, he chose to keep me out.

Where does that leave us?

It's a conversation we'll have sooner rather than later and an issue we'll need to address because this doesn't leave me any less confused on where we stand. We have to be there for each other when one of us needs help. That's what he's done for me. He's been there, so I don't understand why he didn't allow me to return the favor.

Closing my eyes, I try to settle my mind. It's easier to give in to it than face the worries that I might lose my dad.

The long day takes hold, and sleep drags me under.

I ADD the tip in the app and get out of the car in front of the hospital. Tucking my phone into my purse, I take two steps toward the door before stopping. It's early, not even seven o'clock, but I wanted to be here before visitation hours.

Now I'm questioning if I'm still dreaming.

I look up at the hospital sign and then back down at my mom standing at the entrance—hair pulled back away from her face and wearing an army-green jumpsuit with flats. It's a casual look for what I'm used to when it comes to her.

I put on light makeup with jeans and a sweatshirt, so she's more dressed up than I am.

"Hi," she says with a slight wave of her hand. She remains where she is, looking out of place.

"Hi," I reply, walking closer but stopping with a few feet between us. "What are you doing here?"

She's not quick to answer. Talia always did things on her own timeline. I tuck my hair behind my ear and lift my

sunglasses to the top of my head. Huffing, I say, “If you’ll excuse me, I want to check in.”

As soon as I pass, she says, “I loved him. Just so you know.”

I stop or rather my feet do. Maybe my breath does a little, too.

She says, “I didn’t marry him for money. I know you think I did. That gold-digger story wasn’t worth the effort it would have taken to clear it up. Your dad used to laugh about it because he knew the truth.”

I still have an hour before visitation opens, so I turn around and ask, “Do you want to get a coffee?”

It’s not big, but there’s relief in her smile. We walk to the corner and cross the street. As if the conversation was never interrupted, she says, “We met when he was a struggling film student. I know this information is out there, but I want you to know what’s real and what the truth is.”

We place our coffee order, and then we move off to the side. I’m still trying to wrap my head around that my mom is here, even after how our meeting in New York ended. When our names are called, I grab our cups and head back outside to sit at a table on the sidewalk. She says, “You have always had so much more to offer than I ever did.” Sitting forward as if she’s going to confess a sin, she takes the top off the cup, and then says. “I saw you as competition instead of my daughter.”

She looks at me and then to the paper coffee cup again. The confidence and swagger she carried the last time I saw her has all but vanished. I might even detect a note of humility. It’s not a characteristic I’d usually associate with her, but it’s a nice change.

“That’s too bad.” I’m not sure what else to say to her.

“He cheated on me. That’s why I left. There were many over the years. I’m not telling you so you hate him or to justify my actions. I own everything I’ve done. I left because I felt like nothing. I was a supermodel, and a man managed to make me feel like I was nothing inside.”

“His cheating had nothing to do with how you looked. It had to do with how he felt. I’m not defending him, but when you left him, you left me.”

“You’re stronger because of it.”

“I don’t want to be stronger. I wanted your love.” I stand, looking at the hospital until I can calm down. When I do, I turn back to her. “You got what you wanted. I’m stronger, strong enough not to need your love anymore.”

I only get five feet away when she says, “I’m sorry, Marlow. I’m sorry for hurting you and not realizing it at the time. After that, it was too late.”

Whipping around, I ask, “Was it? Was it really too late to make the effort for your own daughter?”

“You tell me. Is it too late for us to start over?”

The question throws me off-kilter. I wasn’t expecting to see her, much less deal with our issues in a public confrontation this morning. And before coffee.

I’d love to give her an answer right now, to lighten the burden even if she is the one who saddled it around herself. I just don’t know if I’m in a place to do that just yet.

“I need to go because I want to be the first visitor to see him. But I’ll think about what you said and that you made the effort to be here.”

She stands and comes to me. “Can I hug you?”

“Yes, I’d like that.” We embrace, and at that moment, I have clarity. “Everybody deserves a second chance, but don’t blow it.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

I start walking again but stop once more and turn back. “Will you be here later?”

“No, honey. I won’t.” She sounds more unsure than she’s ever been, but I believe her words. “Life can be hard sometimes, Marlow. No matter what happens, make sure you

can stand on your own. Because you'll end up alone with nothing."

I think she needs to work on her words of wisdom. We part ways, and I cross the street to return to the hospital. This time, I check and then go to the waiting room until my name is called.

It's eight o'clock, and I stand to go check in with the nurses at the main desk again. "Can I see him?"

"Let's get you back there quickly," the nurse says, coming around the desk. "We're about to take him into surgery, but I think it'll be good for him to see you."

We rush down the hall on a mission. She's giving me an overview of his condition, but I'll have to wait to talk to the doctor to get the details. When she opens the door, she lets me enter, and then says, "He needs to remain calm."

"I'll make sure he does."

As soon as the door closes, I hurry to his bedside and take hold of his hand. Memories of when he would take me to movie sets come flooding back. We would walk around holding hands while he introduced me to everyone. He was as proud as a peacock back then.

Not much about his hand has changed other than the size of mine tucked inside it. His eyes slowly open, and when he sees me, he says, "Marlow?"

"I'm here," I say, pushing all the pain away and focusing on this moment instead.

He cracks a smile. "They're not letting me out of this place today."

"No. You're going into surgery shortly, but I'll be here waiting for you to return."

"You always were a good girl." This time, there's a pause. I'm not sure if he's thirsty or thinking about other things. I can't help him because he can't have water before surgery, and I don't know how to fix his problems or heal him. I just know how to be here.

A nurse comes in, greeting both of us as she starts prepping him.

Our time is winding down, so I say, “I’ll be waiting. I’ll be here until you’re out, and then I’ll come see you. Okay?” I get choked up, and tears start filling my eyes.

I’m about to take a step back, but his hand tightens. “Just in case I don’t make it—”

“You’ll make it. For me, you’ll fight. Will you fight for me?” I know what I was asking, but the double meaning feels right to ask of him now.

I’m not granted the words or promise, just a hand squeeze in return before he says, “My legal team protected your trust fund since it was never opened, and I was only a secondary beneficiary.” Shock comes in many forms, but for me, I’m standing here speechless. His other hand covers mine, and he adds, “It’s available to you to claim, so you can have the money and start over on your own terms.”

My own terms? I’m not even sure what that is anymore or what that means for Jackson and me. There’s so much to sort through.

My mom’s words bobbing around my head don’t make it any easier to determine.

The nurse looks at me and then nods once. “You’ll have to return to the waiting room, ma’am. We’re on a very tight schedule.”

I lean in and kiss his cheek. “I love you, Dad.”

Now he’s the one with tears in his eyes. “I love you, too, Marlow.”

I walk through the sliding doors. I have hours to worry about him and don’t know where to go. In the small garden by the corner of the hospital, I sit on a bench and stare up at the blue sky that reminds me of Jackson’s eyes.

“Is this seat taken?”

I look over to see him sitting down beside me. “I’m saving it.”

“Oh, yeah? For whom?” Jackson nudges my leg.

“You.”

Marlow

“I’M SORRY ABOUT YOUR DAD.”

I nod, not quite composed enough to say all the things I want to. The surprise of seeing him, that boyish smile that knows its time and place, the heat that reaches me across the bench, and the unwavering connection that bonds us. It’s all so much at once.

“How’s he doing?”

I keep the tears at bay and finally breathe through the buildup of the situation. “He’s been taken to surgery.”

“I know it’s scary.”

“It is.”

I look at him. Judging by the dark circles and the wrinkled clothes, I’m thinking he didn’t get much rest on the plane.

He says, “I missed your call. I was in a meeting.”

I want to touch him, hold his hand, or even run my fingers over the scruff that’s thickened on the overnight flight. I want to kiss him and that half-hearted grin from his mouth. It’s unnatural for Jackson to look as though he’s unsure of a situation. He’s unsure of me. I’ve done that to him.

I clasp my hands together to restrain them and bite my lip, feeling a bit unsteady in his presence as well. The love’s still

there, thriving under the skin and rushing my veins, but we shouldn't fix this, whatever seems to be wrong, with the physical. We've relied on it too long. I ask, "You flew all the way to LA to tell me that? You could have just called."

"I didn't want to. I wanted to tell you in person." His own struggle is playing out before me, his fingers fidgeting with the zipper of his jacket while his eyes are set on his shoes in front of him.

I wrap my arm over my stomach because as good as it is to see him, the butterflies have changed direction. "What's going on? I'm nervous. You're nervous."

Resting his forearms on his legs, he angles his head to face me. "I didn't go to work thinking there was anything going on at home that we couldn't work through."

No flowers are blooming in this garden despite the unpredictable California weather this time of year. Just greens and browns. "I'm sorry, Jackson, for not leaving a note or a message, something behind. I wish I could explain my thoughts when I got the news, but there was no rhyme or reason. Nothing was done to hurt you or to make you feel abandoned. I wouldn't want to do that to you anyway. But yesterday, you abandoned me. Emotionally, you put miles between us, and I still don't know why."

"I have."

"Here's the thing. I'm tired. You must be exhausted. I'm not thinking clearly. A nurse told me four hours minimum for my dad's surgery, but it could be upward of eight if there's more damage than they suspect." I stand and hold out my hand because why are we torturing each other? "I don't know where you're staying, but I need more sleep, and you look like you could handle some rest. I'd like to have you come with me ..."

I leave the offer lingering and stand here long enough for him to know I mean it.

But he reaches for it without question, stands, and wraps his around my hand. Without taking a step, though, he asks, "This has changed, hasn't it?"

I know what he's asking, but I'm afraid to tell him the truth. "My love for you hasn't."

He nods, accepting what his gut tells him, and we start walking back to the main entrance. "Where's your suitcase?"

"I rented a car at the airport."

My eyebrows arch, and I have to lift my jaw off the ground. "You're such a New Yorker. I didn't know you knew how to drive."

Wrapping his arm around me, he says, "There's a lot you don't know about me, baby."

The release of tension feels good, even if it is short-lived.

I wait while he pulls the car around to pick me up. I stand from the bench where I'm waiting as soon as I see it. *Sleek. Black. Lamborghini.* He shifts it into park and comes around to help me in. "I should have guessed you'd rent a luxury sports car."

"It's not every day I get to drive one of these babies." He shuts the door and runs around to the driver's side and gets back in.

"It's not every day you get to drive at all. Are you sure you can handle her?" I'm met with a dead-eyed glare. Raising my hands in surrender, I laugh under my breath. "Just saying, if you need me to drive her home—"

"Settle down. I may be a city kid, but I've got this handled."

He did. He handled the car like a dream ... until he met rush hour on the 405. After the fourth stall-out, he looks at me and says, "She's meant for speed, not sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic."

"I can't give you speed since they're residential roads, but I can show you a detour if you get off at the next exit." The pace is slower, but there's more time to reflect on my feelings that returning to seeing my dad has evoked, and even the visit with my mom before that.

Driving down the palm tree-lined street, Jackson shifts gears, and says, “I don’t know if you remember, but my dad had a heart attack a few years back.”

I sit up, adjusting my seat belt. “No, I’m sorry, I didn’t remember.”

“He had it while selling the business. The stress of negotiations finally got to him. My mom had also been begging him for years to retire. That retirement and the life he worked so hard for was almost taken away. He’s fine now. Best shape of his life, but we know we’re lucky to have him.”

“I can only hope my dad has the same outcome.”

He reaches over and gently squeezes my leg. We haven’t felt ourselves, but that gesture gives me comfort. “He’ll pull through better than ever.”

Leaning my head back, I feel like I can finally breathe again. “Promise?” I turn to him and smile.

“Promise.”

When we reach the driveway, I give Jackson the code to punch in, and the gates open. Pulling up to the house, he says, “Beverly Hills is always exactly like what you see in the movies. I don’t know why that always surprises me.”

“It’s like that on purpose. It’s all a Hollywood façade.”

Jackson thinks I don’t know much about him, but there are certain things I do know—he was raised by his parents, who are still happily married and in the seat of wealth. He’s from newish money compared to some in Manhattan. He comes from a respected and reputable last name. He knows money. He’s just not pretentious.

I give him the quick tour, which means I take him directly to my room because I do not have the energy to walk him around the estate. “My dad’s chef might be here if you’re hungry. There’s a menu in the top drawer of the nightstand.”

“A menu? Like room service?”

