



Loan Shark Love

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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LOAN SHARK LOVE

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 298

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

LOAN SHARK LOVE

I need money and I need it fast.

My dad's bakery depends on it and there's only one man I can think of that might be able to help.

Grey Kingston.

He calls himself a moneylender. What he really means is loan shark but I'm in no position to be picky.

I'm expecting an old weathered man when I come knocking on his office door, and Grey Kingston is twice my age, but one look at him and I'm already falling hard.

He's tall and lean, but his shoulders are wide, with his silver-flecked brown hair and more money than he knows what to do with.

There's no way a man like him would ever be interested in a girl like me.

I'm twenty-one, curvy, and I'm still a virgin. I can't imagine he finds me pretty. No man or boy has ever looked twice my way unless it's to hurl insults about my weight.

But then why does he look at me with heat in his eyes when I plead with him to give me a loan.

Grey looks like a man who knows what he wants but does he really want me? And if he does want me can I accept the dangers that come with loving a loan shark?

** Loan Shark Love is an insta-everything standalone instalove romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Rose

Rain lashes across my body as I run. Lightning flashes, crisscrossing the dark sky.

The sidewalk is slippery under my sneakers, but I can't stop. I have to get to the little building at the corner of Carlisle and Roe. Thunder rumbles, shaking the windows of the skyscrapers a few streets down. My clothes are dripping wet, and I'm soaked to the bone from the rain. I can hear my heart beating in my ears.

The building looks like something out of a horror movie.

My hands are slick as they grasp the cold handle, and I open the big wooden door with an ominous creak. It closes with a heavy thud, the noise making me cringe.

I wouldn't have come if there was any other choice, but there isn't one.

A woman dressed in a dark sweater points to the back of the room, where a door waits with an engraved, golden nameplate. Mr. Grey Kingston, Moneylender.

Inside, the most beautiful man I've ever seen waits for me behind a desk.

He's tall and lean, but his shoulders are wide. He runs a long-fingered hand through his silver-flecked brown hair, and I

stand in my dripping clothes. Sharp green eyes look me over, and I feel hyper-aware of my body.

There's no way a man like him would ever be interested in a girl like me. I'm twenty-one, curvy, and I'm still a virgin. I can't imagine he finds me pretty.

"You're Rose Sinclair," he says, in a deep voice that has my toes curling.

"Yes, that's me," I say, nodding. I can feel myself growing nervous.

Grey Kingston is twice my age, but one look at him and I want to be by his side forever. His muscles ripple under his expensive-looking white button-up, and his chest hair dark and curly, has my fingers itching to touch it and run my hand over his hard chest.

"Take a seat," Grey says in his intoxicating voice. He's a gorgeous man.

There's a well-worn leather seat in front of the desk, and I do as he asks of me.

"I just wanted to..." I begin. I'm unsure of what to say to sound serious enough.

"Here," Grey says, handing me a towel from behind the desk. "You're soaked."

My cheeks heat. He probably doesn't want me getting his pricey furniture wet because some random, overweight girl decided to forget her umbrella in the rain.

"It's raining," I say and immediately feel ridiculous. "I mean, that's why I'm wet."

"I gathered that much," Grey answers. He raises an eyebrow, still looking me over.

I have never been so attracted to someone in my entire life, and I'm already under his spell. Grey is ridiculously manly and gorgeous. I run the towel he gave me quickly over my sundress and through my long, wavy strawberry blonde hair. When I look up, Grey is staring at me with intent, and I feel nervous in his gaze.

“I’m here on behalf of my father,” I tell him, raising my chin. “I talked to your secretary on the phone, and she said you could help me.”

“How old are you?” he asks me, watching me with those sharp green eyes.

I don’t know why he’s asking, but I don’t want to mess this up.

“I’m twenty-one,” I tell him confidently. “I’m old enough to do this without help.”

Grey laughs, but he’s not mocking me. His eyes crinkle at the corners, and I wonder if this flip-flop feeling in my belly is what it feels like to be in love with someone.

“I admire your bravery,” he says. “I like someone who’s willing to do anything for the people they love. How much do you need, Ms. Sinclair?”

“It’s that easy?” I ask the gorgeous man in front of me, dumbfounded.

A week ago, when my dad told me with tears in his eyes that the bakery would close its doors come month’s end, I swore that I would save it. I grew up in Cake O’Clock, and I was almost sure that I had learned how to walk on those floors. My mom spent her last days there, and I couldn’t see it fall on my watch.

Grey Kingston’s long fingers tapping over the desk bring me back to the present.

“None of this will be easy, Ms. Sinclair,” he says, keeping his voice low.

“You can uh,” I begin, feeling my cheeks burn. “You can call me Rose if you want.”

Grey stares at me for a moment, and then he nods, and I think I can see the tiniest smile across his soft-looking lips. He pulls a file from one of his drawers.

“Rose,” he repeats, glancing up at me. I decide that I like the way my name sounds rolling off his tongue. He continues, “A loan of twenty thousand dollars will need to be repaid within

thirty days. That's as far as I can extend it, I'm sorry to say. I wish I could do more."

"I'm sorry..." I stutter, sitting forward in my chair. "Did you say within thirty days?!"

My mind is in shambles, but I don't want to look immature in front of Grey. That's the last thing that I want. But there's no way I can pay back that much in that short amount of time. It was a miracle I could find a loan shark to lend me the money in the first place.

"Let me be honest with you," Grey says, splaying his hand over the table. "This is a nasty business. Are you quite sure this is what you want? Is it worth it to you?"

"It's worth it to me. It's worth absolutely everything I can give and more," I answer him. My voice comes out steady, and I'm proud that it doesn't waver.

I've heard stories of Grey Kingston and who he is as a person and a businessman. I've been told that he's ruthless, and he doesn't make exceptions, not for anyone. But I can't think of anything but my growing attraction to him when I'm in his presence. I can't find it within me to be afraid of him or to be wary.

The thunder rumbles, and lightning flashes across the severe features of Grey's face, emphasizing those stunning good looks.

"I really admire your bravery," he tells me, and I can clearly see that he means what he says. "Do you want your loan in cash, or would you like a check?"

A thrill of fear goes through me at the thought of leaving. I don't want to be away from Grey, and my wild imagination convinces me that he doesn't want me to go either. I remember his question and I consider it for a moment.

"I want it in cash," I tell him confidently, nodding. "I don't want my dad to know where the money came from. He might not take it if he finds out I was here."

I want to kick myself. What I said sounded like an insult to Grey, but he only smirks.

“I understand,” he tells me with a nod. He stands from his chair. “I’ll be right back.”

Grey leaves, disappearing into a back room where I assume he’s going to get money out of a safe for me. There’s a stack of papers on the desk for me to sign.

It’s cold in the office, and I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself in the chill.

“Here,” someone says from behind me. “I wasn’t even using it anyway.”

I turn as a thick, wool coat is wrapped over my shoulders. The secretary from the front room has come through the door. Her face is slim, and her body is willowy under her thick sweater. Freckles dot her straight nose, and her green eyes are familiar somehow. Long, red hair is in a braid down her back, swaying gently.

“Oh, thank you.” I look up at her gratefully, keeping the coat closed around me.

“I’m Natalie,” she says, offering a pale hand for me to shake.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I answer, shaking her hand. “I’m Rose Sinclair.”

“Natalie, you should be watching the door,” Grey tells her in a firm voice when he comes back with a bank bag. “Make sure it’s locked. We don’t need intrusions.”

“Yes, dear brother,” Natalie tells him, rolling her green eyes.

I look up at him in surprise when she leaves. “She’s your sister?”

“My half-sister, yes,” Grey says with a nod. “A product of poor choices.”

“I heard that!” Natalie yells from the front, but Grey is grinning, so I assume it’s their usual banter. “I was a product of poor choices and *alcohol*, thank you!”

Grey shakes his head. He looks at me. “Can I ask why you’re doing this?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t have any other choice. I work at the library, so I would never have enough money even after a year. But I can’t let the bakery go under.”

“Which bakery is it?” Grey asks me, sitting on the edge of the desk. “Forgive me if I’m intruding; I’m just curious about you, Rose. I hope you don’t mind.”

My heart picks up speed, and I tuck the thick bank bag into my large tote bag. I can’t let myself think that Grey could be interested in anything about me. If I’ve learned anything through the years of bullying about my weight, it’s that men usually don’t want me the way they might want my slim friends.

There was no way this man was interested in me.

“Um, it’s called *Cake O’Clock*,” I tell him, giving him a shy smile.

“I think I’ve seen it on my runs,” Grey says with a nod. He looks appropriately impressed. “It’s usually just too packed with people to even go inside.”

Suddenly all I can think of is Grey Kingston running shirtless by my window. I picture his glistening muscles and the V-cut that would undoubtedly trail into his running shorts.

I realize that I’ve fallen into my daydream, and I startle, blushing.

“He has enough business, but most of the buildings on that street have been sold to the same family,” I answer him finally. “They raised the rent, so he’s out of luck to keep it going every month. It’s ridiculous, to be honest.”

I’m sure he can hear the anger in my voice, but I don’t care at this moment.

“He could just buy the building,” Grey offers, considering. “Then he wouldn’t have to pay the rent every month, and it would just be his. That seems the best way.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Yeah, that would be amazing. My dad is five months behind in rent, though.” I don’t want to

think about it, but it's cathartic talking it out. "They're taking the whole place from him at the end of the month."

"That's a damn shame," Grey says, rubbing a hand over the shadow on his jaw. "I really hate to see a good place go under."

"It won't," I say quickly. "At least not as long as I have anything to say about it."

Grey raises an eyebrow, and when I stand in my wet clothes, offering him the jacket that Natalie gave me, he just shakes his head.

"I have to give it back to Natalie," I tell him in confusion. "Should I just take it right to her? I was going to leave it with you."

He tucks the jacket warm around me. He stands in front of me, and his woodsy scent is like coming home.

I want to close my eyes and breathe him in.

"It's mine," he tells me. "You can keep it. Be careful out there, Rosie."

The nickname makes me feel tingly. I know that this is the man I want. I need Grey Kingston like I need to breathe.

But all I can do is stand in front of him and gawk.

"I will," I tell him finally, and when I turn to leave, he looks disappointed.

I can feel him watching me as I walk to the front room. It's almost as if some kind of invisible cord has tied us together, and I can feel its pull on my heart.

I want to turn around and fold myself into his arms, engulfed in his manly scent.

I shake my head, heading for the door. He's at least twice my age and not into me.

"Have a good day!" Natalie says cheerily, waving at me. "There's an umbrella by the door!"

At the big, wooden door, I reach down and grab the umbrella she mentioned as the rain is still pattering over the sidewalks and streets while lightning flashes above me.

“Thank you,” I say as I smile over my shoulder. “I’ll bring it back to you.”

I’ll bring it back when I figure out how to get the money to pay your brother back.

I can’t think about the money in my bag just yet. The bakery is a few blocks away, and I’m eager to get out of the rain as soon as possible. I leave at a brisk pace, feeling the weight of the money in my bag, hoping I don’t get mugged. I hadn’t even thought about that until now, but hopefully, the rain will deter anyone.

I reach the bakery, and the rain starts to subside right as I come through the door.

“There’s my girl,” my dad happily says as I push by the crowd of customers.

Once we are in the back of the store he reacts to the money just as I knew he would.

CHAPTER TWO

Grey

I can't stop thinking about Rose Sinclair.

That silky strawberry blonde hair and those big brown eyes dance through my mind relentlessly.

I want her.

I want her like I've never wanted anything in my life.

I want to make her mine.

I have never been so attracted to a woman in my life. Most of the dealings that I've had with women have been orchestrated through my business.

I'm not a man who frivolously throws away his decency for a romp in the sheets, and there's never been anyone to really turn my head. At least, not until Rose Sinclair entered my life soaking wet and looking every bit like a gorgeous dream that I never wanted to wake up from.

I blink to clear my thoughts, but the soft angles of her heart-shaped face and the curves of her body will not leave my mind.

This woman has me in her grasp, and she doesn't even know it.

Would she care if she knew? I wonder if she would think I'm too old for her.

This is the woman who was meant for me. I just know this in my soul. I need to make her my wife and the mother of my children. Give her my seed out of pure want and love to create a family of our own.

Her body entices me and her shy looks pull at my heart. Even her reason for coming to me, to help her father with his bakery shows me that she is full of heart and makes her the perfect wife and mother.

The more I think of her, the harder my arousal for her becomes. I imagine myself running my hands over those wonderful, soft curves – planting kisses slowly down her nakedness, stopping at her sex and drinking in her essence.

I can hear her moaning, saying my name, asking me to take her, to fill her with my seed. I enter her slowly, and her pussy grabs hold of my pulsing cock.

God, it's like being wrapped in a warm blanket. I can't stay here much longer; the desire is too strong. I begin to push harder, entering to the hilt, and I can feel her rippling around me. My cock is ready to explode, but I don't want this to end.

I try to slow down, but Rosie is yearning for it all. She cries out that she wants all of me to spill my seed inside her. That's all I need to hear and I, too...

These thoughts plague my mind and race through my brain until I can't focus on anything else.

Rose is too beautiful, too special, to allow her to fade from my mind. I do have things I need to think about, though, and I try to clear my head and focus.

I sit languidly at my mahogany desk in my overly expensive office on the top floor of my massive manor home. I can hear the fireplace crackling, though not burning very high. Out the window and through the clear glass, it's a beautiful day.

The sun is shining, burning golden across the bright blue of the overhead sky.

The weather is a sharp contrast to the dark, stormy rain clouds that darkened the sky in the city yesterday. The rain is nowhere to be seen now.

The grounds of my home are well managed and beautifully manicured to the point where it's almost too much.

I can see the lake on my property glittering in the afternoon sun and the beautifully maintained landscape. I smile to myself when I think about how I've been able to afford all of this loveliness.

I'm not someone who sugarcoats things, even to myself.

I don't believe in it.

To put things bluntly, I'm a loan shark. I loan money and charge exorbitant fees to the party who borrowed the funds in the first place.

This is who I am and how I live.

It's a lucrative business, to say the absolute least. That much is obvious.

While it can be dangerous at times for those involved, I rarely feel the need to hire any muscle. The good thing about doing business in the wide world around me is the iron-clad contracts that keep me safe. They also keep everything between my clients and myself nice and legal.

On the occasions when the contracts were ignored, I have been more than capable of solving the problem myself.

There are really only two firms to borrow money from at the moment.

It's either the Goblins or me.

Anyone with half a brain would avoid borrowing from the Goblins if they have any choice in the matter.

The Goblins charge way more than I do, and their penalties are almost always life-threatening. The Goblins are a family in Brooklyn whose surname is actually Godwin, but the Goblins are what their clients call them, which describes them well. They are ruthless, no matter what people say about me.

They aren't a family to be messed with easily.

There are a few smaller rackets that someone could borrow from in the city, but they don't deal with the money I make.

It all started in college for me.

The entire school was always preoccupied with the antics of the football team or the latest scandal. So much so that they didn't pay attention to what else was going on.

Back then, I preferred to hang out with my best friend, Sam Brantley, and it was he who discovered the hole in the financial sector that my expertise could fill.

People needed money, they always needed money, and someone could make a fortune by providing it. Luckily, I had inherited a decent amount of money that my parents had left me. I made use of it the best way I knew how to.

With Sam's help, I discovered how to put the money to good use for me.

We started out by just giving out quick and quiet loans to the broke students of the college we knew, and of course, they had to sign the contracts that Sam made. He had been good at that.

He had been so valuable that I had once agreed to split everything fifty-fifty with him. He declined, though, deciding that the business was becoming too dangerous for him to stay.

He graduated and had plans to start a family and live a nice, quiet life. I couldn't deny him that, but to this day, I still think of Sam and how he had helped me start my business.

Spring has started to bloom, and I watch the flurry of birds as they sail across the blue sky. Flowers curl and sway over the hillside, coloring the green grass.

I yearn for Rose as if I'm some lovesick romance novel caricature of a man.

Without much thought, I bring up my laptop from under the desk. Maybe it's not the smartest way to go about approaching my feelings for her.

But I feel invigorated, though, as I search through the various social media profiles and find the one I'm looking for.

I wonder for a second if what I'm doing is odd, but it's a public profile.

Rose's pictures are like little snippets of who she is. There's a snapshot of her with a woman who must be her grandmother. The picture below it has Rose with a cat snuggled into her arms.

Oddly enough, there are no full-body pictures of Rose.

The closest one is just one of her half-hidden behind a pillar at some pretentious-looking club, smiling with round, white teeth but looking nervous.

It's a club I've frequented before, and I wonder if we've ever brushed arms or crossed paths. Had we come in contact and I not noticed.

I couldn't imagine not noticing a girl like Rose. There is just no way I wouldn't.

I spent most of my life wrapped up in my business ideas and my own career path. I wanted money, and I wanted the safety that came with it.

When my parents passed, I could only think about getting out of the emotional hole their absence left me in.

There was really no time for relationships then.

I have never been someone who was interested in connecting with someone else. I don't have time to be intimate and reveal my true feelings. Love is messy, and I don't have the time or the resources to clean up that mess.

Then what is this feeling?

I close my laptop with a quick, annoyed snap, nearly cracking the screen in two.

I stand and lean against the window of my office, letting my hands rest on the polished wooden walls on either side of me.

The warm brown color makes me think of Rose. In my mind, she's become my Rosie. I close my eyes and see her walk into my office, straight to me.

Damn our ridiculous age difference.

She has the draw of someone much older than her years, and her eyes are like windows to an old soul caught in a young

body. Despite this, I know the truth.

Rose is young and still so new to the world around her.

I want her to feel like she's fulfilled with me. I want her to feel like she belongs in this with me.

Would she even be interested in a man my age?

Or my profession?

The man who had just brought even more stress into her life might possibly not be the man she wants to marry.

The thought of that is too devastating for me to bear.

In the warm recesses of my mind, I belong to her, and she belongs to me.

I feel restless in my own home, my body aches to be close to her.

I watched those brown eyes rake over me, and I couldn't get enough then.

I wonder what her father might think of me. Would he allow his daughter to date a loan shark? Would she care what he thought, or would she ignore his wishes?

A thought strikes me, and I grip the wall, using it as an anchor.

Rose is out there on her own with the weight of her father's business on her shoulders. She has the stress of it all on her pretty head, dragging her down.

There is a knock at my office door. I turn, looking over my shoulder.

"Mr. Kingston," my assistant says from the doorway. She has her pale face poked around the half-open door. "Your sister called saying she's coming by in fifteen minutes, and she has food, so you better be here." When I raise my eyebrow, the assistant blushes, stuttering, "That was uh...those are her words, sir. I wasn't trying to sound as if—"

"It's alright," I tell her, waving a hand. "Go ahead. I'll be here."

The assistant nods at me, and then suddenly, the door opens, revealing Natalie behind her. She pushes into the room with her arms full of takeout packages.

“No need, dear brother,” she says, grinning at me. “I brought Chinese food.”

“Orange chicken with soy sauce?” I ask her, helping with the bags.

“Of course,” Natalie tells me, pushing the containers across my desk.

“This is my work desk,” I tell her, but Natalie just grins.

“I know,” she says with a shrug. “You work too hard, Grey. You need a break.”

Natalie opens a container of chicken lo-mein and dives in with her chopsticks, drowning the noodles in various packets of soy sauce. She slurps a mouthful, pointing one of her utensils at me, waving it like it’s a finger of disapproval.

“What?” I ask her, sighing as I stab a fork into my sticky orange chicken. It’s gooey and bright orange like how I like it. “What is the problem this time, Nat?”

“We should go to a club,” she says, nodding. My heart rate picks up at her words. I think of Rose and the club and how we might run into one another, and I wait for her to continue. “I think you really need a good, strong drink and a few dances with a pretty girl.”

“You always think I need a drink,” I point out, shaking my head at her.

“And you always do,” Natalie answers, grinning at me with her straight teeth.

She looks so much like our harsh, dead-and-gone father that it’s unnerving. But even though she has the same sharp, green eyes that he gave me, her soft, pretty features are all from her ginger mother, who lives in a little cottage in Florida.

“We can go,” I tell her, grabbing a buttery sugar roll from one of the containers. “What did you find out about the mold in your apartment? Is it black mold?”

“The landlord said he would cover it with paint,” Natalie tells me, making a face.

“You can stay here,” I tell her. The house gets lonely, and Natalie is the closest thing to a friend that I have. “You’re not going back to an apartment with mold. You’re here all the time anyway. The west wing is yours if you want it.”

“The whole thing? Like all of the west wing? Are you sure?” Natalie asks me, freezing comically with a mouthful of shiny lo-mein noodles in her mouth.

I nod, closing my takeout container. “There’s a bathroom and a kitchenette. It’s a few rooms away from the movie theater too. You can use it whenever you want.”

My sister would be safer if she were closer to me anyway. She was one of the few people that could be used against me, and it would be better if she were in the house with me.

Natalie grins. “I always forget how rich you are, dear brother. I would love to stay.”

I roll my eyes. “Wonderful. I’ll have movers come by later today for your things.”

“Cool,” Natalie said, standing. “Now go and get ready, Grey. We’re going out.”

CHAPTER THREE

Rose

I can't seem to shake Grey Kingston from my thoughts.

I stand in front of the mirror in my pink, sparkly dress, shimmering back at me in my reflection. I run a hand over the slight pudge in my belly, and I can't help but wonder if Grey would be disgusted by it.

Would he avoid touching me because of my size?

Could he ever be into someone like me?

I imagine those big, elegant hands running over my skin.

I imagine that he's warm and heavy as he hovers over me, pressing kisses to my neck. I can almost smell his scent as he moves closer toward my mouth. My whole body feels warm, and I jump when one of my friends calls for me to come down.

"I'm coming! Just give me a minute!" I call out to all of them from where I'm standing in my friend's room, getting ready. "Wait for me out in the car!"

I try to push Grey from my mind and make my way downstairs, stepping carefully in my high heels. I don't want to twist my ankle before I'm even able to make it out.

My hair is shiny, with strawberry blonde curls down my back, and my makeup is sparkly and soft.

I'm ready for a night of dancing and fun with my friends.

My father's bakery is on my mind, and even though he took the money, he vowed to pay me back and find out where the stacks of money actually came from.

I don't want to think about how I'm going to pay the money back.

We finally arrive at the club, and the neon lights flash across the sky. It's usually never a rowdy place, and most of the people there are rich and just looking for a place to wind down for the night. The dancing is far enough away from the bar and the tables that it's not as disruptive as it could undoubtedly be.

I laugh with my friends as the sun dips below the horizon outside and our shiny Uber arrives by the door.

I'm immensely glad I decided to wear only a little makeup as sweat gathers on my brow in the heat as soon as the car door is opened. It's spring, but the heat of summer is quickly approaching.