Why do I feel embarrassed? He knows that’s all my dad since my personal financial situation hangs by a thread. I have

no room to brag. But then I remember what my dad said. I didn't get a chance to enjoy the news of the trust fund under that circumstance, but now ... No, I still can't. The money feels different now. "Yeah. I'm not going to eat. I just need to sleep." I brush my teeth to rid myself of my coffee breath and then kick off the flip-flops I found in the closet. When I slip on my pajamas again, the shorts are skintight and ride up, but I can't think about that right now. I tug on the T-shirt that doesn't quite reach my belly button and return to the bedroom.

From the chair closest to the closet, Jackson's eyes take me in as soon as I leave the bathroom. If we were home, we'd soothe any troubled waters with great sex. No one can ever say we aren't pure chemistry, but I'm craving a different connection with him.

When I bend over to grab my scrunchie from the suitcase where I dumped it early this morning, I hear a chuckle. "Spoiled?"

I pop back up, having already forgotten what's written across the back of the shorts. "It used to be something I laughed about in high school, not even realizing how true it was. Now I cringe." I crawl back into the bed I never made before I left.

"Cringing is the last thing on my mind when I see your ass."

Normally, my body would react instantaneously to him, but now I'm the one keeping secrets, so where does that leave us?

He senses the games we usually play aren't in motion and goes into the bathroom. I close my eyes, not wanting to hear my mother's last words, but they're stuck in my head and staking red flags. "We all end up alone, so don't end up with nothing."

I squeeze my lids tighter, wanting the words of warning to disappear, even if only for a little while.

The door to the bathroom opens, and I hear him pad across the Berber carpet. The bed dips, but all movement ceases after

that. It's so tempting to open my eyes and try to give comfort while seeking the same in his arms. I can't do that, though, not right now. So I stay on my side of the mattress, not breaching the middle until he's lying beside me doing the same.

Our breathing keeps us company until he whispers, "We're breaking up, aren't we?"

I open my eyes. His tone isn't sad. It isn't much of anything I can put my finger on, except maybe acceptance, which seems to own the look in his eyes as well. I think that hurts more. I'm not sure what happened between the gesture in the car and here in bed, but I know we both feel the difference.

I can't lie to him, but my heart still feels intact. "I didn't say that."

"You haven't said much of anything."

"I haven't cried either." I suck in a staggering breath. "I'm doing the best I can to hold myself together."

Offense colors his expression. "That's not your job. It's mine."

"No," I say, already shaking my head. "That's what I used to need. That's not your job anymore. You once said you're not going to save me. I am going to save myself. I believed you, and more than that, I know you're right. Please never doubt how much I love you, though."

"Your dad had a heart attack, and you left. I had to find out both of those major pieces of information from Tealey."

Slipping my hands under my cheek, I say, "I called. Twice."

"You didn't call when you landed. Isn't that something you do for someone you love?"

"It was late, three hours later in New York."

A humorless chuckle rustles through his chest. "Did you actually think I'd come home to an empty apartment and go to bed like you weren't supposed to be lying next to me?" He glances at the canopy, but then his gaze lowers again, and he

says, “Let me rephrase that. Did you think I’d carry on in life like my heart hadn’t gone missing?”

I hate myself for doing it, but even more for saying it out loud, but the truth has a basis for my actions. “I didn’t think about the consequences.”

“You didn’t think about me.”

“No. I was thinking about my dad and hoping he’d survive long enough for me to take a five-hour flight across the country just so I could tell him that I love him.” I look down, shame filling my entire being. “I’m supposed to be mad at him, and I still am. I’m still so hurt by what he did to me. But he’s my dad and the only one I have.”

Reaching over, he rubs my cheek and then moves closer to pull me into his arms. “You’re on shaky ground and feeling big emotions. I understand that it’s complicated—”

“Complicated?” I tilt my head back to see him. “My love for you shouldn’t be in question.”

“It’s not.” His voice is calm despite the conversation. He stares straight at me, making me want to look away under the intensity. I don’t. I look at him and take it because however we leave this bed, together or broken up, I need to feel every second of what gets us there. “I don’t doubt your love for me. I don’t doubt your loyalty or commitment. I know you feel those things for me.”

“Then what *do* you doubt, Jackson?”

“That you feel as strongly as I do.” He rolls away and onto his back, draping his forearm over his head. “You didn’t want a relationship, and I pushed it. You didn’t want to move in, and I insisted. You wanted to stand on your own two feet ... Fuck.” He looks at me through the corners of his eyes. “I fucked it all up.”

“No, you didn’t.” I lift on my elbow, anchoring it into the mattress.

His arm lowers again. “Like I said, I don’t question your love for me. I question the timing. There’s a natural progression, a timeline of how things should be.”

Panic starts burning in my chest, so I say, “I wasn’t where you were, but I got there.”

The smallest of smiles is noticed, but then something else washes through him. “I need to tell you why I was mad yesterday.”

I fist the sheet to brace myself. I can’t lose him, or I’ll have nothing left.

Sitting up with his back to my padded headboard, he says, “I’m in—”

My phone buzzes across the nightstand, causing me to look back over my shoulder. “It’s the hospital.” I glance back at him. “I need to take this.”

I’m not asking, but I appreciate his patience. I grab the phone and press it to my ear. “Hello?”

“Ms. Marché?”

I sit up, feeling sick to my stomach. He didn’t go into surgery that long ago, not quite two hours. Is this standard procedure to give an update at this stage? “Yes?”

“This is Nurse Wilcox. Are you close to the hospital?”

“No. I’m at home.” Using that word for this house makes me wince when it leaves my tongue. I look back once more at Jackson to catch a wave of pain rippling across his face. *Dammit.*

The nurse says, “You need to get here right away.”

I bolt to my feet. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Jackson’s already getting dressed when I pull the same pair of pants that I had just taken off right over my fitted shorts and slip on the flip-flops again.

As soon as we’re in the car, I say, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Your dad needs to be your priority right now.” He glances over at me once more, and I notice the difference in the hue of his irises—a darker shade of blue that’s mislaid the light.

I'm losing him.

Jackson

I MADE a promise I can't keep.

Marlow's been gone longer than expected. Sitting in the waiting room, I stare down the hall where a doctor and nurse flanked her sides and then led her away. It's been more than thirty minutes, and I'm debating when I should go ask about her.

I've already been told once that I'll have to wait since I'm not family.

I'm *her* fucking family. They may not know it, but I do.

Two nurses at the nurses' station keep glancing over at me. I'm used to women staring at me and checking me out, but this is different. Their expressions are not filled with flirtation. As they whisper to each other, I stand, unable to read their faces, and return once again. "Hi, I'm here with Marlow Marché. Her father is in surgery." I glance down the hall when the doors open, but it's not her. "Since we were told not to use our cell phones in the hospital, I'm hoping you can update me."

"We can't give you any details since you're not family, but we do understand that she's alone and ..."

They stop to glance at each other again.

"Alone and what?"

The older one pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose and then picks up the phone. “Let me see if I can locate her.”

“Thank you.” I step off to the side when a lady walks up to talk to the one at the computer.

I purposely eavesdrop, needing more information and hoping it will lead me to Marlow’s location. Fuck the rules. Although it’s tempting to call or text her, I’m not risking lives to do so, but I’ll physically search this maze until I find her.

She sets the phone down and signals me to the other end of the tall counter. “Ms. Marché would like to see you.”

Wait, has it been her keeping me out this entire time? “Okay.” I follow her down the hall. She swipes her key card to open the secured double doors. We go up another floor and down a long hallway. She’s not been answering any of my questions, but finally stops where two hallways intersect, and says, “I can’t give any updates. I’m sorry.”

As much as I don’t get what I want, I know she’s following policy to protect the patients and their families. Family. I want mine back. I want to see her smile and feel the brush of her hand against mine. I want to see her blue eyes finding me across a crowded room and taste her lips once more before I fall asleep.

“Here we are.” The nurse steps aside and says, “But I will say, hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.”

The drop of my stomach has me hesitating. The nurse doesn’t stay, but shit, what have they told her?

I slowly open the door to find Marlow staring out the window. Her back is to me, and she doesn’t move, not a muscle. I shut the door and then quietly cross the room. “Marlow?”

Her gaze pivots to me as her arms, which are crossed over her chest, tighten together. There’s an emptiness in the usually vibrant blue skies of her eyes, like death has already taken its toll. I reach out, but she shifts her shoulder.

Dropping her head forward, she closes her eyes, squeezing them tight. One deep breath is taken and then another. “He’s

not going to make it. He's not going to live."

"I'm sorry."

She levels me with a glare. "You promised. You promised me he would be okay."

Faith and reality are two different things. I said what I needed to make her hold on to hope, but I crossed a line. I can't explain my way out of this no matter how badly I want to. There isn't a way. I'd rather her hate me for reassuring her than to ever realize she can't count on me.

I think I just screwed that up as well, though.

"I'm so sorry. What did the doctor say?"

Tears overrun her lower lids, and through strengthening sobs, she says, "They don't know, but he's had a series of minor heart attacks that he chalked up to heartburn. This was a massive one. He might need a new heart or angioplasty, stents, a pacemaker. I don't know. They were saying so much, and I didn't understand the terminology. I understood when they said he won't get a heart in time. The list is too long and there's already a patient in this hospital waiting. His health alone precludes him from topping the list from the other person. God, I hate myself for selfishly wishing he'd get it." Her arm flies out to the side. "Someone else would have to die."

"It's not selfish. You love him. He's your dad."

"He's my dad, Jackson," she cries, looking at me through blurry eyes that have brightened through the tears. "He's not even sixty. Sure, he drinks a lot, loves a good party, and smokes cigars like a chimney, but I was naïve and thought I had years, but now I have hours, and I don't even know if I get that because he's still in surgery. I wasted the time I did have with him being mad for stupid reasons. Money kept us apart." She steps forward almost involuntarily.

Fuck. I don't care anymore. I grab her and envelop her in love. My love that I can only hope is strong enough to heal her pain one day. Her body rattles with each sob and jaded breath. "Everything's always about money."

I can't help but bite my tongue. There's no way I can drag my situation with the lawsuit, the threat to my reputation and career, into this room with us when it's all because of money and greed.

It would prove her point but how would she see me? A party to her pain? No, I won't say a thing. I refuse to put that on her.

With her head on my shoulder, she says, "They're still hoping for a miracle because that's the only thing that can save him."

Every wrack of her body leaves a mark on my soul. I've failed to protect her, but more so, I've failed to shield her in the first place. I should have demanded to go with her. I should have insisted we stay together. How long has she been alone with this devastating news?

I stroke the back of her head and down her hair to her shoulder blades, holding her to me as close as I can.

She's suddenly untangling herself from me as if I'm holding her captive. Maybe I am in some way. I don't feel the need to apologize, even if I was holding her for me. She says, "I realized ...". She drops onto the couch, the weight of her own body appearing to be a burden. "He gave me those bags because he wasn't around to give me more. He bought them simply because he thought I'd like them. *And I fucking sold them.*"

She crumples forward, her cries becoming heavier. I sit down and rub her back. "Marlow?" She doesn't respond. "Marlow, look at me."

A listless effort is made before she's crying again while hunched over. I pick her up by the middle, but she comes willingly and sits on my lap, letting me hold her with her head on my shoulder. "The handbags aren't your connection to him. Sure, they remind you of him, but your connection isn't superficial. It's the memories you made growing up."

She hangs on every word and then sniffles. "He wasn't the best father, but sometimes, he was a great dad."

I kiss the top of her head. “That’s his legacy.”

She takes that in, appearing to draw strength from it. When she leans back enough for me to catch her teary-eyed gaze, I say, “You won’t ever have a lack of shoulders to cry on.” The next words get choked in my throat, causing her to blink back her tears and reach to caress my face. “I have two reserved just for you.”

Despite the sight of her tears beginning to dry, they spring right back into her eyes. Kissing my chin and then higher on the corner of my mouth, she whispers, “They’ll always be my safe place and favorite.”

We didn’t break up earlier in her bedroom, but this feels like the beginning of our goodbye.

I embrace her, leaning my head against the top of hers and staring at the pale green wall across the room. Eventually, I close my eyes and let the pain sink in. Soon, it will become real. It’s all I’ll have left to hold.

The door opens, and Marlow pops onto her feet. “Is he out of surgery?”

“He is,” the nurse says. “He’s out of surgery.” Her hands fly in front of her. “He’s not out of the woods. In fact, he’s deep in them, but you should get some time with him.”

“When?” Marlow asks.

“Not for a few hours. I recommend getting some lunch. Enjoy the sunshine. The doctor said you might be able to see him around four, four thirty. When he’s settled in a room, the doctor will provide you with the details regarding the surgery.” She backs out of the door, closing it behind her.

When I stand, Marlow looks at me. “I don’t know what to think, Jackson.”

“You don’t need to think through anything. Just let your heart tell you what to do.” I open the door, and add, “Let’s get you something to eat. Nurse’s orders.”

We walk back through the maze of hallways, following the signs like mice searching for the reward. It’s not until we walk

outside that we find Lorie Marché yelling at a doctor.

“Dammit,” she says, ducking behind me. “I can’t deal with her right now.”

“Marlow!” Lorie’s ire is directed at us. We’ve met. I can’t say she’s on good terms with anyone in our friend group, especially not Marlow. Her stepmom embodies the negative stereotype.

Marlow stands behind my left arm like a deer in headlights, and I’m happy to be her barrier. Lorie comes over and says, “They won’t let me see Bob. Did you do this? Are you purposely keeping me from my husband?”

When she takes a step closer, I raise my hands just in front of me. “We’re good, Lorie, if you keep some distance.”

Her head jolts back in offense. “Like I’m the one who’s causing drama?”

Marlow moves beside me and takes my hand, standing as a united front. She replies, “I didn’t make a list or submit any names. If you’re not allowed in, that’s my dad’s request.”

Her gaze volleys between the hospital and us a few times before she says, “I’ll talk to my lawyer.”

“Probably best.” Turning to me, Marlow asks, “Where are we parked?”

I help her out of that mess the best I can, but we both look back to make sure Lorie’s not following us.

As we walk into the parking garage, I don’t know where our relationship stands exactly, but I won’t tempt the fates. I have her hand in mine, but I can only hope I still hold her heart.

Marlow

“DADDY.” I rush to his side and take his hand, careful not to rattle the bed.

“Hi, Princess.”

I grin, sort of embarrassed by the nickname I used to adore. Back then, it had a different meaning, like those booty shorts that spell spoiled. I used to own every ounce of the titles. Now, I’d rather be known for other traits like clever. Resourceful. Scrappy like my dad. But it’s my dad calling me princess, and there was a chance that I would never hear it again, so I’m not complaining to him.

Jackson stands near the door, looking like a kid showing up to date my dad’s daughter. One hand is tucked in his pocket, and one raised just enough to wave to my father. “Hi, Mr. Marché.” They’ve met a handful of times over the years when he came into town and hung out with us.

“Jackson.”

My dad’s gaze returns to me, and he asks, “Why is he here? Did you bring your friends with you to watch the old man kick the bucket?” He chuckles at his joke but then wheezes in pain. When he catches his breath, he adds, “I wouldn’t blame you. I’ve been a real—”

“Let’s not talk about that.” Everything took longer than they predicted, but just after eight, I received the call that I

could visit. Not sure how many speed limits Jackson broke getting me here in the Lamborghini, but it had to be record speed.

My dad says, “I want to, Marlow. I need to. I owe you an apology. Greed is a gregarious little devil, drawing you in so deep until its claws get ahold of you.”

Though the analogy is so dark, I see his dramatic side hasn't been affected by the surgery. I rub his arm and smile. “Once a filmmaker, always a filmmaker.”

“Till my dying day.”

I almost correct him but then stop. Instead, I choose my words wiser. “We have no say when we leave this world. We only have the good deeds we leave behind.”

He grins, his hand reaching to touch my cheek. “That was the first movie set I ever took you to. You were a baby, and Barbara, the leading lady, was enamored with you. She won an Oscar for that role, but I never heard that line delivered so beautifully until now.”

“Wasn't she the reason Mom left you?”

“One of many. I fucked up a lot.” His eyes study me as if he's looking for the resemblance. It's not hard to find. “Talia deserved better and took me for almost every dime. I got you out of the deal, so I'd say I came out the real winner.” Seemingly satisfied, he lowers his arm to the bed and looks at Jackson again. “Get in here or get out but stop hovering around the door.” He comes to the other side of the bed from me.

We catch eyes before Jackson asks, “Is it wrong to ask how you're feeling?”

“You can ask, but you never did tell me what you're doing here. That leads me to believe you're not here for me. You're here for my daughter.” Jackson chuckles lightly, but then nods. “Why do I get the impression it's not for moral support?”

It's an uncomfortable conversation to be having while he's in the hospital with every minute I get with him a new, unexpected gift.

“I’m here however Marlow needs me to be.”

My dad laughs, the bellow loud, but then the wheezing begins again. He pats Jackson’s arm and says, “That’s exactly what you should say, son.” Tugging on his sleeve, he says, “Come closer, and I want you to listen to me.”

Jackson moves in a little more. My dad says, “Don’t fuck up like I did. Marlow is my princess. Whether you’re dating my daughter or you marry her, she’s your queen. You understand?”

He’s nodding, but I swear I hear Jackson gulp. “I do.”

“You’ve always been a good kid. Don’t make me come back from the bowels of hell to kick your ass.”

With a roll of my eyes, I start laughing. Jackson doesn’t. “I won’t, sir.” Now I’m laughing even harder.

“This is the most ridiculous conversation I’ve ever been a part of.” I smile, but sadness still hangs in the air, knowing the outcome. “You need to be resting rather than intimidating the man I love, Dad.”

“They made me sleep for hours before calling you. I’m ready to bust out of this place and have a good cigar.”

The door opens, and dread sets in. The nurse says, “He needs rest.”

When I look at my dad like it might be the last time I see him, he says, “You’re not getting rid of me that easily. We have a lot to discuss. For instance, you saying ‘the man I love.’ I think that’s the first time I’ve heard that.”

“Let’s not make it the last.”

“Ah.” My dad starts chuckling. “The girl’s got jokes. She takes after her old man.”

“Don’t push yourself, Mr. Marché,” the nurse cautions with a stern tone. “You need rest.”

Turning to me, my dad says, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I don’t ask for a promise or anything at all. I stand in the contentment of the present instead. Leaning down, I kiss his

cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you, Marlow. Always. Remember that. Okay?”

Nodding, I say, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As soon as I release the bedside railing, he says, “By the way, Lorie and I divorced a few months back. I heard she was trying to come in and claim she’s still my wife.”

The news comes as a shock. They’ve volleyed divorce around a couple of times in the past but never followed through. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugs but winces right after. “We weren’t on speaking terms. I’m telling you now because she will start making claims on properties and assets as soon as I’m in the ground.”

“Dad ...” He speaks of death so freely when I’m still hoping for a miracle to save him.

Jackson’s brows knit together. “Has a settlement been made in the bankruptcy case?” Someone else might be bothered that he’s talking finances, but I know Jackson always has my best interest at heart.

My dad replies, “They got their money from selling the other properties and even the artwork Marlow acquired for me. It was worth a fortune and went up for auction. The house and what’s left in it all goes to my daughter.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Do you want me to leave it to an ex-wife? I have a lot of those to choose from, but none that I’m particularly fond of.” He smiles. It’s always been the one thing we had in common. “Except maybe your mom. I live with a lot of regret when it comes to Talia, but I’m too old and out of shape to catch her eye like I once did.” Seemingly caught up in a memory, he smiles to himself and then snaps out of it, and says, “It’s a house. Sell it and buy a place you love in New York City. You two can start your family there.”

My eyes latch onto Jackson’s the moment family is mentioned. I struggle to read the undercurrent between us and take a sobering breath.

The nurse clears her throat, which helps break the thickening air, and holds the door open in a not-so-subtle hint.

“Take care of yourself, Mr. Marché,” Jackson says.

“Take care of my daughter. That’s all that matters.”

I know Jackson. He’s always believed in me, but there’s nothing to prove to my father, so he moves to the door and waits for me. “Good night, Dad.”

“Good night, Princess.”

When I reach the door, Jackson holds his hand between us palm up in offering. When our hands come together, my heart skips a beat. It always does with him.

I look back once more to see my dad smiling. Guess he caught that shared moment as well.

Walking out of the hospital this time feels different than before. Peace has washed through me, calming the anxiety I was feeling earlier. “He was telling me goodbye,” I say, walking toward the garage. We keep walking, our hands clasped like we’ll lose sight of one another if we don’t hold on this tight. When Jackson doesn’t say anything, I ask, “What do you think?”

“I think I could get into trouble no matter how I answer. But if you pressed—”

“I’m pressing you,” I say, poking him. I’d normally get a chuckle or a wayward grin out of him, but his mind seems to be deeper in thought for me to pull him from. “Jackson?”

The name catches his attention, and he glances at me. “He looks and sounds like he’s not going down without a fight. Maybe it won’t take a miracle. Maybe it just took you showing up for him.”

The thought grows my smile. “I’ll take whatever days I get with him. Not only do I get a chance to rebuild my relationship with him but I also need to take care of my family.” The meaning behind the squeeze of his hand is lost. I don’t know what he’s sensing, keeping his feelings to himself or burying them.

Stopping in front of the Lamborghini, I take Jackson's other hand and hold them both between us. "You know what I'm going to say."

His expression doesn't fall, but he's struggling with indifference. "You're staying."

"I have to."

Resignation is foreign to my fighter's demeanor, but it's there, seen in his posture. "And I have to leave."

I sigh because that thought is depressing. I don't voice my needs because relationships are built on compromise, and that's where we are. We're stuck in the in-between of wants and needs.

I didn't call him the man I love for my father's sake. I don't want to ever hide how much I love Jackson, not from anyone, especially the man standing in front of me now. My feelings won't change. Distance and time won't erase my love for him, but as much as I hate it, I need to let him off the hook. "Our timing ... Just know I love you."

The words strike a different chord inside him than usual, and a heavy breath follows. "That's a way to kick this conversation off. Bringing in the heavy hitter right off the bat."

I sway our hands, trying to figure out what to say when I don't want to say any of it. I want him here, with me, but that's an impossibility. "I love you, but I don't know how long I'll be in LA."

"I think this is when I say I'll wait." He releases my hands and cups my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. "I'm sorry this isn't more romantic. Us, in a parking garage with the smell of gasoline in the air, the sound of tires squealing as they head for the exit. Yeah, I could have played this better, and then maybe you'd change your mind." He kisses me and then presses his forehead to mine. "I can't ask you to leave, but please see that I'm a man in a state of desperation. I'll wait for you, Marlow."

"I can't do that to you, though. I could be here for weeks or even months. I have to stay for my dad. I wish I had an idea

for how long ... but I don't."

His head tilts to the right. "What do fucking months have on us? We got this. We waited years to be together." I want to smile, but my heart hurts too much, so I move closer. His arms welcome me and then warm me from the outside in. I'm not sure what to say because nothing will make this better. Our journey's been long and winding, the timing always a bit off from one another. I just thought this time would be different. Life threw a curveball right at us. He kisses my head, and says, "You always hated LA."

I'll cling to his desperation as a reminder of how much this man loves me. But our timing is off, and all I can hope is that one day we can recapture it. "I did, but the sunshine's not as bad as I remember."

Leaning back, he locks his gaze on mine. "No, baby. You're a New Yorker through and through. Don't you forget that."

"I won't," I whisper. I also won't forget how he was mine and I was his for too short of a time.

Tears start to form as our goodbye grows louder in my ears. Just when I feel a sob rising inside, warm lips press to mine, and our tongues embrace one last time. Hands caress my face as fingers slide deep into my hair.

I've never known what being consumed—*body and soul*—felt like until Jackson St. James was kissing me. Now I never want it to end.

Except it isn't up to me ... It's now in fate's hands.

Jackson

ANDREW WALKS in without knocking and drops a red file on my desk.

“What’s this?” I look up. When he doesn’t say anything, I ask, “What are we doing? Charades? File. Red. Folder. I’m going to need more to work with here.”

He must be in a good mood because for a serious guy around the office, he chuckles. “Funny.”

“I try.”

Tapping the folder, he says, “That’s the evidence we need to clear CWM, and you, though I’m having second thoughts about getting you off the hook with your attitude.”

“My attitude is always the same.”

“That’s my point.”