I fan myself with my hand, and then I step out of the car, across from the flashing building. There are crowds of beautifully dressed people going in and out of the club. I can hear the low thump of the music, deafening even from outside of the walls.

I feel invigorated by the night.

One of my friends links her arm together with mine as we crossed the street. My other friends we came with are following right behind.

All of my stress melts away as I take in the excitement of the night. I feel as if I'm wide awake, already swaying back and forth to the music as we go inside the building. One of my friends yells over the music, letting us know that she's going up to the front to grab drinks from the bar.

I sip at my club soda when she comes back to our group, and we all spin on the tiled floor with the flashing lights, moving in time with the quick beat.

I can see my friends becoming intoxicated by the club, the neon lights flashing over their pretty faces as they take in the atmosphere of the nightclub. There's a sick band playing,

sending waves of live music out into the crowd, enlivening the dancers around us even more.

The clubs my friends and I usually go to in Brooklyn are nothing compared to *The Light Room*. Manhattan is a whole different ball game. The walls and floors thrum with life and light, intense and encompassing me all around.

Outside of the club, I know I would never have been able to describe how it feels to be there. In *The Light Room*, I'm not the overweight girl towering over my slim friends.

I'm someone else, a creature of light and moving sound, whirling my way across the dance floor as if I belong here in the neon as the beat moves through me.

Glowing, neon light balls soar through the air, thrown into the crowd of people around us, who jump and reach happily into the sky to grab at them with their hands.

I feel myself laugh feeling so bright and shining, like a star from the night sky fallen to earth. I don't have the stress and the pressure on my shoulders of my dad losing his business. I keep dancing until my feet begin to ache, and I completely lose sight of my drink somewhere.

When one song stops and another one begins, I let myself catch my breath, feeling the high of the night wash over me. I look around the room, searching the crowd for any familiar faces.

"Olivia? Riley? Anyone?" I call, looking for Olivia's long dress or Riley's slicked-back ponytail.

My friends are pretty much nowhere to be found, and the crowd pushes at my body, edging me out of the group now that I'm not one of them, no longer a slave to the music around me.

I begin to struggle to maintain my balance on the slick tiles of the dance floor, and I feel off-kilter in my high heels. Sweat beads on my neck, dripping between my breasts.

A trickle of fear crawls into my mind, but I push it out of my thoughts, heading for the bathroom so that I can gather my thoughts there. Perhaps I'll find a familiar face to cling to in the dark of the club.

I shove my way through the crowd, feeling my lovely glittering pink dress catch on the belts and buttons of the people that I pass by.

“Hey baby, you wanna come and dance over here?” A deep voice calls from my right.

A large, sweaty hand drags over my belly and then my arm, grabbing for my hand. I jump away with a screech, nearly falling headlong onto the floor below me.

“Now, don’t be like that. I just want a little time alone with you and that ass,” the voice says, laughing.

I feel myself grow nauseous. I’ve never been so terrified in my entire life. I only wish that I had stayed with my friends.

How am I going to get away from this man?

I’m alone.

“Yeah,” joins another disgusting voice to the fold, and I feel someone’s hand brush my breast with their fingers. “We just want a taste of you, sweetheart, come on now. I love a curvy woman under my hands. Damn, you’re so sexy, girl.”

Of course, I only attract the weirdos.

I think longingly of Grey, and I wish I was in his arms, safe with him and in his embrace. But these are the kind of men that want me, not beautiful men like Grey Kingston.

I can see their awful faces in the neon lights that flash across their sweat-drenched skin.

All of them are shadows in the dark, their pale eyes hungry-looking, cornering me in the dark. No one is around to see, and if they were close enough to tell, they wouldn’t pay enough attention to care about me.

Another man pushes himself off the wall, flicking the butt of his spent cigarette away from him and onto the tiled floor. He grins at me maliciously, showing dingy yellowed teeth as the bright neon lights scatter in a wild flash over his ugly, unshaven face.

“Stop it!” I cry out, trying to move away from all of them without much success. “Leave me alone! Get away from me, you assholes!”

They follow me with measured steps, backing me firmly against the brick wall behind me where two people are kissing deeply and groping each other under their clothes, unaware and uncaring of anything else.

I feel a sweaty hand grab my naked thigh, and I suddenly remember the self-defense class my mom made us both take after my aunt was mugged when I was thirteen years old.

I shove the hard edge of my knee into one man’s groin with all the force of my terror. He howls in pain from the blow, stumbling back with a hand on his crotch.

One of the other men looks back at his friend that I had hit, and then another man lunges forward at me, looking completely murderous and hellbent on revenge.

I think for a moment before I bring the heel of my palm up clumsily, but the force of it seems to be enough, and the blow sends blood spurting from the man’s nose.

I nearly fall back as the man lets out a yell.

I heard the crack of the bone, and I feel a small sort of satisfaction at the move.

The second man falls away from me in pain, and I think for a moment that I might be able to escape into the crowd of people still dancing around me. The last man, the first one who grabbed me, shoves me roughly against the wall and paws at me with his hands, bringing my hair up to his nose to smell, writhing against me.

I move and scramble, clawing and screeching, and then suddenly, the man is forcefully yanked away from me.

I feel myself shaking as I fall back against the wall, and there, in front of me like some Greek god, Grey Kingston stands with his fist clenched at his sides.

He kicks the man he threw down at his feet savagely and without restraint.

“Leave before it’s too late,” he growls. “No, actually, apologize.”

“I’m not...,” one of the men begins in a whimpering little voice.

“Apologize to her before I fucking make you,” Grey says in that deep voice.

I hear a few of the men mutter a few whispers of *sorry* and *fuck off, man* as they limp away from us, but I don’t care either way. I’m too in my own head to care.

I can’t help but curl into myself and begin to shake violently.

Grey is golden and beautiful in the lights as he moves to me slowly, like I’m a wild thing cornered, waiting to strike at him.

His eyes are like spring grass, growing wild and warm.

“Hey,” he says, his voice gentle. He’s so soft in his approach that it startles me for a moment. “Hey, hey, it’s alright. I’m right here, Rosie, you’re alright.”

I all but throw myself into his arms, the only safe place in this cruel world.

He’s warm against me, and he pats my back gently, rubbing smooth circles over my exposed skin. He pulls back to look at me, worry coloring those handsome features. He’s so damn good-looking, and he feels like home right at this moment. His green eyes are dark, and his white shirt is unbuttoned again, but only halfway, giving me a tempting look at his chest.

The object of my daydreams, the source of my desires, stands holding me in his strong, capable arms and all I can do is shake. Grey pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and softly dabs under my eyes.

I hadn’t even realized I was crying, but it isn’t a surprise to me.

Grey is a true gentleman. I can’t believe that I’m lucky enough to be saved by him.

“You did good,” Grey tells me, giving me an encouraging smile. “I came over to you as quickly as I could, but the crowd

was so....”

“It’s okay,” I say, loud enough to be heard over the thumping music. “Thank you.”

“Are you okay? Did they...?”

“I’m alright, but I lost my friends, and I’m not sure where they are,” I tell him, looking around hopelessly to try and find them. “Can we just get out of here? I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Grey looks at me, his gaze full of affection, making me feel warm and giddy.

“Do you like pizza?” he asks.

CHAPTER FOUR

Grey

I still want to rip those men apart, and I would too if Rose wasn't curled around me. I had planned to make them a bloody mess, but I want Rose to feel safe with me.

"Natalie is still at the club," I tell her as we make our way down the street. "The driver can pick us up after she's done. The pizza place isn't far off from here."

Rose doesn't say anything, but she squeezes her arms tightly around me.

I debate picking her up and carrying her just for the hell of it, but I don't know if she would appreciate being treated like an invalid. I'm sure that she wouldn't.

A Slice or Two is a little brick building on a quiet street corner, with flickering lamps lighting the glass door. Inside, I can see that a few people are eating in the booths by the windows, but it will be quiet enough for us to have a nice dinner.

"Will you stay close to me?" Rose asks in a quiet voice. Her hand wraps around mine, pressing warmly against my skin. "Don't leave me alone, please Grey."

The sound of my name from her mouth is like a song, so very sweet in my mind.

"I won't leave your side, I promise," I tell her, cupping a hand to the back of her head gently for a moment. "I won't let

anyone hurt you ever again, Rosie.”

We make our way inside under the ringing doorbell, and a sweet-looking older woman guides us to a booth in a dimly lit corner, sliding menus over to us.

Rose looks overwhelmed by the various pizza and calzone selections, so I look at her.

“How about a large pepperoni pizza and an order of bacon breadsticks?” I ask her.

Rose shifts uncomfortably, looking away. “I really shouldn’t have all those carbs.”

At first, I’m not even sure what she means, but when her hand brushes absentmindedly over her stomach, looking down at it, I realize what she was implying.

“Nonsense,” I tell her. When I reach over, she puts her hand in mine once again. I’m completely honest when I say, “Only the most beautiful women eat pizza and breadsticks, and you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Rose.”

The pink that spreads across her cheeks is so enticing, and I see her push her shoulders back, looking a little more confident than before.

“I guess a few slices wouldn’t hurt me too much,” she says, shrugging.

Once we order and the waitress brings over our drinks and the platter of pizza and breadsticks, Rose begins to loosen up from the hard exterior she had taken on in her fear at the club.

She slathers a piece of pizza with ranch dressing and rolls it up neatly.

“What?” she asks when she sees me laughing, but there’s a smile on her face.

“Ranch dressing rolled up in pizza?” I ask her as I finish one slice and start on another.

“That’s the best way to eat it,” Rose answers with a shrug, taking a bite.

“I’ll take your word for it.” I take a bite, and Rose reaches out a hand. “What?”

“Give me your pizza slice,” she says, and I don’t think I could deny her anything at this point, so I hand it over, letting her fold a glob of ranch dressing inside it. “There you go. Now you’ll see what I mean about the ranch. Go ahead and try it.”

I shake my head, laughing as she hands it over. When I take a bite, Rose grins and I’ve never been happier than I am now. Of course, she’s happy about it too.

“It’s good,” I tell her, nodding. It’s not that good, but seeing her smile is worth it.

Rose looks up at me, uncertain. “Grey?” she asks me hesitantly, wringing her hands. I hate that she looks so unsure around me. I just want her to be happy.

“Yes?” I answer, finishing my pizza slice with the ranch slathered on it.

“Do you mind if I come over there and sit with you on your side of the booth?” Rose asks, her cheeks glowing a rosy red. “It’s just a little cold in here.”

“Come on,” I tell her, getting up so that she can slide into the seat on my other side. “Are you warm enough now?” I ask as I move back into the spot beside her.

“This is a lot better,” Rose tells me, pressing her leg to mine.

The sweet, older waitress comes over to the table, carrying two candles, and she looks at us both when she sees Rose snuggled up on my other side.

She sets two candles on the table and lights them for us, touching my shoulder as she passes. I think that her name is Penny, but I can’t be sure if it is or not.

“Thank you,” I tell her, and she just nods, smiling softly. “They’re lovely.”

“That was nice of her,” Rose says, and she lays her head against my shoulder. “Do you two know each other or something? I mean, do you know her?”

Is that a hint of jealousy I hear from the woman beside me? I'm almost sure I've imagined it, but I can see that she's waiting for me to answer her question.

"This is where I come to de-stress while I'm in the city," I tell her. "Natalie likes cinnamon bun breadsticks and cream cheese. You might like them too."

"Will she be very mad that you left her?" Rose asks. "Your sister, I mean?"

"No," I tell her with a laugh. "She was getting free drinks from men at the bar."

"That must be nice," Rose mutters, sighing under my arm. "She's really pretty."