Now I’m chuckling. I pick up the file and start flipping through it. “That didn’t take long.” I shrug nonchalantly and then open a side drawer to pull out a blue file I’ve been holding on to for just this occasion. Handing it to him, I say, “I mean, a week longer than my attorneys, but you guys got there in the end.”

Settling in on the couch, Nick smarts back, “Considering how many calls I had to field from *your* attorneys, you’re lucky I was there to guide them through the process.” The

laughter is contagious, and he struggles to hold a straight face when he adds, “Amateurs.”

These guys are on fire today. It feels good to laugh without the dread of this lawsuit hanging over our heads. It’s not dismissed or even settled as a case, but to know it’s dead in the water gives much-needed relief.

I just wish I could share this victory with a certain blue-eyed beauty who likes to challenge every part of my life, especially my patience. Two months is too long without having her in my life, her kissing me good morning or falling asleep curled around me on the couch at night.

Does it matter anymore? We don’t even speak or text. I thought we were pausing so she could care for her dad. I didn’t realize her stay might become permanent.

There was no big fight or low blows exchanged. Nothing was said to terminate our relationship. No production was made at all. We didn’t end things on a keep-in-touch basis. It was more of a cold turkey kind of thing. Not sure why other than it would also give us time to reflect on—life, us, and how we see our futures playing out. It was a whisper, a mutual understanding that our timing was off.

For the time being. *Not forever.*

Laughter brings me back to the conversation. Rad and Cade are my best friends, but the Christiansen brothers are damn good entertainment. And they’re my friends, but I like to give them a hard time since they’re also family. Family ...

Get your mind in the game, St. James.

Chuckling, I set the files down. “Oh, yeah? So how did you crack the mystery?”

Andrew sits in the chair across from me, a smug smirk still on his face. “We don’t have records for the calls Brent made on his cell to Morgenstern, though the subpoena may still come through, but we do have two employees willing to go on record that they overheard Brent advising Morgenstern to buy in on the stock.”

“Brent went rogue? That fucking weasel.”

“Tell me about it,” he continues. “We hadn’t even put the stock in our index as it wasn’t verified.”

Nick leans forward. “He not only went rogue but he was also making shit up. After discovering what was overheard, it led to finding that stock’s company is hidden under an umbrella based in the Bahamas. Ready for this? The company is listed under one of Brent’s old girlfriends. He never went on a honeymoon. He never even got married.”

“Fucking hell. The company gave him an expensive gift, too,” Andrew says.

“Let the gift go,” Nick says. “Brent was in the Bahamas setting up an offshore account.”

“The twists and turns are captivating.” I rub my chin. “Can we touch the offshore account?”

“We can’t, but the government can.” Nick kicks back with his feet on the coffee table. “And has.”

Andrew adds, “Nick isn’t heading up this case as it’s not in his wheelhouse, but the attorney working with the prosecutor said that even though the money will take time to process, if this all pans out, Morgenstern should get his money back minus the fees on the case. The fees could be millions. The government loves a surcharge and those all-encompassing admin fees.”

I glance at my phone, a habit I already had in place, but in the past two months, there’s only one name I want to see on the screen. The first month flew by since I was buried in work and dealing with this lawsuit. This month ... slow as molasses.

A reminder plays on a loop in my head; she needs to be in LA as much as her father wants her there. He’s not a bad person. He’s just done bad things, but not unforgivable. Marlow needs this time with him to heal the wounds he made worse when he threw salt on them.

According to Tealey, she found a part-time job at a local gallery in Brentwood. I’m sure it’s a good distraction while her dad is getting treatments and in and out of doctor

appointments. What do I expect her to do? Sit around and do nothing?

It only bothers me because I didn't get the information directly from her. It sows the seeds that the fear of losing her instilled. My nightmare come true, making the nights even more brutal. The space beside me in bed remains empty, waiting for her to return, but little by little, she's settling back into her old life in LA. Maybe she's still a California girl at heart.

At least it sounds like her father might have found his miracle.

"You don't seem happy," Nick says, his brows lowered in confusion.

I rock back in my chair. "I've been thinking about it, and then I did some research. When a brokerage discovers insider trading or anything along those lines, and it makes headlines, business booms fifteen percent on average. Why do you think that is?" I lean forward again, my mind spinning from the possibilities. "I'll tell you why. Because the headline may seem like bad PR for the brokerage, but the average investor sees it as an opportunity to work with brokers who have the inside track."

Andrew laughs. "You're saying not to worry about the dirty headlines, but roll with the punches and let the clients come to us?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying."

Nick chuckles. "That's brilliant." Standing, he walks to the door. "Hey, Jackson?"

I glance up from that black phone screen again. "What?"

"While you have a good point, several, in fact, I wasn't referring to the case. I wasn't referring to work at all."

"You don't have to worry about me. I'm a grown-ass man. I can handle it. I can handle anything thrown my way."

"Yeah, you've always been so determined to prove you can do anything, to do things on your own, to do them your way,

whether it was right or wrong, but you've let that bleed into your personal life. And you know where that will get you?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

Nick sighs, and I see an ounce of disappointment enter his eyes. "Sitting in this office working all hours of the night to avoid returning to an empty house."

"I'm leaving early today," I lie. My eyes redirect to Andrew, who looks away. He's not calling me on my bullshit because he's above that.

"Bullshit." My brother-in-law is apparently not above it.

I start packing my stuff because I'll run this lie into the ground to win an argument. Argument? We're not fighting, and they're not my enemies. "Okay, today I'm leaving early."

Andrew says, "It's six thirty."

"Not early, but earlier than usual." They both have shit-eating grins on their faces. "Whatever."

Snapping his fingers, he says, "I almost forgot to ask. Are you coming over this weekend?"

I've been going over every weekend to play with James and hang with my family—Mom, Dad, sister, nephew, and Nick. There's just one person always missing.

I don't think I realized how larger than life Marlow used to be until she was replaced by silence. "I'll let you know tomorrow. I might just lay low this weekend."

"Let Natalie know. She's planning a cookout on Sunday since the weather will be nice." He leaves, and Andrew gets up right after. "How are you really doing?"

"Are we going to talk about our feelings? Because I might need to pour a drink for this."

"Your sarcasm is on point. Lots of fucking feelings buried by those comebacks."

Comebacks ... I grin, remembering how Marlow would always call me out on the delayed comeback. She didn't get that arguing with her was too distracting for me to be clever.

He's just about to leave when I hold up the file, and say, "Thanks."

Tipping his chin, he replies, "Anytime, St. James."

Left alone again, I read the details in the red file to compare to mine. The district attorney filing charges didn't come as a surprise. There are ramifications when stocks and exchanges aren't dealt with properly. The company is protected. I may not have the resolution I'm seeking yet, but the suit against me should be dropped once the paperwork is filed.

I should feel better than I do, at least more than superficial relief, but what's a victory if you have no one to celebrate with?

Slipping my arms into my jacket, I straighten my tie and lock up for the day because fuck it, I'll prove them wrong and leave before night falls.

I don't call cars or use cabs much these days. I take the subway, needing to be around people who can take my mind off ... "Marlow."

There. I say her name out loud for the first time since I can remember. I half-expected it to sound foreign to my ears. It doesn't. It's smooth and melodic, natural like it's such a part of me. *Still.*

The only downside to riding the subway is I lose cell service for thirty minutes while underground. Or maybe that's a blessing. It's the only time I leave all expectations on the sidewalk above the train station, ready to pick up where I left off when I return.

After taking the steps by two to reach the street level, I instantly pull my phone out so it can find a signal.

Missed Call - Marlow

"Fuck!" *You're fucking kidding me.*

Pacing the sidewalk, I call her right back but get her voicemail.

Fuck! Fuck! “Fuck! Oh, sorry,” I tell a startled silver-haired lady clinging to a walker.

I walk the remaining blocks staring at my phone, willing it to ring again. It doesn't, but I go over every detail of how she's embedded into my day. Whether it's for me or she's doing it on purpose, I can't escape Marlow's fingerprints on my life.

Her stuff still takes up most of my closet, and her toiletries are where she left them. Her sneakers are lined up next to mine in the hallway, and I keep a chilled bottle of champagne in the fridge because she always believed life was worth celebrating. Even the little things.

I don't ask questions on if or when. I just leave the stuff because it's all I have left of her. And I'm not ready to move on.

Once my door is unlocked, I push it open but stop. As I stand there frozen in time, my breathing slows, and my heartbeat picks up. *And then I hear it ...*

“Hey there, St. James.”

She's there, not fifteen feet in front of me. How does she manage to pull off cool and casual so effortlessly? Like her world wasn't turned upside down like mine?

It doesn't matter when that smile that carries so many emotions grows when she sees me. Her hair is lighter, I assume from the West Coast sunshine, her skin tanner, making me curious if it's even all over.

But it's her eyes... Marlow's eyes still carry the burning torch inside. Faith. Hope. Whatever this is, I'll take it.

I can't pull off casual, not when she's right in front of me after all this time. I still make a concerted effort. “Hi, Marché, what brings you by?”

“I was in the neighborhood.” I grin, really liking her in my neighborhood again.

Her hand is anchored to the stone counter, grounding her to the apartment. I'm looking right at her. Is she real or an

apparition haunting me like her ghost has done the past two months?

Twisting her foot against the other, she tilts and looks me over, seeming to like what she sees. Maybe she does have some tells. “You look like you need some sun.”

“The sun is overrated. I prefer basking in the shadows of gray skyscrapers.” That leaves her smiling, and in turn, me as well.

She takes a breath that fills her chest, and then says, “I miss the sound of the city and the vibration of the streets.”

I’ve felt every breath since walking in. I start down the short entry just to feel the grace of her presence up close once again. A queen is fine, but that’s not what Marlow is to me. She’s my muse, my safe place, a goddess I have the pleasure of worshipping. *My lover. My savior.* She’s my heart and the soul that makes me feel alive again.

Reaching out to touch her, our hands bond, fingers weaving together between us. She whispers, “I miss so much about this city, but most of all, I miss you.”

“I missed you, too.”

“Why are we not together?”

“Because the East and West Coasts are just too fucking far apart.”

She nods but then asks, “Why are we not texting? Or calling to see how our day went?” Tears begin to glisten in the corners of her eyes. She licks her lips and then bites the bottom one.

“Stubbornness or pain. I’m not quite sure which. It may have been a mixture of both. It’s been a mystery to me as well.”

She looks down and then says, “I’ve been hurt before. I used to be scared to commit to anyone, to rely on someone who would eventually hurt me. But I’m more afraid of losing you, Jackson.” She moves closer, the tips of our shoes pressed together. “But I realized I needed to. You left a gaping hole

inside me that dealing with my dad's care, his dieticians, cardiologists, and the big life he leads could never fill."

With our hands still connected, I take another step closer. "I can't shield you from your problems or the negative side of life. There will be ups and downs, but I'll be there by your side every step of the way."

Reaching out, she runs her hand over my chest and stops above my heart. "I can handle what life throws at me. I was never as fragile as I once believed. But you need to let me in. You need to let me fight with you. That can only happen if you're honest and lean on me when life throws obstacles in your direction. You don't always need to be the hero, Jackson. Sometimes, I can take the lead."

Remembering what Nick said earlier. I may not have liked it, but he's right. It's time to set my weapons down and be open to being a team instead of an island of one. I was never bothered by returning to an empty house. I was bothered by not returning home to Marlow. "Sounds like a good time to make new rules."

"I agree." A smile finally springs into place. "But why are we still so far apart?"

"Good damn question." Our mouths crash together, and our lips find purchase in each other, just like our hearts.

Hands in hair.

Tangled limbs.

Tugging at shirts.

The sweet taste of sunshine that traveled on her lips.

The heat of my skin from rushing home so I could try calling her again.

Ripping us apart has to be the hardest thing I've ever done, but I do because I have questions, and only she has the answers. "I'm so glad to have you here again, but how is it possible?" I can't stop touching her, tucking hair behind her ear, staring at the face I had memorized just to see if anything

changed. Despite my need to be all over her at once, I need to make sure that she's staying if I kiss her again.

"I doubted myself for so long that I'd overlooked what was right in front of me. I've been on my own for years. My salary could pay the rent. Maybe not where I lived, but in plenty of other parts of the city. Bills, sure. I would've learned to live on a budget, but isn't that a good life skill to have?"

"Absolutely."