I squeeze her tight, pulling her closer to me so that she has to look up at me. Her eyes are big and soft, whiskey brown. Her mouth is plump and soft-looking.

When I lean down and kiss her, Rose doesn't pull away, and she deepens the kiss.

"You," I say as we kiss, whispering into her mouth, "are a dream that I don't ever want to wake up from. Please stop bringing yourself down, Rosie. Just stop."

Rose opens her eyes slowly with her nose brushing mine. Her hand slips over the nape of my neck, warm and gentle across my skin.

I love the feeling of it. Of her.

"I can't believe this is happening," she says, shaking her head in disbelief.

"What can't you believe?" I wonder, pressing a gentle hand to her cheek.

She smells like peaches and cream, and I want to engulf myself in her scent.

"I just can't believe that I'm here with you," Rose whispers. She shakes her head, unsure of herself. "And I can't believe that you...I mean that you..."

“That I want you, too?” I finish for her, raising an eyebrow.
“Well, I do, Rosie.”

“I like that,” Rose says, looking up at me with a smile.
“Rosie.”

“That’s what you are,” I answer, pressing my forehead to hers.
“You’re my Rosie.”

Rose blushes, and I press my fingers gently to the heat in her cheeks, feeling her embarrassment against my skin. She finishes her pile of breadsticks, and we sit quietly in the dim light of the lamps for a moment, drinking each other in.

Suddenly, my phone begins to go off in my pocket. I pick it up, pressing it to my ear. I already know who it is even without having to look at the screen.

“Yes, Nat?” I ask my half-sister patiently, sighing. “Is there something you need?”

“Where are you?” Natalie yells on the other end, speaking over the loud music. “The driver said we have to pick you up. Where did you go? I had three free vodka spritzers in one go, and then I ditched those three guys at the bar. I’m bored now.”

“Come to *Slice’s*,” I say to her without actually answering any of her questions. “I’ll have a box of cinnamon breadsticks waiting for you when you get here.”

“You know what?” Nat calls through the phone. “I’m just going to ignore that you didn’t answer my questions, dear brother. I really want those cinnamon sticks.”

“I’ll see you here in a little bit,” I tell her. “Tell Aaron not to speed when he gets out on the road. I want you to get here in one piece, okay?”

After I hang up the phone, I catch Rose staring at me with an affectionate smile.

“What is it?” I ask her, and Rose leans up to kiss me again, brushing my mouth.

“I just think you’re sweet, that’s all,” she tells me with a shrug of her shoulders.

“I care about the people in my life,” I tell her, and I wonder if she knows that she is quickly becoming one of those people. “I keep them safe if I can.”

“Natalie is lucky to have you,” Rose tells me, looking shy again.

Her chin is on my shoulder, and her hand is rubbing circles on my back.

It feels very domestic to be sitting in a restaurant with her. I want this so very badly that I ache inside. My need to be the one that Rose belongs to spreads through me like a sweet syrup, coating me in the softness of her presence.

“Rosie,” I say, but I can only think about her body under mine, writhing beneath me, skin to skin. “Do you want me to take you home now?”

Rose shakes her head. “I don’t want to go home to my apartment and be alone.”

“You can come back with me if you want,” I offer, hoping that she wants to.

“Where are you going?” Rose asks me, and I can see the hope on her pretty face.

I want to take Rose home and make her a part of my life. I want her to be at the center of everything and to love every minute of it. Right now, though, I would settle for just getting her into some warm, comfortable clothes. As much as the pale rise of her breasts tempt me, her comfort is most important to me.

“I’m going to my condo,” I tell her gently. She presses her lips to my neck as she listens to me, and I think the waitress will have to kick us out if she keeps doing that. “I have a home outside of the city that I stay at when I’m not in Brooklyn, but tonight I’m just going to stay here. It’s above the building I use as my office.”

“A condo,” Rose repeats, looking up at me with those whiskey eyes.

“I have a spare room,” I tell her, though I want her in my bed, warm under my sheets.

“Okay,” Rose answers, and I can see the hint of disappointment on her face.

I don’t want Rosie to think that she’s just a one-off kiss at the pizza place. Hell, this is the woman I want to stand by my side and be my wife, my equal in every meaning of the word.

I need every inch of her, and I have to make her mine.

She puts her thigh over mine, revealing a pale strip of skin where the slit in her glittery pink dress falls open. I think of how easy it would be to slip my hand between her legs and push gently inside of her, curling my fingers into her slick warmth.

I shake my head to clear the thoughts. She probably doesn’t even realize what she’s doing.

“Grey,” Rose whispers, parting her lips as she stares up at me. “I’ve never wanted anyone more than I want you. I don’t want to stay in a separate room.”

Rose is blushing, though she stands her ground. A feral, unhinged sort of lust sweeps over me, and I imagine bending her over the sink in my bathroom, and coming while I’m still inside of her.

I can’t really think of anything else.

“I want you in my bed,” I tell her, my voice rough with lust and desire. “I can’t explain to you how much I need you.”

Rose’s eyes seem to go hazy with lust. “How long before they come to get us?”

“I can tell them to wait,” I answer, dragging a hand up her back.

I just text the driver and let him know we want him to come later.

I’m aware that we’re still in the middle of the pizza shop and that there are other people eating and talking quietly, but in the flicker of the candles, Rose is intoxicating to my senses. I can

smell her perfume and feel the brush of her glimmering strawberry locks across my arm.

She's irresistible.

"Tell them we need time to eat and not to get us just yet," she says, nodding.

I pull back for a moment.

"Rosie, how do you feel?" I ask her because she's been through an ordeal. I don't want our affection to be just because I saved her from that situation.

I want to feel like she needs me as much as I need her, and not just because she's afraid.

"I feel good," Rose tells me, kissing my neck until she drags her teeth across my ear. "I want you to make me feel good, Grey," she says, low and sensual.

Her hand presses gently against the crotch of my trousers, nearly gripping my hard length with her fingers. Her other hand grabs my suit jacket from where I put it behind me, and she tucks it over my shoulder, hiding us halfway from view.

"Right now? You want to do it right now?" I ask her, but my voice is hoarse, and I want nothing more than to know what she tastes like.

I want her to say yes.

Rose nods, and she massages her hand over the front of my pants, slow enough that no one would be able to tell.

The night is dark beyond the window, the quiet streets only illuminated by the flickering lamps on the building and the dim streetlights on the sidewalk. Rose's mouth is on my neck, kissing smoothly.

I drag two of my fingers up the inside of her leg, and she shivers under my touch.

My fingers find the lace of her panties, and I pull them gently to the side. Rose lets out an almost silent gasp, digging her fingers into my back. When I slip my fingers inside, I wish we were something else, I long for a bed to lay her down on.

I pump my fingers slowly in and out. She's soaking wet, squeezing around me as she breathes into my neck. I curl my fingers, and I have to quiet her when she lets out a soft moan. Her moans are for my ears only.

I want to hear her moan in my ear while my length is inside her.

"Grey," Rose gasps breathlessly, pausing with her mouth pressed to my skin. To anyone in the restaurant, it would look like her head is just resting on my shoulder. No one would guess that my fingers are inside her, and I like that.

"What is it, Rosie?" I mutter, pulling back a little, touching my forehead to hers.

"It's just..." she begins, hesitating. "I need you to know that I'm a virgin."

My body sings with her admission.

No one else has ever loved this woman the way I plan to. No man has worshiped her body the way I want to.

She's mine.

This heart-stopping woman will experience her first time under my hands.

"I promise not to bend you over this table," I tell her, and she laughs softly, loosening up as I gently pull my fingers from her. "We have time, Rosie."

Suddenly, the restaurant erupts with screams and gunfire.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rose

I can honestly say that I've never been in the middle of a shootout before.

My dad would completely lose his mind if he knew that I was dodging bullets in a pizza shop. He would also lose his mind knowing that I was just tangled two seconds earlier with an older man, feeling each other up in the middle of said pizza shop.

I want to go back to that moment, to think of Grey's fingers and his mouth, but I'm too busy hiding.

"Shit!" Grey grunts, pushing me behind him where we ducked by the booths. "Stay down low, Rosie!"

That brings a thrill of warmth to my chest.

Even with my terror threatening to choke me, that nickname on his lips makes my chest grow warm.

Grey is shielding me with his body, holding me against his back with one of his strong arms. I can tell he's afraid by the slight shake in his hands, but it doesn't show on his face. Instead, he looks furious, he looks as if he wants to tear someone apart.

What are the odds that we would be in a pizza parlor on the same night as a robbery takes place?

“We have to get out of here,” I tell him, though it’s not something that he doesn’t already know. “They won’t care about us, they just want what’s in the register.”

“Come out, come out wherever you are, Kingston,” calls a deep voice from somewhere by the front door. “We know you’re in there, you asshole!”

I look at Grey, at what I can see of his back, and my fingers dig into his hip. Grey tenses up, and I can see that he reaches for something with an almost imperceptible twitch of his fingers.

He’s reaching for a gun that isn’t there.

We’re in danger, and I realize that Grey is the kind of man to look it right in the face. And while I don’t like violence I find I’m even more attracted to him than I was before.

“This isn’t about money,” Grey tells me in a hard whisper. I can hear the strain in his voice, but it’s not because he’s afraid of anything. “They’re looking for me.”

“Who are they? What do they want from you?” I ask in a whisper, I can hear footsteps crunching over the broken glass from the windows, and my heart stutters.

“I have a lot of people who would like to see me dead,” he says with a sigh. He glances over his shoulder at me, and his deep voice is a soft whisper. “But I won’t let them hurt you. We’re getting out of here, and I’ll live to fight another day.”

Fight?

Who the hell are we fighting?

At the front of the restaurant, the men are still calling for Grey, trying to draw him out of his safe spot.

Grey is smart enough not to take the bait from them. But then....

“That pretty girl at your side needs a real man,” one of the men suddenly calls out. “I think I’d like to give her a little spin. She won’t need you after that.”

Grey is like a rubber band, pulled tight and ready to snap in front of me.

I wrap my arms around his waist, pressing myself against his back, and he calms down. His body relaxes just a little beneath my hands, not as tense as before.

Somehow, probably stupidly, I feel pride and satisfaction knowing that I'm precious enough to Grey to be used against him. I wonder if they could see the way we looked at each other earlier. They obviously know something about us.

I wonder if they saw us touching in the booth.

"They've been watching us," Grey says, and I can see his jaw clench at the revelation. "They must have been following me all night. I'm sorry, Rosie. I put you in danger."

"Hey don't say that, you saved me. And now it's you and me," I tell him, though I'm unsure if it sounds childish. I just want him to know that I'm not running away. Instead, I'm glued to his side, where I belong.

Grey lets out a breath. "You and me."

I nod against his shoulder.

I can hear crying and quiet whispers at the far side of the room, where the workers must have called the police, and some of them are weeping. I hope our sweet waitress is okay where she is. She must be hiding, and I hope she stays that way.

The footsteps grow closer, and my heart nearly thumps right out of my chest.

Suddenly, a wild honking begins outside, and I can hear sirens in the distance. The noise is so distracting that I can't hear the robbers, only small tidbits and some cursing.

The honking is loud, and Grey snatches me up from the floor, tucking me into his side. He stops at the corner of the room, where the half-wall leading to the front dining room area hides us both from sight.

At the windows, are four tall, lanky men, and they have either hands to their ears or guns in their hands.

I can't recognize any of them, though I never expected to.

What do I know of crime?

I stole a pack of gum when I was a kid and was given a stern talking to. That was about the extent of my criminal history.

I wonder if Grey deals with things like this regularly, and then I also wonder why I never thought to imagine his life as dangerous. He's a loan shark with god knows how much money to his name.

Of course, his life is full of dangers.

Some part of me feels the smallest bit of excitement at its thought, though that part might be the stupid part of me.

"I need you to trust me, Rosie," Grey whispers, pressing his lips to my ear. "Can you do that for me? Can you trust me?"

I nod, and I can't help but shiver as he presses a quick kiss to my neck.

Grey pulls me out of our hiding place quickly, and the glass crunches under our shoes as we run across the room. Grey would stand and fight if he could. I can feel the yearning practically rising off of him. It makes me feel hot with need.

Protecting me and keeping me safe is more important to him than fighting these men and winning against them, that much is obvious.

The honking continues, and yet I can still hear the moment the men turn from the window, and then they see us. A spray of bullets bounce off of the blue walls behind the two of us, and I can feel the air as they whistle right by my head.

Grey pushes us down, and three bullets barely scrape by us, narrowly missing my shoulder.

The doors of the pizzeria are busted open already, and Grey hauls me through them, tipping us both out into the flickering street lights that illuminate the sidewalks. The men are scrambling behind us, and finally, the honking car is just further up ahead.

Natalie is leaning out of the front seat, and I can see the driver holding the horn.

“Get in the damn car, Grey!” she screeches. Her green eyes wild.

Grey doesn't hesitate. He pulls me in front of him and yanks the door to the black car open, basically picking me up and dropping me onto the leather seats.

Just as Grey closes the door, the sound of a gun goes off, and there's a sharp bang as the bullet slams into our window. I close my eyes, ready for the impact, but the bullet is caught in the glass, twisted into a flattened curl of metal. Spider web cracks spread out from the hit, and I watch them splinter across the window.

“All of my personal cars have bulletproof glass,” Grey says on the edge of a breath, but he seems relieved. “We should be safe in here now.”

“Drive! Go, go!” Natalie screeches, tapping the blonde driver's arm wildly.

I glance behind us, and I see the men in their dark clothes standing on the sidewalk. I still can't see their faces, but their presence is terrifying. They wanted blood, and they wanted us dead, or they definitely wanted Grey dead at least.

“Take us to the manor, Camden,” Grey says, wrapping a comforting arm around me. He looks down at me, where I'm pressed into his side. “We can't go to my condo now. They might know where it is. The manor has better security.”

Natalie turns in her seat, and her bright red hair falls over her shoulder. She raises an eyebrow in surprise when she sees me at her brother's side.

“The girl from the office,” she says, pointing at me. Her voice still sounds a little hysterical.

“I'm Rose,” I tell her, nodding. “I'm sorry this is how we're meeting again.”

“Huh,” Natalie says, looking over at Grey. “I guess you took the *'you need a pretty girl thing'* literally, dear brother. It's

nice to see you again, Rose. I'm glad you didn't get shot a second ago."

"Me too," I tell her, and Natalie's mouth tilts up in a small smile.

"We're going to the manor?" Natalie asks her brother. "Did you lock the office?"

"I locked it," Grey confirms. His lips press to my temple as he speaks. "Everything really important is at the manor in the safe. The one at the office has money and a few meaningless documents inside of it, but that's about it."

"Who was that, Grey?" Natalie asks, and I want to know too. "Who tried to kill you and Rose in there? I can't believe they attacked you in a public place."

"They must be desperate," Grey says breathlessly. "I recognized one of the men. It was one of the Godwin brothers. There's no mistaking him."

Natalie goes pale where she's turned in the front seat. The sweater pulled over her dress looks warm, but she appears cold in the car, pallid in the low light.

"The Goblins are after you?" she asks, swallowing hard. "They're after us?"

"It's alright, Nat," Grey says in that same voice he used to soothe me. "I'm not going to let them hurt any of us. We'll be safe at the manor. Your stuff is there."

"I know. They called me and told me that everything had been moved in while we were in the city," Natalie answers, sounding distracted.

"Natalie is moving into the manor while her apartment is remodeled," Grey tells me, and I'm glad he finds me important enough to keep me in the loop.

"Who and what are the Goblins?" I ask him because I can't take not knowing, though I'm sure he isn't trying to keep anything from me.

Grey kisses the top of my head. "I promise I'll tell you everything when we're safe at the house. There's much to say,

and you've been through a lot tonight.”

“I’ll have to call my dad and tell him I’m sick or something,” I tell Grey. “He’ll wonder why I’m not coming into work at the bakery. I have to give him some sort of reason why.”

“You can use my phone if you want,” Grey says, reaching into his pocket.

“I can wait until we get to your house,” I tell him, shaking my head. I can feel myself begin to blush. “If you still want me to be there with you, I mean.”

I don’t know why, but I begin to doubt myself for a moment. In the car with his sister and his driver, engulfed in Grey’s life with him, I don’t know if I belong.

I’ve been on the outside looking in for most of my life. My weight has made me feel as if I don’t fit in most places. Could this man really want me? Could he love me?

Grey’s hand wraps around my hip when he turns to me, and Natalie has turned around back to the front of the car.

Grey’s breath in my ear makes me shiver when he says, “I’ll always want you with me. Stop doubting what’s between us.”

“I’ll try,” I tell him, sinking into his embrace. “How long until we get to the house.”

“It should take about two hours to reach the Hudson Valley,” Grey tells me. “My house sits on a lake there. There’s a garden too. I think you might like it.”

“I think I might,” I agree with him. “Thank you for saving me, both times.”

“You don’t need me to save you,” Grey tells me with his lips to my temple. “You’re strong, Rosie. I like that about you, but I’m glad I could be there to help.”

“I might go to sleep,” I warn him. I’m too exhausted and in shock to stay awake.

I feel safe with Grey, and I can honestly say that he’s slowly becoming someone who is like home to me. I see him as my future, and I hope I’m good enough to keep him for that long.

“Sleep, Rosie,” Grey says as I curl into his side. “I’ll keep you safe while you do.”

CHAPTER SIX

Grey

A thick fog cloaks the manor grounds, folding and shifting in the dewy night.

Natalie is asleep in the front passenger seat, and our driver is looking as if he might fall asleep on the spot. We're on the gravel path that leads up to the large house, and the tires crunch on it. The windows are glowing softly, and I know the staff must have lit the fireplaces and the chandeliers in my absence.

Rose is talking softly in my ear, and I can't get enough of her voice, as sleepy and hazy as she sounds in her exhaustion. She's like a balm against my stress.

Her favorite flowers are purple pansies, which she has really only ever seen once on a school trip when she was a kid. They remind her of a happy childhood.

She has only slept in twin beds her whole life, and she's had to share a room with a cousin for as long as she can remember. Her favorite colors are pink and green, but she doesn't think they necessarily look good together that way. She admits that I'm welcome to prove her wrong, though. She doesn't want to pick between the two colors, and she likes both.

I listen to Rosie very carefully as she answers each of my questions that arise from her admissions. I don't need to write

anything down because everything she says I instantly memorize, branding it into my mind.

We're all yawning as we step out of the car, so tired after the night we had together. Natalie mumbles something, and she stumbles up the stone stairs, brushing her fingers over the ivy that covers the side of the brick manor and half of the stairs leading up to the big, oak door. She uses her key to open the door, and it creaks when it swings open as the driver heads to the back.

Natalie disappears, heading up the stairs to her section of the house where her things have been dropped off, and I know I won't see her again until the scant hours of the morning.

It's nearly two o'clock now, and she won't be up until at least nine or ten in the morning.

I wonder if Rosie is a late sleeper or not.

"I'm going to look around if that's okay with you," Rose says, looking awed as she steps into the house, taking in the dark, antique furnishings and warm interior.

"Go ahead," I tell her, pulling her in for a kiss before she wanders away from me.

I want her to see this place in all its beauty, and I want her to feel as if she belongs because she does. She looks lovely in the low light that burns through the house from the lit fireplaces.

Her skin is radiant, and this house looks good on her.

Rose gently licks my lips, exploring this thing between us, driving my need for her higher. I can't wait to peel that glittering pink dress from her body and sink myself into her wet warmth.

I watch her walk away, brushing her fingers over everything she passes by.

A hot need to protect her and what is mine rises up within me. I can't believe someone, and I know who it was, tried to take everything away from me. I can't even imagine what might have happened if Rose had been hurt because of me.

If I really think about it, I have never understood why people underestimate me, if they do at all. When I was a kid, it was the easiest thing in the world to pick a window lock or even break a window open if I tried hard enough. Almost everyone is capable of it if they really think to try. So why would someone think I'm not able to take a few heads now if need be?

Many people don't seem to be entirely capable of being confident enough to know they can figure out where to go when they step outside their comfort zone. Most are content to watch their lives pass by them and never take that chance. I have always been one to try and take chances for myself.

Most people are adept at accepting whatever fate has been laid out for them – that is when they feel like they've been forced into it without complaint. These things are typical for the people who don't care enough to help themselves. Most people assume that giving up and letting go is perfectly fine.

But I never have been a man to lay down, and I doubt I ever will be.

Not until my fate is something that I am satisfied with, anyhow.

So I step onto the dark veranda that overlooks the expansive grounds without a plan, and my lack of a plan doesn't make me any less confident. Why should it? I know this place, and it knows me just as well. I'm safe in my home's warm, green comfort, and I know I can keep my loved ones safe here.

Whatever I need to do, I'll figure it out here, with Rose.

I don't want to think of a time without her, but I do anyway.

Your trigger finger, my boy, is the part of your body you might come to hate the most. You might even argue with it.

Your right hand will always be the hand that takes charge, the hand that fucks...the hand that destroys.

Warren Kingston, my late father, comes to my mind.

The night air is cool, and the rising scent of blooming flowers accompanies the shifting of trees. Their sweetness reminds me

of my Rosie. She's somewhere behind me inside the house.

She belongs in this place with me, and I want to keep her here with me for as long as possible. I need to have her here.

I step back inside from the veranda, closing the swinging wooden door behind me.

My father's voice returns to my thoughts unwarranted once more.

There is power in your body, the strength of a thousand men that lay behind you. If you ever fear the things you want, my boy, you have all the power you need in your blood to be whoever you want to be.

Then, another voice that sounds suspiciously like my mother's just before the accident ended them both forever rises.

Look after yourself, my love. This world might surprise you yet.

My mother was right. The world has surprised me more than I can say.

I don't regret one single portion, not one crumb, of my life as I look over at Rose standing by the bookcases. The library is expansive, and Rose looks like a kid in a candy store. She stands in her short dress and reaches up for a moment to tug down a leather-bound book from the middle shelf, holding it in her hands.

I would help her, but the picture she paints is too tempting, and I want to look.

Every part of her body looks as if she has never been touched, and I know now that she hasn't.

I remember dipping my fingers inside of her sweet heat and bringing them back out to taste her on my own skin, and I wonder if she thinks of me as I think of her.

I might have been able to get Rose out of my head before, but not now. Not ever.

Every second she stands before me with her long, glimmering strawberry blonde hair bouncing gently makes my blood run

hotter and hotter in my veins.

She leans up onto her toes to reach for something on a higher shelf, an old, well-worn novel, maybe. She's barefoot now, and I know her heels are by the front door, right beside my array of loafers, as they should be.

Her pink dress is just a little too small for her, and the hem rides up until I can see the soft, rounded curve of her thighs, quivering, pale, and too smooth to be real.

Mine, I immediately think to myself as I look her over with my gaze.

She was made for my hands, my touch, and no one else's.