"But it wasn't any of those things that brought me back. It was you," she says. "I never understood unconditional love until you loved me. It wasn't the flowers or heart-shaped candy boxes that I've been showered with over the years. It's not anything we can buy. It's just the little things—you brushing your teeth next to me, working at night while I worked in the living room, giving up half your closet space." With our arms wrapped around each other, the emotions she's feeling fall through tears down her cheeks. "I miss our routine, but I miss us even more." She leans back, feeling safe in my arms, and says, "How do we move forward?"

"One step at a time."

"What if we forget the rules altogether." She laughs. "We've never been good about following them anyway."

"Let's do us the best way we know how and dive right into the deep end."

"I've been thinking ... what if we pick up where we left off on that balcony on New Year's?"

"Now's a good time." I pull her into my arms and kiss her, dipping her for no other reason than she deserves the big gesture.

Breathless, she hangs in my arms, and says, "The best kiss ever. Do you think you can top it?" I accept the challenge and kiss her because as entertaining as the banter always was between us, kissing her is five times better.

This time I swing her back up when our lips part but hold on to her as her knees regain their strength. "How was that?"

“Spectacular.” Not sure what catches her eyes, but she sighs in annoyance. “Dammit.” She slips out of my hold and into the kitchen. “I had it all planned and blew it.”

“What is it?”

Straightening her hair, she plasters on a grin, and asks, “Are you hungry?”

I take the bait. “Famished.” My soul is starving to be reunited with hers again, but that feels a little heavy-handed for whatever she’s trying to do, so I stay quiet and watch.

“I didn’t want to break from tradition when it comes to my apologies.” She grabs a bag and hands it to me. Her showing up at my door with those damn chips and queso wasn’t so long ago, but it’s incredible how much things have changed, including us. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“For staying gone so long. For letting you walk away without telling you that I do want to have kids, but only if they’re with you, no matter the size of your head.” A smile cracks her cheeks wide open.

I touch the top of my head. “What’s wrong with the size of my head?”

“Nothing.” She shrugs in a poor attempt to throw me off the scent. “Natalie just mentioned your mom had to get extra stitches. That’s all.”

My mouth falls open, though I’m not really offended. It’s just fun to mess with her. “I guess I should be grateful that you’re willing to birth my pumpkin head kids then.”

Laughing, she nods enthusiastically. “And just off the top of my head—”

“More head jokes, huh?”

“No more jokes about the size of your head.” She quirks an eyebrow, but her expression softens again. “I’m sorry for not telling you I love you every morning, noon, and night with texts and calls. So here’s some chips and queso as an apology.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” I grin, taking the bag from her and peeking inside. “Why are the chips crushed?”

“I thought I’d save the wall the trouble by smashing them myself, just the way you like it.”

I start laughing, the feeling as pure as the sound, a good release as if I haven’t tasted freedom in years. But as much as I want to get caught up in her again, *all up in her*, I need to bring it up. “I hoped you’d come back to me, but I can’t say I didn’t lose hope sometimes.”

She caresses my face. “We all do, but please let me help you regain that faith. Do you trust me?”

“Baby, I trust you more than anyone, including myself. If I could spend every day showing you just how much faith I have in us, I would. But I can’t be selfish with you. Your dad still needs you.”

Her eyes dip closed briefly, but then she looks up and smiles. “My dad claims that scotch and good cigars led to his health issues. He’s on the road to recovery after getting the pacemaker and has a team of medical professionals hovering over him around the clock. He even has my mom visiting.

I’ve done what I can. I was there, taking care of my family. Now that he’s stronger and healthier, he doesn’t need me to be there every day anymore. That means I get to return to my life and New York, and it just so happens you’re at the center of both.”

Marlow*THREE MONTHS LATER. . .*

I STAND BACK and let them look around, hoping they see the big picture like I do. Sure, it's just an empty warehouse to some, but the potential is here. I just need them to believe in me.

Jackson makes a loop around the space again and then comes to stand next to me. "The business proposal was intriguing. It would impress any investor."

"What about you?"

He crosses his arms over his chest and keeps his eyes ahead. I can see how his size and that ticking jawline would be intimidating. To others. *Not me*. I just think he's so sexy when he's walking around in rolled-up shirtsleeves. He's distracting from the reason we're here today. "It impresses me. I was running the numbers. If you were to ask me to invest ..."

I pick some lint off his black shirt. He wiggles like I'm ruining his cover. I laugh but restrain my grin and mimic him instead. Trying to recover and be serious, I say, "I did ask you to invest."

"I'd want seventy-five percent."

Lowering my arms, I uncross his as well. “Okay, I don’t want you to invest that badly. Can you simply invest because you love me while letting me retain the majority so I can run the show?”

He starts chuckling, the sound drawing the attention of the other potential investors, basically our friends. “I would have given you that deal before we got out of bed this morning. You brought me here to compete with everyone else. That’s what I’m doing. Making you an offer and negotiating.”

“I thought you were still in a sex haze this morning from the fantastic blow job I gave you. I didn’t know you were being serious.”

“I’m always serious when it comes to money.”

Winter Everest comes over and says, “This is such an exciting proposition. To know we can have professional artists leading kids’ classes ... if Bennett’s out, I’m in.”

“And if Bennett’s in?”

“We share everything so that means I’m in as well.” She smiles and adds, “You know how that is. It’s going to be a great space in support of the arts.”

More than I’ve announced, but that’s still to come ...

As soon as she joins her husband and her sister-in-law just out of earshot, I nudge Jackson and say, “Looks like you got some competition,” under my breath.

“I think you’re enjoying this a little too much.”

I finally turn to face him and wrap my arms around his neck. “I am, but I also know this is a good idea on several levels. This room will host world-class exhibits. The two studios will host our artists in residence and the classroom for the kids’ courses ...” Joy bubbles inside me, and I can hardly contain it. “It’s just a dream come true.”

Jackson’s hand covers my lower back, and he leans down to kiss that special spot behind my ear. I shiver under his touch, always needing him in ways that I imagined being consumed feels like. But now, it’s not just the physical

connection that I thrive off of. It's the emotional we've built over the months. It ... we, grow stronger every day, entangling our lives so much that there's no me or him. Only us.

When the front door opens, the excitement of the day continues. Grabbing Jackson's hand, I say, "I can't wait for you to meet them."

"Who's them?"

"Story. Story Salenger-Haywood. She's an incredible photographer. The hottest thing in photography in the city right now. She's quite the catch. I was lucky enough to meet her when I was at the other gallery." We start walking toward them. Quietly, I continue to fill him in, "She and her husband, Cooper, are interested in investing."

"Is there anyone not investing?"

I glance up at him and start laughing. "Are you feeling the heat, St. James?"

He tugs at his already loosened collar. "Kind of." I squeeze his hand. "Don't worry. There's a twist coming."

"Hi, I'm so glad you could make it." I embrace Story like I'm meeting a hero. I am in some ways, but she's so kind it's hard to remember that she's a sensation in the art world.

When we part, she says, "I was telling Cooper that we had to be a part of this. I think what you're doing is amazing for the community, but also, it's taking the art world in a new direction that's usually hidden behind tickets and curators."

"I haven't spilled the beans yet." I give her a wink, an insider's secret signal. I couldn't help sharing my vision with her when we met a few months back once I started plotting my career comeback. Brainstorming with her sent me on an all-new track. I can't wait to share it with everyone, including Jackson.

Yes, I kept a secret, but I wanted to do this all on my own and make him proud of me. Not that he's not, but this is the biggest dream I've gone after.

Story wraps her arm around her husband. “This is Cooper Haywood. Marlow Marché and ...”

Helping her out, I fill in with the smallest thing he is to me, “This is my boyfriend, Jackson St. James.” What he means to me is more than a word can describe, but we like titles and easy ways to classify for understanding. So boyfriend it is. *For now.*

Jackson shakes hands with Story while I greet Cooper. The guys shake each other’s hands while I wrap my arm with Story’s and walk her off to the side. I hear Cooper say, “St. James as in Manhattan Financial?”

“Formerly. That was my parents’ company. I work for myself these days. What do you do for a living?”

“Doctor. Pediatrician.”

“Impressive. Do you play basketball?”

“Poorly.” They chuckle, and knowing they’ll be thick as thieves soon enough, we leave them to their own devices. Story helps me retrieve the champagne from the back and asks, “Are you ready?”

I take a deep breath. Jackson’s favorite motivational phrase *go get ’em, tiger* crosses my mind, and I straighten my shoulders and nod. “More than ready.”

When we return to what will be the main gallery floor, I say, “Thank you all for coming today. I know you’re here to support me with your friendship and your encouragement and, more importantly, your wallet.” That earns me some guffaws. “I’d say, but seriously, but we all know I need your money,” I deadpan, and then laugh, finding Jackson across the room, arms crossed over his chest, proud as a peacock with a smile on his face.

I scan the room and see some of the greatest people in this world, here to show their love and support—Cammie and her adorable baby belly, Cade wrapped around the back of her, and Tealey leaning against Rad’s chest, his arm draped over her shoulders.

Then I take in all the love that being with Jackson has added to my life, not only from him but also his family—Natalie and Nick, Andrew and Juni, Tatum and Harrison. Love is bubbling inside me, and I feel contentment and a sense of security.

It's not just them, though. Seeing my dad and mom holding hands at the back of the room has me feeling even more emotional. I've spent my whole life trying to get their attention or make them proud. If possible, to do both at the same time.

This is the moment I've dreamed of for so long, and I'm making them come true. I conquered what I thought I couldn't and came out on the other side with so much more—fulfillment.

“I knew the moment I had the idea that this is what I'm meant to do with my life. So I brought you together not only as my family and friends and investors, but to share that I'll be putting my professional hat aside to give rise to a new pursuit. I believe that the arts are what puts humanity in our community. In times of struggle, in times of pain, we don't reach for a book on statistics. We reach for poetry, music, paintings, photography, and other art forms to comfort us. We reach for each other to see the good. The best of us is found in the words and colors, photos and notes.

“Art shouldn't only be accessible for the wealthy.” Tilting my head, I shrug. “No judgment. Art also isn't only for professionals who deem it worthy. Art is for everyone. That's why I want to create Art for the Community, and I need your donations to make that happen. *Yes*, donations for this *nonprofit*.”

My idea is received with silence, and I start to get nervous. *Guess I won't pursue comedy*. “You won't make any money, but you will give a budding artist a chance to follow their passion and a place for this community to seek a reprieve from the heavy in life, just like art's done for me. So, who's ready to write a check and make this happen?”

“I am.”

Everyone turns to the back of the room, and I lift on my toes to see my dad holding a check in the air. “Your mom and I think it’s a brilliant idea. And not just because we’re your parents. As your parents, we’re so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Mom.”

Tealey comes forward, wiping her eyes. She knows the road I’ve traveled with them to get to a place of respect and peace in our relationship. “Rad and I would like to invest as well.” Hugging me, she whispers, “I’m so proud of you.”

Everyone lines up to hand me checks and hugs in support. Story is in tears and leaning against Cooper. It’s incredible to have so many amazing friends in my life, all willing to step forward to make dreams come true.

It’s so overwhelming that I almost forget part two of the night’s festivities.

“Strong closing.”

Those oceanic eyes captivate me, and I lean into his arms. Kissing the top of my head, he says, “Did you rehearse?”

“I’m asking for millions of dollars. The right answer would be yes.”

“And your answer?”

“No,” I reply shyly, a little embarrassed as well, but juggling part one and part two of tonight’s festivities have taken up a lot of my time.

He pinches my chin between his fingers and tilts me up. “I’m so damn proud of you. You’re forging your own path.”

“I was inspired by a certain tall, dark, and extremely well-built force to be reckoned with.” Looping my arms around him, I say, “I never gave you enough credit for the career you’ve built.”

“That’s because you didn’t know what I did for a living.” He chuckles, swaying me by the hips.

I roll my eyes. “That’s not a lie.” Giggling, I then take a breath, and say, “But I mean it. I think you’re amazing. All

you've built, you did through hard work and determination. I can only hope our kids get those amazing qualities from you."

"Are we talking about the giant-head kids?"

Throwing my arms up, I shake my head as I start walking away. "I'm just going by what your family told me, and I'll admit, it scares me. I like my body."

My hand is caught, and I'm dipped right into the security of his arms. "Not so fast. I have a check for you."

"That feels like more than a check, St. James." I click my tongue and give him a wink.

"You caught me."