I move closer to Rose, and I watch her lean her shoulder against the bookcase. She must be exhausted, but she remains standing, skimming over the book.

"You should sit," I tell her softly, nodding to the two chairs by the fireplace.

"I'm okay," Rose says, glancing up at me. "I'm not even tired anymore."

She yawns after that, and I can't help but let out a chuckle. She's adorable.

"I can see that," I answer with a laugh, coming up to put my arms around her. She puts the tattered copy of *Wuthering Heights* on the shelf, and she seems to almost sink into my embrace. "Did you ever get in touch with your dad?"

Rose nods. Her voice is quiet, colored by the flames that flicker in the fireplace. "Natalie let me use her phone charger. She told me to tell you that she was going up to the west wing and that she's really glad it's far from your bedroom and that the walls are thick. I guess she knows something is up between us."

Rose is blushing, and she looks flustered, but she doesn't look embarrassed.

It's obvious that she's thinking about me, too, like I hoped that she was.

I can see the multitude of freckles across her nose and cheeks from up close. Her skin is glowing in the firelight. That little dimple at the edge of her smile is still there, but now there is something undeniably darker and more effortlessly devastating in the way she looks tonight.

The night's events have made her confident and more sure of herself.

Her glittering dress is cut low and just transparent enough for the points of her nipples to show through. I decided right then and there that the pink of her dress is my new favorite color, and is only surpassed by the whiskey shade of brown in her eyes.

I want her so much it hurts, but I know what she needs right now is sleep.

"You might not feel tired anymore," I tell her, cupping her warm cheek in my hand. "But you need to get some sleep. Your body needs time to recuperate."

For a moment, she looks at me desperately.

"Grey, no," Rose cries, wrapping her fingers around my arm. She pushes her body against mine. "I don't want to sleep. Don't make me go to sleep."

I let out a gentle laugh. "I'm not going to make you do anything, Rosie."

I pull her fingers gently off of my lower arm, and then I wrap my hand around hers, bringing it up to kiss the center of her palm.

She looks up at me, hazy-eyed.

"I feel like if I go to sleep, if I close my eyes, you might be gone when I wake up," Rose admits, her bottom lip trembling.

I can understand that because I feel the same way about her. Rose feels like a dream to me, and I can't imagine a life without her around me now.

"Hey," I murmur, tipping her pretty face up with my other hand. I let my grip on her hand go and bury my fingers in the thick hair at the nape of her neck. "I'm not leaving you, Rosie."

I'm not going anywhere, but I know that you need to get some sleep. You want to be wide awake with me, don't you?"

I want her to be fully happy and wide awake when we come together because that's what this is leading up to. That's what Rose is saying. She wants to be entangled with me as much as I do with her.

She needs sleep, and she needs to feel safe.

"Don't go anywhere, okay?" Rose begs, pressing herself against me.

"I'll be right here waiting when you wake up," I tell her, resting my chin on her head. "We can go right up to my room and sleep, warm in my bed together."

I'm not thinking about sleep, but I push the thoughts from my head.

"I want you," Rose whispers, and her breath rushes across the hollow of my throat.

I feel my throbbing length twitch in my pants, pushing against the seams. It takes all I have in me not to groan at her admission.

I have to be patient.

I have to wait.

"You have no idea how much I want you, Rosie," I whisper, clenching my jaw against the need that surges like a hot fire within my body.

I have never felt for a woman the way I do for Rosie. It feels like she's what I've been missing for the many lonely years of my life, this young beauty that needs me just as badly as I need her.

I crave her soft touch, and I know that when we meet, skin to skin, I won't be able to get enough of her. Rose is a fire burning deep within me, yet she is also the only one who would be able to put it out.

Rose slides her hand down my abs and cups my length, squeezing gently as if she's used to me now and this is normal

for us.

I let out a quiet groan, squeezing my fingers at the nape of her neck.

“Showers usually fit two people,” Rose says as she walks away, looking over her shoulder at me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rose

Grey Kingston is like some sort of drug that I can't ever get enough of.

He, only by existing, has taken me by the hand and carried me to a world where I've never been, told me the secrets that everyone else has made him bury, and made me believe that, in his eyes, I am everything to him, and the absolutely only one....

All before even lifting a single finger to touch me.

And when he finally did touch me, lit by candlelight and tucked into a leather booth, it was like electricity.

He lights me up from the inside out.

I now understand how some people in this world become addicted to something. I'm addicted to the smell of his cologne, or maybe it's his aftershave? I don't think I could live without that fragrance around more, mesmerizing me, making me want Grey even more than I already do. He's so fatally close to my cheek, and my mouth has to be the height of ecstasy I'm sure I've never experienced before.

Is he real? Is this really me with a man like him?

I really can't believe that Grey wants me like he seems to. Am I myself, or am I just who he sees me to be? Either way, I find

myself craving him and needing him now like I never have anyone else.

I know it's because he seems to think I'm some sort of salvation, and in his eyes, I'm what he needs. But I know myself to be just a woman, and Grey is just a man, and, oh, what a man he is...but he's still a man nonetheless.

I love him. I love him. I love him.

I wonder if he feels the same for me or if this affection is just some passing fancy, covering me and making me whole, only to flit away in the night like a bird.

But when I turned to take one final look over my shoulder at him, the bright heat of his stare was ruinous. There really is no other word for it...the fire that burns behind the sharp green of his eyes.

If I had thought before that he seemed as if he wanted to consume me, now I understand that it's not that he wants me to cease to exist.

Instead, I think he wants me to exist solely for him, and I believe he wants to be mine only in the same way.

He's a wildfire of a man, and I want to be burned in his flames.

I let out a breath as I finally find the bathroom in the huge mansion of a house.

The walls are a mossy green color, and the furnishings all look antique. There's a big, claw-foot tub under a stained glass window, and in the corner, there's a lavish shower that was obviously added later to the space.

I decide very quickly that sitting in a porcelain tub of hot, steaming water for a few minutes sounds like a dream. I haven't had a bath in a tub since I was a kid.

The light in the bathroom isn't a harsh one, coming from the ceiling. Instead, the room is lit by wall sconces that flicker like real flames. The warmth is intoxicating as I fill the tub with hot water. I feel like a Princess, come home to my castle.

Grey could most certainly be a king on a throne, that's for sure.

I step out of my glittering dress, letting it pool on the floor. I'm already barefoot, and I long to dip my toes into the hot water.

Hazy steam fills the bathroom.

The hot water burns at first as I dip my toes, feet, and legs. I let out a sigh as I sink down into the bath, letting my body be engulfed in its heat. My hair hangs off the back of the tub, brushing the creamy tiles of the floor. For a moment, in the bathtub in Grey's home, I let myself imagine that he's in the bath with me.

I let my fingers caress gently over my inner thigh, and I convince myself that it's Grey's hand. He's so close, but he's also so far away from me.

I swirl my fingers around, building the pleasure until I slip a finger inside, and I call out Grey's name without even meaning to. I grab the edges of the tub, crying out again.

I hear the bathroom door open, and I don't have to open my eyes to see who it is.

"Rosie," Grey murmurs, and I can hear his steps across the floor. He's right by my ear now, and his lips brush my skin. "I can't wait out there with you calling out my name like that in here."

I want to feel embarrassed, and I think that I am for a moment, but with my eyes still closed, I feel Grey's hand, the real thing, slipping into the water to trail down my thigh.

I let out a gasp as he pushes two fingers inside me, making me ache for him.

When I open my eyes, Grey is watching his fingers push in and out. He is entranced by the motion and the push and pull of the water.

I reach out a hand, brushing over his jaw so that he turns toward me. His eyes are hazy with need, and the green is so very bright, like the grass over the hill outside, lit by the moon overhead.

“Grey,” I whisper, staring into his eyes.

In this light, in the early hours of the morning, it feels like we’re in a dream. I feel as if I’m floating on clouds of lovely pleasure, and I can’t even remember how I got to where I am now.

I am in Grey Kingston’s house, sitting in his bathtub.

It’s been a strange few days, to say the least.

He’s already shirtless, and the rippling muscles of his chest and arms are all I can see. I think of him sitting in the room opposite, which must be his own bedroom. The maid that had shown me to the bathroom told me as much.

I imagine him hot with his need for me, running a big hand over his hardening length, thinking of me, naked and waiting for him in the hot water. I wonder if he hungers for it as much as I do, but I’m not sure how to initiate it.

I’m new to this, and I’m unsure of myself, but I’m sure that I want him and that he wants me.

Now though, I watch in real life as Grey stands in the bathroom, bathed in the rainbow flare of the stained glass window as he unbuttons his pants and steps out of them. Dark blue briefs strain against his tan thighs, and I can’t take my eyes off of his bulging erection, pushing against the fabric of his underwear. His hair silky and soft, falls gently over his forehead, curling over his ears. And the glitter of steel in the strands makes me want him more.

Thankfully, the bathtub is huge, and he slips in with ease, watching me hungrily.

His plush, pink lips trace up my inner thighs with wet kisses as I slide against the porcelain edge of the bathroom tub.

The water is hot and steaming as it laps against my skin, filling the air with a haze of lust that’s too hard to ignore. As he makes his way up my thighs with the slowest, most precise flicks of his tongue, the water splashes. He slides his hands under my ass, holding me up to him.

For a moment, I want to hide the soft folds of my stomach. I'm sure he sees beautiful women every day, and their stomachs are flat and perfect. Grey stops me, though, leaning in to kiss where my belly pokes out a little, touching the tops of my thighs.

He swings my legs over his strong shoulders, and I grasp a handful of his soft hair in one hand and the edge of the bathtub with the other, gasping as he licks my wet heat.

I look down from the bright ceiling lights to where he rests between my thighs, the dark hair on his chest like swirling ink amidst the steaming bath water. He feels my shudder despite the heat, and his green eyes look up to gaze up at me, his lips pulling into a slow smirk against my wet skin as he laps up my juices with his tongue.

"We should be in a bed. It's what a woman like you deserves," Grey tells me with his mouth full of me, his voice husky, and the words pressed to my opening feel strange and wonderful. "I didn't want to wait, though, and then I heard you say my name."

I let out a gasp as he pushes his tongue inside, thrusting it in and out.

"I was thinking about you," I tell him breathlessly. And then, because the lust in his eyes makes me feel bold and sexy, "I wanted you inside of me. I needed you here."

"I'm here," Grey says. He kisses my mound, and then his hands grasp my thighs hard enough to bruise as he licks up from my hole to my clit.

"Does it feel good?" he asks me, voice low.

Water drips loudly as he raises a hot hand from beneath the surface to push my legs apart even more, to touch me and pump his fingers in and out while his tongue flicks over me, firm but slow. His grip on my legs is strong, just the way I need it, causing me to ache for him even more.

"I need it," I breathe, a ripple of pleasure prickling my warm, wet body. "Please."

Grey buries his head between my thighs once more, and I teeter at the very edge when he pulls back, making me whimper. I wonder if he's changed his mind about me or about this, and I feel like I might die if he doesn't bury himself inside me.

"Fuck, you're so beautiful," Grey says in a heavy voice as he pulls back.

"Grey, please," I whimper, tossing my head back. The water sloshes around me, cooling.

"My Rosie, are you sure you want this?" Grey says, insisting we can wait. "I know you haven't done this before, and I want to make sure you're comfortable. This is important."

"But you said you wanted me, that you knew it when you first set eyes on me? I felt the same way, Grey. I want you inside me more than anything I've ever wanted anything."

"You don't know how that makes me feel to hear you say that," Grey remarks. "I dreamed of this since I met you. I can't explain it; I just know we are supposed to be together, always."