Still balancing precariously in his arms, I ask, "You sure about that? I feel pretty caught up right now."

"Good. Now that I have you just where I want you. What do you say we tie the knot?"

My heart stops beating, and my breath chokes in my throat. He asks, "'Marlow, are you okay?'"

"When you say knot, you mean in the nautical sense, right? We're sailing? You bought a yacht? We'll travel the world. We're twelve knots to the wind? That kind of thing, right?"

"No," he says, flashing that damn smirk that got me in bed the first time. This time, it just might knock me up. "I'm talking wedding bells, rings, and lots and lots of sex—"

"My parents are here."

Jackson glances up and then back at me. "Lots of honeymooning."

"As tempting as that sounds," I say, starting to feel the blood rushing to my head. "As much as I love this and you for asking me, what about the one-knee thing?"

"I didn't think you'd be into that. You're always talking about Tealey being the romantic."

Wiggling around, he gets the hint and rights me on my feet. “I was never with anyone who gave me those mushy feelings before, but you do, so I like romancing with you.”

The lines on the sides of his face lighten, and he laughs. “I like romancing with you, too. I messed up. Will you give me a second chance to get this right?” Who am I to ever deny him that opportunity?

“You didn’t mess up—” He drops down on one knee. “You mean right now? Okay. Perfect.” When he pulls a box from his pocket, I raise an eyebrow. “I knew there was more than a check in there.”

He chuckles. “Trust me, baby, I’m packing more than a ring box, too.”

I whisper, “My parents are listening.”

“Mine are, too.” I look up and see his parents standing with James, Nick, and Natalie, and wave. I adore them, but this is kind of embarrassing. Maybe I don’t need the big production. *I just need Jackson.*

But then I worry about Tealey. Barely moving my mouth, I whisper, “We can’t do this right now. It will take away from their moment.”

“Don’t worry. Rad and Tealey are in on the plan.”

My gaze whips to them, and they grin.

Aw. I have the best friends.

When I turn back to Jackson, I didn’t expect to see him getting emotional, but he can’t hide his feelings in his eyes. They give him away. He says, “The first time I saw you, you were the hottest ... most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on. Even now, you steal my breath away. But it wasn’t your looks that made me trip *head over feels* for you. It was your heart—so open and pure. Brave and kind. You may hide behind your looks sometimes, but you can’t hide who you are on the inside. I’m just the guy lucky enough to stand by your side. And if you agree to be my wife, Marlow Marché, I’ll stand proudly with you for the rest of our lives. Will you marry me?”

My tears had already fallen on the floor between us, but I lean and cover him in tears and kisses. “Yes. I’ll marry you, Jackson. I can’t wait to be your wife.”

He stands and kisses me, his arms coming around and holding me. I never want to leave this man’s arms again. He just does that to me. Consumes and I’ll happily let him for the rest of our lives.

Under resounding applause, he tilts to place a kiss on the shell of my ear, and then whispers, “And if you need stitches, I’ll make sure you get taken care of.”

I whack him. “You better.”

I hadn’t thought about the ring until he opens the box, and says, “I hope you love it.”

The delicate platinum band is modern and classic. I couldn’t have dreamed of a more gorgeous diamond than the radiant cut. “You don’t have to hope. I do. I love it so much.”

His smile easily competes with the carats. He slips it on my finger, and then says, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Staring at the brilliance of the diamond sparkling under the lights, I look back at him. Finding that forever more engaging. Engaging ... I giggle. I’m engaged. “Guess I’m a fiancée now.”

“You sure are.” His hand lowers to my ass. “But don’t worry, I plan to wife you up as soon as you’ll let me.”

Music drifts into the large space as a string quartet plays Vivaldi as they enter from the back room. Everyone turns their attention to them and then takes their places as previously instructed prior to the event. Except of course, Tealey and Rad, the bride and groom.

Holding my hand, Jackson says, “Perfect timing.”

“The band?”

“No.” He kisses my hand and the finger that now wears his ring. “Us.”

Never happier, I lean my head on his shoulder, and for the first time, I feel content in what the future holds. “I have to agree.”

EPILOGUE

Jackson

TWO MONTHS LATER ...

“I DID SOMETHING,” I confess, whispering from fear. Maybe it’s also the hour, just past midnight. Or maybe because I know I should have talked to my wife beforehand. We’d just gotten back from an extended honeymoon in the Maldives when the opportunity presented itself.

Call me weak, but I couldn’t resist. She was a thing of beauty, and I couldn’t pass up the chance to have her. But Marlow’s going to kill me. We said no secrets. She’s my wife and I should have talked to her first. That would have been the right thing to do.

It’s too late.

I did it.

Now I must face the consequences of my actions.

Marlow doesn’t move a millimeter and I can’t hear her breathing either. I nudge her. “Are you awake?”

“I am now,” she snarks.

“Why didn’t you say anything then?”

She shuffles onto her side to face me. “Sorry, I guess my husband making a confession in the dead of night that starts

with ‘I did something’ kind of freaks me out.”

I chuckle and slip down the mattress, rolling to my side to face her. “Sorry.” Laughter aside, I gulp, and just tell her, ripping it off like a Band-Aid. “I bought a house.”

“What?” Her body bolts upright, and she looks down on me. “What do you mean, you bought a house, Jackson?”

I’m debating if I should stay lying down tucked under the covers or sit up and face the wrath of Marlow. I stay under the covers. “It’s a good investment and a good transition—”

“Transition to what?”

“Transition into the next stage in life.”

“Jackson,” she huffs and falls back on the mattress. “You make it sound like we’re heading into retirement when I just turned thirty, like three weeks ago.”

“Right, but we’ve talked about kids, for instance. Where would they go? Sure, they can have the office, but then where will we go? I know you don’t want me at the office all the time, so I need a place to work at home. You need a place where you can get stuff done without always being at the gallery.”

I know I’m about to get a barrage of reasons for why this is a terrible idea and how I should’ve never done this without asking. And she’d be right on all of those rationales. But she’s for the here and now, our present life. I am planning for our future.

Before she has a chance to say anything, I continue, “I know you like this apartment, and we haven’t even lived here that long together, but—”

“I just moved from the other one, and now you want me to move to a new place. When do we get to settle?”

“That’s what I’m trying to do. That’s what this place will be for us. It’s a place with six bedrooms, an open kitchen, nice living room space, and a game room or it could be a screening room for your dad’s films. And wait till you see the primary bathroom.”

“What if I hate the bathroom?”

“Then we remodel. I don’t care if we tear it all out. I know you’re going to love this place if you just keep an open mind.” I hear her taking a deep breath, a sign I’ve learned that this means she’s not giving in. But she is giving me a chance. And that’s all I need.

“Okay, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll keep an open mind if you let me change anything I want.”

“Done deal. I already knew you’d change everything.”

“Huh.” She snuggles closer. I wrap my arm around her, holding her to me. A few breaths pass before she asks, “Where is it?”

Finally, she’s on the hook. This is the best part and what I’ve been dying to share with her. “You know how you always say it’s amazing that Natalie and Tatum live next door to each other, and how awesome it would be to live next to your best friend?”

Shoving off my chest, she hovers over me. “You did not?”

For a second, I can’t tell if that’s a good reaction or bad, so I say it slowly while nodding to help break the news, “I *did*.”

The lights drifting in through the windows is enough to see her eyes go wide. She tackles me into a hug. “I can’t believe you bought the house next to Cammie and Cade.”

Oh, shit ... wrong best friends as new neighbors. “Wait.”

She pushes up again, but in her happiness, she dips to kiss me, and then asks, “What?”

“I, uh ...” Shit, I don’t know how to fix this. Maybe I should go to Brooklyn and see if the neighbors will sell their house to me.

She swats me and then falls in a giggling mess to the bed next to me. “I’m kidding, St. James.” But then she pops up so fast that her hair falls from that twisted little fabric. “But you better mean Tealey and Rad.”

“Oh, God, I can breathe.” I puff out a harsh breath. She’s still laughing when I say, “I was really thinking I screwed up. So much so that I was already planning a trip to Brooklyn to buy the neighbor’s house.”

“How?” She’s suddenly not joking at all.

“I’d probably call a car. The subway would take too long ___”

“No, Jackson. I mean, how would you afford both?”

Caressing my cheek, I say, “*We*. It’s our money.”

“Half my trust went toward Art for the Community, and the other eight million went into a nest egg for our family. You own this apartment. You now own a house in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in the city.”

“I also own a building in Staten Island, a farm outside Nashville, and a lake house in Austin.”

“I. Hm ...” Lying down, she tucks her hands under her cheek. “I think we need to talk about finances soon. Yours specifically since you already know about mine.”

“I’m an open book. All you have to do is ask me. But to save you some trouble. I’ve made some really good investments, and the settlement from Morgenstern wasn’t too shabby either.”

She leans over and kisses me. “You know, it’s not money that impresses me.”

I watch, entranced by the sight of her tongue sliding over her bottom lip. “Oh, yeah? What impresses you, baby?”

She reaches under the covers and rubs her hand along my length. “Really big ...”

“Yes?” I swallow hard, wanting to kiss her so badly and start round two for the night. “Go on. Tell me what impresses you.”

Taking hold of me, she says, “Closets. Tell me about the closet space at the new house. Talk about a turn-on.”

“Mmm.” I roll on top of her, wedging her legs apart with my knee, and settle in exactly where I want to be. When her arms come around me, I say, “I’d rather show you because I promise you, I never disappoint.”

SIX MONTHS LATER ...

“YOU DO NOT DISAPPOINT, Jackson St. James.”

Hate to brag, but I’m so tempted to say I told you so. I don’t because I’m a grown man who can control himself.

She walks to the drawers under the backlit, glass front cabinets and opens them. On the third one, she stops and stares down at the contents. When she glances back at me over her shoulder, a mischievous grin arises. “You did not.”

“I did.”

“How many pairs of underwear are in here?”

I sit down in the chair and swivel. “Enough for me to have my way every night for the next two months.”

“You bought me sixty pairs of Agent Provocateur underwear?”

“Technically, I bought them for me to rip right off your fucking sexy body. There’s also a gift card so you can go buy anything you like in there.”

She laughs, picking up the card. Looking at me again, she says, “You know you didn’t have to do this. I’m perfectly fine buying my own panties to let you rip off me.”

“I wanted to. I keep my promises.”

Coming over to me, she sits on my lap and wraps around me. She kisses me and then says, “You certainly do. How’d I get so lucky?”

Running my hand over the scruff of my chin, I reply, “I think it was beer from a keg.”

“I remember champagne.” She kisses me again, and says, “Doesn’t matter how we got here. Only matters that we’re here.”

I caress her cheek and look into her eyes, still seeing her like it’s the first time and stealing my breath away. But now, it’s not her beauty that mesmerizes me. It’s how big she loves. She loves me with everything. The same way I love her, with my entire being and soul.

We used to take it day by day, but that’s not how we operate anymore. We’re two people who have made the commitment to be together and to be present, open, and honest in each other’s lives. Always. “I want to have kids with you, Marlow.”

She leans forward, taking a good look at me. “Right here in this closet?”

“No, *well*, maybe, but in life. I’m ready. What do you think?”

Reaching down, she digs through her handbag and then comes back up to settle on my lap again. Handing me a white stick, she points at two little pink lines. Kissing me, she then says, “I think we’re just getting started.”

TURN the page to read chapters from *Head Over Feels* and *Never Got Over You*, which are part of the *New York Love Stories* Series, and introduce you to these awesome characters.

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In addition to Marlow and Jackson's story in *It Started with a Kiss*, which is part of the *New York Love Stories* series, I think you'll enjoy reading the following books. They are all interconnected standalones that will grab your heart and carry it on the journey along with some familiar names. All are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited.

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The One I Want

Crazy in Love

Head Over Feels

It Started with a Kiss

HEAD OVER FEELS

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HEAD OVER FEELS PROLOGUE

Rad Wellington

Have you ever met one of those couples who tell their meet-cute story while finishing each other's sentences and sharing every detail of how they fell in love?

It's annoying. Am I right?

It's all surface and no substance. That's not how my brain works.

Facts.

Figures.

Substance.

Emotions have no place in my life. *Never have.* So this is not *that* kind of story.

In fact, this story starts with a blindside ... *mine, to be precise.*

Even though I used to laugh at the notion of love, Cupid's arrow shot me right in the ass just before I landed on it. All thanks to a girl.

Tealey Bell.

Just to get this out of the way, we were never meant to be. At least not more than the friends we became. Enter exhibit one as evidence: *how we met.*

It's a preposterous story, one with a twist I never saw coming—namely, a golden-haired beauty on top of me. Look, it's not unusual to have a woman land on me. They struggle to keep their hands off me, but let's keep that between us. I'm already fighting a playboy reputation, so no need to add fuel to that fire, even if it is true.

I may have been an innocent bystander to her stumbling ways, but I don't believe in accidents. We may not be meant to be, but we were meant to meet. I'll never forget how her cheeks flamed red, matching the strawberries squashed between us. There was something about her being sorry as I

momentarily got lost in her blue eyes. That is, until her gaze lowered to the mess on my shirt, and she said, “Bam, and here we are.”

Bam is an understatement.

Seven years later, I still haven't recovered. I hate that I stare at her when she's not looking, and that jealousy bubbles up when I meet her dates or, worse, *boyfriends*. I hate that her laughter calls to me from across a room and how disappointment stabs me when her smile isn't directed at me.

Want to know what I really hate?

That I didn't tell her how I felt when I had the chance.

But a promise is a promise.

Unfortunately, that's what got me into this mess, and now I'm caught in the middle. To fully understand the predicament I now find myself in, we need to rewind. Not to the beginning, but to the moment I promised one friend a favor and fell *head over heels* for the other.

HEAD OVER FEELS CHAPTER 1

Radcliffe Wellington

(You can call me Rad. All my good friends do.)

“SUCH AN ODD ACHIEVEMENT for a guy who breaks up marriages.” Tealey holds the crystal award in her hands. *My award. One of the three Big Apple’s Most Eligible Bachelor honors I’ve received. I keep the others at home because I don’t want to boast too much.*

“I don’t break up marriages.” I temper my defensiveness, noticing she couldn’t care less about the Klein & Sable award right next to it. I’m pretty proud of winning my law firm’s top honor this last year.

Trying to act casual by leaning back in my leather chair, I kick my feet up on my desk, and say, “They’re already broken when a client walks through that door.”

Relationships are complicated. I’ve traveled that road before—three times total. They lasted anywhere from two weeks to two months max. The frivolous notion of love never factored into those relationships, so no hearts were broken. *Particularly not mine.*

For me, dating is about companionship, something I rarely crave. And since sex satisfies my physical needs, it’s easy to separate the two. I have a contacts list in my phone that goes for miles, and the one thing they don’t need is dinner and small talk. Their needs, just like mine, are met in the bedroom. No intimacy required. No dates scheduled. No food is involved unless they’re into that kind of thing. **winks**

No hassles.

No strings.

No heartache.

Yet the woman in front of me, the only person I’d consider changing my current dating lifestyle for, can only—*will only*—ever remain my friend.

Tealey holds the trophy in the air. “It’s heavy, like it holds the weight of bachelorhood inside.” Her laughter is light, almost as if for herself.

I anchor my feet back on the floor. “I don’t know about the weight of bachelorhood, but it definitely holds my reputation.”

“Serial dater?” She lifts a brow. “Commitment-phobe?”

I could be offended, but she’s right on the money. “That’s fair.”

She smiles, her eyes darting from the award and then back to me. “What do they base this on?” she asks. “Really.”

“I don’t know. Reputation probably plays a part. Financials. Looks, maybe?”

She’d make the worst attorney in the world. She’s unable to hide her emotions since she wears her heart on her sleeve. Her displeasure causes her to purse her lips and narrow her eyes as if the award in her hands personally offended her. “You’re more than connections and financials, Rad.”

I quirk a smile. “Didn’t know you cared, Bell.”

She rolls her eyes but quirks a smile as she sets the award back on the shelf. It’s slightly askew, similar to how she leaves me feeling. “Of course, I do. We’re friends.”

I sit back and take her in. She’s as beautiful as she was the day she fell on top of me seven years ago. Her sweetheart face is a bit fuller, her hair a little lighter. It’s long again after cutting it to make our friend Cammie feel better about a bad haircut.

But that’s Tealey—the woman who came back into my life five days after our fateful encounter when my friend Cade started dating her friend Cammie, and our two groups merged into one.

Any hopes of dating Tealey Bell were squashed back then, just like those strawberries between us.

“I still don’t get why that stuff is important.”

“It’s not. The title is utter nonsense, but the perks are nice,” I say, trying not to let myself focus too much on her.

Our eyes stay locked for a few seconds before she averts hers again. “By perks, I assume that means having your choice of date every night of the week?”

This time, I sigh, tilt back in my chair, and fold my arms behind my head. “I wouldn’t say *every* night, but it’s good to have options.”

“Options. *Okay ...*”

“It’s for charity, so how can I say no?”

“No,” she replies dryly but then grins. “Just like that. It’s easy. Anyway, there are other ways to give back to your community than to ...” Her brows pinch together. “What did you have to do to win this?”

“Have sex with prominent donors.”

“What?” Her eyes dart to mine, the soft blues brighter in the afternoon sunlight flooding my office. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“That I need to tell you says everything.”

Amusement dances in her smile. Returning to the award, she runs a finger down the side of it. “The phrase *most eligible* downplays the fact that you’re not looking to become ineligible.” Her brow furrows, displeased. “It’s like false advertising to the women who think they can snag you.”

“What exactly does snagging entail?” I’m an attorney, not a detective, so I have no idea where she’s leading this conversation. I’m enjoying our chat but also wading through until she opens up about the real reason she’s here. I know for a fact that Tealey didn’t drop by to talk about my accolades, and she didn’t just happen to be in the neighborhood, considering how far apart our neighborhoods are.

“Weren’t you the one who said you prefer the wrong woman, so you have a built-in excuse not to call her the day after your tawdry affair?”

She's good with the details. Maybe she wouldn't make such a bad attorney after all.

"That was years ago, and tawdry is not a word synonymous with me. I'm top-notch and more than generous if you know what I mean."

I expect a laugh or knowing grin at the very least, but she silently crosses the room to look out the window instead. Her gaze lengthens into the distance of the Manhattan skyline. It's unlike her not to volley when I give her the perfect setup.

When the silence extends, I notice the change in her demeanor—all lightness being held hostage by the thoughts that appear to consume her. I sit forward again and pick up a pen. "It's quite a trek from Brooklyn for a one-hour lunch break. Anything specific bring you by?"

Hesitant, she exhales slowly. "Yes."

Her apprehension concerns me. She's not usually one to hide her feelings. "What's going on, Tealey?"

"Rad?" With her Bahama blue eyes set on mine, she drags her teeth over her lip. "I need ... I need you."

The pen snaps, causing us both to look down at the ink on my hands. "Shit."

She rushes to grab a tissue from the box on the shelf and then to me. "What happened?" Taking my hand in hers, she starts rubbing my palm to no great avail.

Stopping her by stilling her hand, I ask, "You need me?"

"Yes, I need someone I can trust," she replies, returning to the distraction of my hands. Peeking at me from under long lashes, she adds, "A lawyer, and you're a lawyer."

Was it foolish to even consider the idea of her meaning anything more than needing my legal skills? Probably. Yet, because of the fool I am, I stupidly believed this was some long-overdue opportunity to ... *to what exactly? Clenching my jaw, I run through what the hell I thought this could be—a hookup, a precursor to a date?* The whole situation with Tealey is impossible.

Fucking fool.

I switch gears, burying my personal feelings. “Why do you need an attorney?”

Losing hope for cleaning my hands, she looks around the office as if her nerves have taken over. “Anything you can offer, advice or otherwise, I’ll take.”

“I’ll help if I can. What’s your concern?”

Whispering, she adds, “Preferably free.” Embarrassment taints her cheeks as she drags her eyes away from mine. “I can’t offer much in return—”

“Hey?” When she looks my way, somberness washes over her usually happy expression. “What’s going on, Tealey?”

“I need a divorce.”

As if the needing *me* didn’t shock me enough, my jaw slacks as I realize I was wrong. She’d absolutely kick my ass in court by the way she throws tidbits out like bombs. I’m so confused by this curveball that I stumble through my next words. “I didn’t know, know you were married.”

“I’m not.” *Thank fuck.* Her hand rests against her chest, and she adds, “It’s not for me. It’s for someone I’m working with.”

“A case?”

Her eyes lower, dragging the corners of her lips down with them. “Yes, a woman I’m working with at the social services office. She has two kids. I found a place for them to stay for a short time, a safe place, but we’re trying to help her move to Philadelphia, where her mother lives. Her mother can give her the help she needs with the kids while she works and then after school.” Her expression is as soft as her tone. “She needs a divorce and permission to take the kids out of state.”

I’m not generally an overly emotional guy. Many years of training myself to bury those reactions in court have served me well. But every now and then, my chest tightens, like it is now. She’s so damn kindhearted. “You’ve never come to me before —”

“Misty Connor, that’s her name. She’s gotten terrible advice. One attorney told her to stay in the marriage and work it out for the kids.” Leaning forward, she flattens her palms on the desk as if she has no other choice. “He’s ... awful, Rad. I can’t go into the details, but she needs this divorce. She needs to be free from him. These kids need a stable home, and she and her mother can provide that for them.”

Tealey’s heart of gold shines through her plea. And I want to help her. I’d do anything to help Tealey, but it’s not as simple as she thinks. “I hear what you’re saying, but it’s—”

“*I need you, Rad.* She needs you, and I need to do whatever I can to help her. I know this is a big ask. And ...” Giving her time, she swallows, and then adds, “Her kids deserve a chance at a better life.”

Shifting in my chair, I study the frown shaping her lips in a way they should never be and the sadness darkening her irises. Blowing out a breath, I look away and run my hand through my hair when my chest tightens. I remind myself to maintain a neutral expression and remain professional. “I hear what you’re saying, but it’s complicated to force a divorce on someone who doesn’t want it. It can be a lengthy and emotionally drawn-out process. I’m assuming he won’t sign anything if she gave it to him, correct?”

“She spent the night in the hospital when she once mentioned it.”

Rage strikes like lightning. “Fuck.”

“I know.” She sighs through the defeat coating her tone.

Stay professional. Shuffling papers around on my desk, I distract myself from looking at her. I won’t be able to handle the tears wavering on the edge of her lids if they fall. Seeing a woman cry is my weakness. *My mom* ... I remember her tears too well. Tealey crying? No. I can’t have that either. “Is there a restraining order in place?”

“She filed, but it was denied.”

I should really have Ashley in here taking notes, but this is personal, so I pull a legal pad from my drawer and jot a few

things down. “It shouldn’t have been denied if there’s a paper trail documenting the abuse.” I look back up. “He’s—”

“He’s awful, Rad.”

With our eyes locked on each other, I sense the words—fear, danger, and concern—she harbors inside but won’t say. “I’ll help her.” I nod before setting the pen down before me and twisting it between my fingertips. “I take a handful of pro bono cases a year when I can. It’s all I have time for lately. I’ll take this one but on one condition.”

“Anything.”

“Get rid of her current legal aid. Whoever was assigned to her case is doing a shit job. I’m not interested in schooling someone on how to win a case. I’m interested in helping your client.”

Tealey’s shoulders ease as a small smile appears. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“You’ve done more than you realize. You’ve given me hope.” She moves to her bag, pulls out a file, and sets it on the desk. “I brought this with me. I can get an e-copy for you if you prefer.”

“I hate sounding like, well, an attorney since we’re friends, but I have to keep things legal. I’ll send over a contract. She’ll need to sign it to retain me.”

Worry creases the corners of her eyes. “Free of charge, right?”

“Yes.”

Relief colors her expression with bright eyes, and a hint of that pink in her cheeks kisses her skin. *Why does she have to be so fucking beautiful?* “Thank you, Rad. What can I do for you in return?”

“Nothing. It’s fine,” I reply, glancing down. “Really, it’s no big deal.” I’d never require a favor in return, especially not from her, but my mind goes to the gutter because yeah ... *I’m an asshole*. A few good deeds can’t change that fact.

She adjusts the strap of her bag over her head and settles it on her hip. “You’re busy, and I’ve already taken up too much of your time. I need to get back to work before I’m late, and let’s face it, I’ve already made this awkward by asking for a favor I can’t return. I’m going to take the win and get out of your hair.”

Our eyes connect one last time before she opens the door. Barely filling half the doorway, she says, “It was ...”