I can see it in his eyes, the moment he gives in to the need and the desire, and feel him against me as he pulls me down by the knees, my head resting on the rim of the tub. The backs of my thighs pushed against the front of his chest. Grey rises half out of the water, raining slow, cooling droplets down onto my body, moving forward slowly to push his already hard length deep inside of me.

He stretches me, and I feel it burn, though it doesn't hurt. He's big, but I want him so badly that I know I will take all of him in me.

I watch his muscles move and flex as I squeeze around him, letting him glide inside.

"Are you okay, baby?" Grey asks, his hair brushing my forehead as he leans down.

I can't help but let out a curse, and he swallows it with a kiss, pushing his tongue into my mouth. I feel myself let out a whine, feeling so full as he slides inside me inch by inch,

making me reach out to palm at his shoulders with my hands and press my nails deep into his tan skin.

His breath leaves his chest in a moan, his head tilting back in pleasure as he thrusts in slowly, rolling his hips to bring me to that peak he knows I want, crave.

“You feel so good,” Grey breathes, making a low sound of pleasure at the back of his throat. “You’re damn tight, Rosie.”

“Faster, please, Grey,” I whimper.

He obliges immediately, ever the gentleman, shifting his body to change the angle of his strokes. His thrusts speed up, now hitting deeper inside me than before. I feel so full, and I never want it to end.

This new position and pace combined render me a panting mess, gripping onto his arms for support.

He really is my rock, dependable and strong.

I began to moan his name shakily, the pleasure beginning to be too much for me to bear. He wraps his arms around my waist and leans down to take my lips with his, swallowing my moans and mixing them with his throaty groans. We both must be so close.

I take my hand out of the water and reach down to rub my clit gently. My pleasure builds, pushing and pulling with his thrusts. He notices my hand and he shakes his wet hair.

“No, baby, let me,” he says as his long, slender fingers take over, rubbing me in perfect sync with his thrusts as he fills me again and again. I’m completely over the moon with pleasure, and my moans quickly falter into a heart-rending peak.

“You’re so beautiful,” Grey murmurs, panting, his dripping head rolling to the side, gazing at me in awe as I break apart under him. “Come for me, Rosie.”

The spark of my pleasure explodes in white-hot oblivion, and I cry out. Grey lets go with me, as he comes inside of me, his grip on me feeling like it might bruise. I hope it does.

Grey pulls out of me, and without warning, he lifts my limp and trembling body out of the cooling water of the tub. I let

out a whimper as he kisses my forehead, carrying me to the shower on the other side of the bathroom.

The air has cooled as well and I shiver as we walk across the tiles of the floor. Grey hurries to turn on the spray of hot water.

“I’ve got you,” he says as he gently sets me down on the shower’s matte tiles.

I gratefully sit under the water, soaking my hair and shoulders. Grey settles in behind me, and I want to melt into his embrace as he closes the shower door. I feel a pull toward him, like white-hot electricity or the surge of crashing wind that gathers a storm to the coast.

He holds me against his body, my back to his front, and leans against the wall, holding me halfway in hot water.

Grey pulls a shampoo bottle from the top shelf under the shower head and squeezes out a palm-sized amount into his hand before he massages it into my hair. I don’t think about my body or my size in Grey’s arms.

He makes me feel beautiful and wanted by him.

I feel like a goddess as he smooths gentle fingers through my hair, and the bubbling suds slide down my body and into the drain below.

For a moment, I have a flashback to my senior prom. I remember standing by the tables in my expensive dress, watching my friends as they danced the night away with the boys that wanted them. I had never felt as lonely and unwanted as I did that night. It solidified the way I saw myself back then.

Now though, a beautiful man is wrapped around me, washing my hair, and I feel sorry for my friends. I’ve seen their boyfriends, and I’ve watched them get their hearts torn in two by men who are not fit to even polish Grey’s boots. Maybe all of my disappointments and shortcomings were leading me to Grey’s strong arms.

This feels like something written in the stars. Him and me.

Grey feels like the other half of my soul, and now that we're together, I feel like I've finally been made whole. When I turn around, he presses his mouth to mine.

My need rises inside of him again, and as I run a hand down his chest, I can feel his member grow hard against my hip.

We stand under the spray of hot water, and Grey sucks in a breath when I wrap my hand around his hard cock. I move it back and forth, pressing my thumb over the tip and then down to his base, squeezing until he groans.

He pulls me into his chest, kissing me with such force I have to hold onto him to keep myself steady.

I might be new to this, but I'm ready for another round, and I don't want to stop.

My hands are all over his firm body as his tongue wrestles with mine for dominance. He lets me push him so that we're fully under the hot water, intensifying the heat and desire radiating from both of our bodies.

His hands slide down my back, making me shiver, leaving a trail of goosebumps over my skin as he cups my ass. I let out a gasp as he palms and squeezes my ass roughly before gripping tightly and lifting me. I wrap my legs tightly around his waist.

I like this fierce, primal side of Grey very much. Very much indeed.

"Mmm, my strong man," I all but purr into his ear with my arms around his neck. He softly bites along my neck and shoulder with his teeth, leaving little bruises in his wake.

I don't know what comes over me, but I know that I don't want soft foreplay this time.

I don't want to be held like some precious piece of glass, though I'm sure Grey still thinks of me that way. I want to be tangled with him, hard and rough, with passion like you only read about in books. For so long I only dreamed about a man wanting me like this and now that I have him, my man, I want it all.

I don't want to be coddled.

I want to live my fantasies out with my man.

I reach my hand up to grip his wet hair so that his head is pulled back, and I kiss him hard while grinding on his hard length that's tucked between our bodies.

When we part, I stare into his dazed eyes and practically growl, "I want you to take me hard this time."

I have never seen his green eyes look so dark, like the tops of the trees in a summer storm.

Seemingly deciding he wants the same as I do, Grey pushes me up against the tile wall, making me gasp and arch my back as I come in contact with the cool tiles there. He doesn't look down, instead, he stares into my eyes as he lines himself up with my entrance.

My breath hitches and my nails sink into the skin of his shoulders as he slides his cock inside me, filling me with a sweet ache that only he can soothe.

His grip on my hips tightens as he feels my walls pulse around him, squeezing him. We both let out a sigh of relief when he thrusts himself so that he's fully inside of me, exactly where he should be.

My legs tighten around his waist and I bite down gently on his earlobe, moaning in his ear to let him know just how good he feels inside of me. He lets out a low moan, bringing his head back up to stare into my eyes.

He presses me hard against the wall, using his hips to thrust himself up into me at an agonizingly slow pace.

It's obvious that he loves teasing me, especially when I'm very obviously worked up. I like that this already feels normal, natural, slotted around each other like this. I grab at his salt-and-pepper hair again, pulling him closer to me for a heated, steamy kiss as I begin to try and roll my hips against him, trying to encourage him to move faster.

He follows my cues, thrusting faster and deeper than before, hitting exactly the right spot each time he does. I can't help myself as I moan loudly at each thrust of his hips, gripping his

shoulders so tightly, that I begin to see red, crescent indents in his skin from my nails.

My mind begins to spin, and I wonder how big he would feel from behind, bent over.

I put a hand on his shoulder, and he slows, looking at me expectantly.

“I’ve never been bent over before,” I tell him, and his eyes darken.

He slips out of me, and I hate the loss of him, but he quickly puts me down. I turn around, and Grey slides my hair over my shoulder and kisses my neck. I moan at his mouth pressing against my skin, desperate for him to fill me again.

“I want you inside of me,” I hear myself whimper, though it feels like someone else. I’m a creature made up of lust and longing, now. Unrecognizable even to myself.

Grey grabs my hands and presses them against the shower wall, bracing me. His foot slides my feet apart gently, and I think he’s going to line himself up again, but instead, I hear him move behind me, kneeling on the floor there, hands wrapped around my calves.

Grey is on his knees. For me.

His mouth engulfs my wet slit from behind, and licks and mouths at me without restraint. He pushes his tongue in and out and then flicks it over and over. I come quickly, nearly falling onto his face as I try to hold myself on my trembling legs.

I’m whimpering, aching for him, and when he stands and shoves his member deep inside of me again, it feels big enough to break me in two. The feeling of him is heavenly, and he shows me no mercy as he thrusts into me.

I’m so slick, I can feel my wetness running down my leg, even in the hot water, because it’s mostly on his back.

His mouth clamps down on my shoulder for a moment, gently biting my skin, and I can hear his breath in my ear.

His big hand comes around, at first pulling me even further onto his dick, and then his fingers circle me where I'm most sensitive, and I come almost instantly around him as he thrusts. I can barely hold myself up, the pleasure is so all-consuming, as Grey holds me in place.

His groans are muffled by the hot running water along with the sounds of skin slapping. I swear I can see stars from how hard he's pounding into me, my head rolled forward, resting on the cold tiles of the shower.

I'm so close again, alternating between cursing and chanting his name as he fills me over and over again. Never stopping

Grey's control and strength seem to falter as he groans behind me, still pushing inside of me, his lips slightly parted around its sweet sound. He thrusts once, twice, three times before burying himself completely inside me one more time.

We both cry out in unison, our voices echoing loudly around the private bathroom as we climax together.

My body trembles as heat spreads through me again; the only thing holding me upright is his body pinning me against the wall and his arm securely wrapped around my waist, where he's still cupping me and rubbing my aching, wet slit with his fingers.

"Grey," I say, tucked against his body. "I..." I don't say it, but I want to.

I'm not sure what I'm trying to tell him, but I'm scared he will leave, and I want him to stay buried inside of me for as long as possible. His hand slides up until it's wrapped around my belly. His forehead is pressed to my shoulder, where he leaves a kiss.

"Rosie," he says breathlessly. "You're everything to me."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Grey

Early morning is rising over the hills when I leave Rose sleeping in my bed.

After she told me that she indeed cared for me as much as I care for her, I carried her into my bedroom, and we fell into a deep sleep that only happens after a round of mind-blowing lovemaking.

Our time together isn't just sex, and I want to be sure that she knows that. I fully intend on being by her side as long as she'll let me stay there.

Rose is the beginning of things, and she'll be at the end of them, too.

It was odd to think that we only met because she needed a loan to help her father's business out of the clutches of corporate capture. I plan on telling her that the money is hers and she doesn't need to pay it back.

I'll also give her any more that she might need in the future. I have enough to spare for the both of us.

I really doubt that she is the type of woman to take handouts, but she loves me, and I love her, and maybe that will be enough to convince her to take it.

The lofty rooms of the house are lit by the rising sun, glowing pink and bright orange, and it's nearly silent around the space.

I walk over the hardwood floor, feeling the cold seep through to the soles of my feet. It keeps me awake and alert.

I feel safe in my home, but one never really knows. Now that I have Rose with me, I can think clearly about the Godwin situation. I need to come up with a plan, or it will completely ruin me.

The kitchen smells of warm coffee, the fragrant scent wafting out into the hall. It's the butter pecan blend that Natalie always likes in the mornings.

I find my sister sitting at the kitchen table, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of hot coffee. Her red hair in a wild-looking braid and her bangs stuck to her forehead. She wears a soft, well-worn green sweater, the sleeves thick and threadbare. I'm almost sure it's one of the ones that I asked her to deliver to the thrift shop in Brooklyn.

My sister looks as if she hasn't slept a wink the entire night.

Even though early spring has brought heat and life to the flowers outside, the room is a little chilly. The threat of a frosty turn in the weather remains, and we're still using the fireplaces as if it's winter. I always enjoy the aesthetic and calming flames of a fireplace.