I nod. “It was.”

Smiles are exchanged before she turns and runs right into a Pepto-pink suit. “Marlow? Hey? Hi.”

Just what I didn’t need today. A groan rumbles through me.

“*Helllooo.*” The most boisterous and vain of our group, Marlow Marché arrives like she’s late for a red-carpet event. She may annoy me sometimes, but there’s also something strangely charming and captivating about her that draws people in. I just wish she wasn’t making a show of things in my office. Marlow asks, “What are you doing here, Tealey?”

“I stopped by to visit Rad.”

Marlow laughs, the sound echoing around the office. “Are you two having a party without me?” She nudges Tealey with an elbow and another giggle. “Meeting in the middle of the day is how rumors get started.”

“No need for gossip,” Tealey responds and then shrugs. “I just needed to talk to Rad.” Glancing at me, she smiles softly. “Thanks again. Call me later, Marlow.”

“I will,” Marlow says, nipping our friend’s heel with the door as she exits. “Bye, Teals.” As soon as the door is closed, Marlow leans against the back of it, her eyes piercing me from across the room. “When did the two of you get so chummy?” she asks, an insinuation embedded in the question.

I’d like to ask her why she’s here, but I already know. A visit from Marlow only means one thing: she wants something. “We’re friends,” I reply casually. *Why do I feel like we were doing something wrong?*

“Yeah, but not usually outside of Jackson, Cammie, Cade, and me.”

“It’s no big deal. She just wanted to talk about some stuff.”

She sags in relief and then pushes off the door. “Phew, I’m so glad she told you. That secret was killing me.”

Even though I’ve known her as long as Tealey, I’ve never understood how those two became best friends with their night and day personalities. She struts toward me like she’s walking a Paris runway, and I watch the whirlwind of a woman as her emotions twist around her, ready to usurp me into her drama, and I brace myself. “Told me what?”

“That she needs help.”

It’s not like Tealey to share individual cases with the group. Today with me makes sense since she needed help, but I’m surprised she’d tell the others. “Yes, we discussed the situation.”

Marlow perches on the chair across from me. “Good. I was afraid I would have to get involved, and I just don’t have time. I have appointments at the art gallery today.”

“You don’t have time to help a friend?” Taking the file Tealey left with me, I open it. “Your best friend, I might add.”

“How could I possibly help? Have her sleep on the couch for months on end? I offered her money, but you know Tealey. She has a saint’s heart.”

Why would Tealey be sleeping on her couch? “Wait, what?”

She looks at me like I’m dense. “Tealey’s moving to Texas,” she says as if I have comprehension problems. *Maybe I do.*

Tealey.

Texas?

What the hell is she talking about?

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NEVER GOT OVER YOU

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NEVER GOT OVER YOU CHAPTER 1

Natalie St. James

I'm the first to admit I have no business taking another shot.

Especially after the past two.

But what's a girl to do when a room full of strangers is chanting my name and a particularly wild best friend places the shot hat on my head along with a small glass of liquor in my hand?

I drink.

In a little hole-in-the-wall hidden from the main street in Avalon on Catalina Island, I down the liquid like a champ, then promptly proceed to fall from grace, also known as the barstool.

My eyes close, bracing for impact, except ... someone catches me just before landing. With my breath caught in my throat, I hang in the balance of arms made of steel and open my eyes.

Laughter fades away with any drunken shame that threatened as I stare into the soulful eyes of a stranger.

"Hi," whispers the future hero of my dirty dreams ... *oh, wait.*

Maybe I'm unconscious? Maybe I was knocked out cold, and I'm dreaming. I blink. Why are my eyes open? Letting my lids fall, I keep them closed long enough to pray, "Please let him be real. If he's not, I'm begging you to leave me in this dream a little longer." My lids drift back open to find him still staring at me.

"Are you okay?"

"Perfect," I reply. *I think.* I'm not sure if I actually voice the response or not. I feel pretty damn perfect in his arms, though, the response still fitting in any circumstance that involves me, him, and those arms wrapped around my body.

Naked would be nice, but I'll save that for our second date.

His brow furrows, but a smile curls the corners of his lips.

The fog of alcohol clouds my mind, creating a heavy blanket on my brain. Regardless, I try to calculate the odds of a ridiculously sexy stranger—the exact man I’d craft if Create-a-Hottie was an actual thing—being in the right place at the right time to catch me if I fell.

It’s impossible, so the only logical answer to this conundrum is that either he is the best college graduation gift ever or I’m dreaming. “How are you so hot?” I ask, worried he’ll disappear in a puff of smoke and mirrors. Clamping my eyes closed again, I whisper, “Dear Lord, please don’t let him be a mirage.”

“I’m real.” *Yes!*

Does that mean my friend set up this encounter for me? She’s always been a great gift giver. It is our job, after all. I squint one eye open, biting my bottom lip. “*Mm, so real,*” I purr. *Too perfect to be real, though. I must be dreaming.*

His grin creates dimples that could compete with the Grand Canyon. *How did I know I liked dimples enough to add them into this delirium?* I don’t know, but score one for me.

“I think you’re going to be okay,” my dream man says, his voice as delectable as his face.

Wait, what? No. “As for me being okay, not so fast, buddy. No need to rush toward the waking hours. Anyway ...” I drape my hand across my forehead. “Dream or real, I’m going to need mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.”

His dimples dig deeper. “Is that so?”

“So right,” I pant.

“Do you think I should call a paramedic?”

“That’s a little kinky for me, but if you’re into it ...” I press my lips into a pretty little pout to seriously consider this twist. “Nah. Changed my mind. I only want you. Just the two of us resuscitating each other.”

“You want me?” he asks, surprise tingeing his tone as he cocks an eyebrow. He readjusts me in his strong, manly arms.

“Circling back to the real part, you do realize you’re not dreaming, right?”

I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck, wanting to melt in his arms again. Totally obsessed with how I fit so perfectly, I pull him closer and hold tight. “You do realize you’re stupidly attractive, right?”

He chuckles, his grin lifting higher on one side.

That smirk would totally get me into bed, given what it’s doing to me while dreaming. I close my eyes again. “I’m ready.”

“For what?” His deep, dulcet tones vibrate through my body.

“Resuscitation. I’m ready. Resuscitate away.”

When nothing happens, I peek one eye open. He’s still staring at me with the smirk I’m ready to kiss off his sexy face, and whispers, “I don’t think you need me—”

“Trust me.” Opening both eyes, I also run my fingers through his shiny, chestnut-hued hair, taking in the feel of the soft strands. “I really, *really* need you.”

When he leans down, I prepare my lips with a quick lick before meeting his ... or at least, that’s the direction I hope this dream is going.

“I was thinking—”

“Yes?” My gaze floats from his mouth to his eyes again.

“We’ve been at this a while. Maybe we should get you off the floor?” His head tilts to the side, and the industrial lights above him shine bright in my eyes, almost like a place of business, a restaurant, or a bar would hang. My senses begin to return, starting with the stench of old beer scenting the air.

“Yuck.” Next comes a wave of cedar-y cologne and salty air. That’s a scent I approve of, but that’s when something else hits me. *What if I’m not dreaming?*

“Up you go,” he says, shadowing me again as he tries to lift me to my feet.

I don't budge. "Dream or not, I quite enjoy being horizontal with you."

"Are you always this, *should we say*, flirtatious?" he asks, laughter punctuating his question.

"Not when I'm awake, no."

As if he couldn't be more gorgeous, little lines whisker from the outer corners of his eyes, enticing me to drag my fingertip along each one. I don't, but I want to. "Are your eyes hazel or brown? It's hard to tell in this light."

"Brown."

"Brown does them a disservice. A kaleidoscope of colors is trapped inside them. I'm going to need a closer look in the sunshine."

"The sun will be setting soon."

"Then we should hurry."

A restrained chuckle wriggles his lips. "You can stare into my eyes, but I have to warn you, once you do, you'll fall madly in love with me. And I'm leaving tomorrow, so if we're falling in love, you better get to the loving part since you've already fallen."

"Good point."

"Get up, Natalie," my best friend says, rudely barging into my fantasy and peering at me from beside his shoulder. "The floor is filthy! Now you're going to have to wash your hair."

My eyes shift her way. "Please go away and let me have this one little dream, Tatum."

Snapping her fingers twice in front of my face has me jerking my head back. "You're wide awake and making a fool of yourself."

Noise from the crowded bar filters into my consciousness. Instead of looking around to confirm, I stare into Dreamy's eyes a moment longer and then exhale as embarrassment becomes reality, returning me to the present. "You're real, aren't you?"

A slow nod accompanies a smug expression.

The heat of my cheeks has me pressing my hands to them in hopes of cooling my skin down. “Do you mind helping me up?”

“I need to know something first.”

“What?” I ask, knowing I should leave before I’m sober enough to realize how absurd I’ve been behaving.

Still holding me in his arms as if I’m light as a feather, he leans closer with his eyes on my mouth. When his gaze rises to meet mine, he asks, “Did you fall in love?”

My heart rate spikes, and the sound of it beating whooshes in my ears. Maybe I did hit my head because I swear at that moment, the one with my dream man so close I can kiss him or even lick him if I want, I can answer honestly.

Despite all the physical signs of me feeling otherwise, I reply, “You know. I think it’s time for me to go.” *Before the last few minutes really sink in.*

My feet are set on solid flooring while his hands remain on the underside of my forearms to steady me. Like the perfect gentleman. “I wish—”

“Nat,” Tatum says under her breath. She moves in and grabs my hand.

“What?”

Her hair catches the light when she flips it over her shoulder, an exhausted sigh following right after. Every blonde needs a brunette bestie, and Tatum Devreux was destined to be mine since our mothers exchanged silver spoons from Tiffany’s as baby shower gifts. I’m not exactly the calm to her wild ways, but she can out party me any day.

“A party on a yacht down in the harbor. We have to go now, though.”

Panic rises in my chest. I know I should want to hightail it out of here to save myself from further mortification, but I don’t want to go. I’m perfectly content right here.

I'm not shy about it. I look straight at him, but I'm smacked with a dose of candor I wasn't ready for, my ego crushed under his expression that mirrors pity. Now I regret not making a quick getaway when I had the chance.

My stomach plummets to the floor I was just hovering above. "Yeah, it's time to go," I tell Tatum, my hand pressing to my belly in an attempt to keep myself together. My hand is grabbed, and I'm tugged after her as she calls, "Ciao, darlings."

I turn back to catch Mr ... *Dreamy, Smug, Sexy, Pity-er of Drunk Girls* watching me. I'm left with two options to make an escape without further incident. I *could* blame the craziness on a head injury, or I *could* just leave. "So ... thanks," I say awkwardly as I back toward the door. *Yes. Choosing the latter.*

"Are you sure you're okay?" His voice carries over the lively crowd.

I dust the dirt off my ass. "I'm fine. Guess I'm not a tequila girl."

"You drank rum," he replies with a lopsided smile that could sweep me off my feet again if I'm not careful.

"Rum. Tequila. Same difference." I wave off the idea because it doesn't really matter. "I'm not good with liquor." That should settle it, but I make the mistake of daring to look into his eyes again. The five feet between us virtually disappears, and mentally, I'm back in his arms again, reading the prose that makes up his features. It would take me days to interpret, capturing not only his thoughts but a history that's worn in the light lines. He makes it hard to look away.

Stepping forward, he raises his hand and then lowers it to his side again as conflict invades his expression. "You sure you're okay? You might have a concussion."

I can't say I'm not touched by his concern. Grinning, I ask, "Does a concussion involve my heart?"

"What's happening with your heart?"

"It's beating like crazy."

Smiles are exchanged. “I think you’re experiencing something else, but if you’d like me to call an ambulance—”

“Nope,” Tatum cuts in, yanking me toward the door again, and laughs. “He’s cute, but we don’t want to miss the yacht.” She whips the straw hat off me and tosses it to him.

I twist to look back. “Thanks for the lift. *Literally.*”

“Anytime,” he says with his eyes set on mine. When he shoves his hands in his pockets, he looks like he’s posing for a Ralph Lauren ad. Tan. Rugged good looks. Tall. Those dreamy eyes and a grin that call me back to him. But life isn’t a dream. It’s time to return to reality.

Goodbye, dream man. It was nice hanging with ... onto you.

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THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading my books!

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XOXO,

Suzie

Love always to my world - my family <3