Natalie shivers a little in her stolen sweater and her jogging pants, and I can see that the fire has nearly gone out in the opposite room.

"You know," I say quietly. "It's cold because the fire went out."

"Really?" Natalie asks me sarcastically, looking up at me with tired, green eyes. "Why thank you, Einstein, I had no idea."

"Well, you haven't stoked the hearth," I point out, going over to do it myself.

"I'm too cold," Natalie answers, and she holds her coffee like it's a lifeline.

"Not fixing the fireplace is counterproductive to that," I tell her.

“I thought you had workers or something that would do it eventually,” Natalie says with a sour face. “Don’t you have house staff or something like that?”

“I don’t make them come in until seven,” I tell her. “You have about thirty minutes.”

The early morning sunlight pours in through the small stained glass window above the sink, softening the image of the kitchen in the near-dark of the morning. My feet move over the floor in my socks, and Nat looks up at me from where she’d been staring into her mug intently, her familiar green eyes bleary and tired on her face.

Her eyebrows pull together, scrutinizing me.

I don’t like her scrutiny, so I turn to fix myself a cup of coffee.

“I don’t like butter pecan,” I say, though it doesn’t bother me that much.

I pour a small cup of the butter pecan but use more half-and-half and two sugars in my cup to cut the taste. I know Natalie takes it black. I can hear her taking a sip while I’m pouring my cup.

“And I don’t like not knowing if my brother is dating someone,” Natalie says in a sharp tone. I turn with my cup, and she says, “Is she the real deal, Grey?”

“What are you doing up so early, Nat? You should be resting,” I answer instead, trying to get her off of my scent, but she’s determined to get in my business.

“I could ask you the same question,” she says with one red eyebrow raised, trying to sound more confident than she is. “Where is she now, Grey?”

I let out a sigh, standing at the sink. I take a sip of my coffee but it’s too sweet for me. “I want her, Nat. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Thank you,” she says, looking at me in a surprised sort of way when I turn to glance at her. “Thank you for telling me the truth.”

I shrug. “I figure that I owe you that much after yesterday.”

“She’s really pretty,” Natalie says matter-of-factly. “She looks good with you.”

“I think so too,” I tell her evenly. Inside though, I’m glad she approves.

I sit down at the table with my sister, watching my coffee as it swirls in the mug. I can feel Natalie looking at me, and I know she wants to say something. She won’t admit anything until I start the conversation, though; I know how she is. She wants some give with her take, she’s like our dad in that way.

“Why didn’t you sleep?” I ask her because it’s very obvious that she didn’t.

Natalie tenses up. “I kept imagining someone was breaking into the house.”

“Nat, we’re safe here, and you know that,” I tell her, shaking my head.

I stand and walk to the big couch in the living room, pulling off a blanket and heading back to the kitchen. I put it over her shoulders, and she looks surprised.

“Thank you,” she says, nodding. “Grey, they attacked you in the middle of a known, filled restaurant. What the hell did you do to make the Goblins come after you? It seemed fine before; at least they didn’t care about you.”

“They always cared because I took away potential profit from them,” I correct her, taking a sip of my coffee. “They were just always too scared to do something about it. They didn’t want a war on their own turf, and I have as much right to be there as they do.”

“You’ve been there longer than they have,” Natalie points out, shivering.

The fire is roaring in the living room, sending waves of warmth into the kitchen and the hallway. She’s afraid, though, not really cold – even if she won’t admit it.

“It doesn’t matter to a family like the Godwins,” I tell her, drinking my coffee thoughtfully. “In their minds, they own the streets, and I’m a thief.”

“I wonder what set them off, though?” Natalie ponders. “I mean, it’s been years, and they’ve never openly tried to defy or hurt you in any way.”

“It was me,” a sudden familiar voice says from the door.

I look over to see Rose standing at the opening to the kitchen, looking sleepy-eyed and beautiful. Her strawberry blonde hair is tangled and hanging long and loose down her back. She’s wearing my jogging pants and T-shirt.

“Rose,” I say in surprise, standing up from the table. “You’re up.”

“What did you mean about it being because of you?” Natalie asks, putting her coffee down. “Here, come and sit by Grey,” she says, patting the spot next to mine.

Rose looks a little uncertain, but she shuffles over in her socks and sits by me. I get up to make her a cup of coffee, and Natalie turns to her, waiting patiently.

“Well,” Rose begins, rubbing a hand up and down her arm. “When you said the goblins’ real name, I remembered that they were trying to buy my dad’s bakery. Grey is who I went to, and he loaned me the money to keep the business.”

Of course, she’s right, I hadn’t thought about it that way. The Godwin family has bought and taken over nearly every business on that street, and of course, they are the ones that want to take Rose’s father’s bakery.

Now I realize that I may have started an unintentional war with the Goblins, and Rose is stuck in the middle.

“That actually makes a lot of sense,” Natalie says, looking excited to know. “Grey, you’re the one who said they didn’t care before because it wasn’t worth it, right? Well, this is a real threat to their dealings.”

“I’m so sorry, Grey,” Rose says, going pale. “I put a target on your back. It’s my fault.”

I leave the coffee on the counter and sit down beside her, putting a hand on her thigh. “Hey, no, Rosie. This has nothing to do with you. Don’t think like that.”

“He has a lot of enemies,” Natalie agrees, nodding. “They won’t get him though, don’t worry. He’s too hard-headed and annoying for anyone to kill.”

“That’s really sweet, Nat,” I tell her, rolling my eyes.

Rose laughs, though, and I’m grateful that Natalie could make her calm down.

“Well, what are we going to do?” Rose asks me, blinking those big, brown eyes at me. She’s looking to me for safety and assurance, and I feel so strong for it.

“We’re safe here,” I tell her, reaching out a hand to brush over her jaw.

“Grey, what if they come for my dad?” she asks, looking suddenly resolute. “I’ll die before I let anything happen to him. I won’t let anyone hurt him.”

I won’t let anyone hurt *you*, I think to myself. The thought of someone putting their hands on my Rosie, of someone *hurting* her or causing her distress, makes me want to rip something apart. She’s everything to me, and I won’t let her go.

“I can send some of your guys over to Brooklyn, so they can watch the bakery,” Natalie offers. She stands and takes the blanket around her shoulders off to put it on Rose’s instead. “It’s going to be okay, Rose. We won’t let anything happen to you or your dad. Don’t be scared.”

Natalie is only a year or so older than Rose, but she seems so motherly at that moment and I’m thankful to see this caring side of her. She likes to pretend she doesn’t care about anything and our relationship is one of snide remarks and love deep down, but with Rose, she’s exceedingly gentle for some reason.

I think that Rose is just someone that other people want to protect. Maybe it’s her gentle brown eyes or those soft, pretty features. She garners immediate feelings of *protection* and *defense*, and I know that my half-sister feels it too.

I hope that one day they can be good friends.

“I’ll rip them apart before they hurt you or anyone else,” I promise her, and Natalie whistles.

“Okay, Rambo, why don’t we all go out on the lake for lunch?” she says, looking between the two of us in question. “Rose, I have some clothes you can borrow so you don’t have to wear Grey’s ratty sweatpants on the boat.”

“You have a boat?” Rose questions both of us, looking impressed.

“He has five,” Natalie says, rolling her eyes. “Because he needs one for every work day of the week, apparently.”

“I told you that you could have one if you wanted one,” I answer her, annoyed.

“And I appreciate your generosity, dear brother,” Natalie says, snorting a laugh. “But I’m good for right now.”

“The lake sounds amazing,” Rose says, beaming. She grabs my hand, squeezing.

I can only think of laying her down in the soft sand and trailing kisses across her naked skin, my mouth on her pink pebbled nipples, and I’m salivating. I can almost feel the soft curve of her hips in my hands.

My body reacts to the thoughts, and I have to shake myself to clear them away. Rose makes me feel like a teenager again, giddy and filled to the brim with lust for her.

Natalie snaps her fingers in my face. “You’re drooling, Don Juan.”

Rose lets out a sweet little laugh.

I think Natalie will be good for her. Maybe not good for me, but she’s my burden to bear. I try not to laugh.

“I’ll get the staff to grab the boat once they’re in,” I say, kissing Rose on the forehead. “You two can go get ready.”

“I want lobster rolls, Grey,” Natalie calls after me as I leave. I hear them whispering, and then she says, “And Rose wants you to make sure I get lobster rolls!”

I hear them laughing, and I can’t help but smile.

“Whatever Rose wants,” I call back from the hallway, and I think I can hear Natalie huff.

I know that Natalie is busy, so I call myself to have the bakery looked after, but I don’t get the response I assumed I would when I ask.

“None of them are here, sir,” one of my men says. “The Goblins are all gone.”

CHAPTER NINE

Rose

Grey stares at me in my bikini, his gaze hungry, and I think he wants to eat me up.

Or out, maybe.

And strangely enough or not I don't feel the need to cover myself for fear of anyone seeing my curves. Grey has helped me in this way.

It's a big boat or a yacht, and I wonder if there's anywhere inside we can sneak off to. I need to feel him again like I did last night.

"You look like you want to swallow me whole," Grey whispers in his deep voice as I stand by the railing, his lips at my ear as he comes to stand behind me. "What's on your mind, Rosie?"

The driver starts the engine, and Natalie has Grey's security guard help her lay out a thick blanket on the bottom deck, right in the bright sun's golden glow.

"I'm thinking about you," I tell Grey honestly. "About this," I whisper as I reach a hand down and squeeze him where no one can see.

"The boat's cabin has an inner room with a bed," Grey murmurs, kissing my earlobe.

“What are we waiting for then?” I ask, and Grey wraps his arms around my waist, spinning me around as I laugh.

“We’ll be back in a little while,” he tells Natalie distractedly as he pulls me to the entrance of the inner portion of the boat. “I’m going to show Rose around the yacht.”

Natalie raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I bet,” she says, shaking her head with a snort.

I’m giddy with excitement as he tugs on my hand, and we crowd into the empty inner cabin like two giddy teenagers.

A lavish-looking leather couch is built into the wall, opposite a TV and a kitchenette to one side. There’s a small hallway that must lead to a bathroom and then a door beyond that, which Grey leads me into. Behind us, I can hear Natalie and Anderson talking quietly.

The small door opens to a tiny room with a fold-out bed and a little TV on the polished wooden wall. A sci-fi movie is playing, and I know that one of Grey’s staff must have turned it on because it was the same on the other TV.

Grey likes sci-fi and fantasy stuff, that’s good to know. There are stacks of books that are piled on the floor by the bed, and I look at Grey, raising my eyebrows.

“This is just one of my smaller boats,” he admits, looking the smallest bit embarrassed by the admission. “I actually use it on weekends to read and fish.”

“And now you use it for this,” I say boldly, standing in my bikini in front of him.

He stares at me for a moment, and then he locks the door behind us with a soft click. The window above the bed looks out over the lake, and the glimmer of the sun’s rays spreads across the room.

I feel safe and warm here with my man.

Grey comes to me, and he dips down to press open-mouthed kisses down my neck. I let out a soft sound, digging my fingers into the steel hair at his nape.

“You look so damn beautiful,” Grey says, standing back to look at me.

He looks at me as if I’m a priceless painting or something to be admired and protected. I don’t feel any sort of embarrassment or any sort of need to cover myself in front of him as I might have done before he had come into my life.

His hand brushes over my chest, and he slips the straps of my purple bikini top from my shoulders, leaving my breasts naked and my nipples pebbled in the cool air.

Grey brushes a thumb across my breast, and then his mouth closes over the soft skin, his tongue flicking gently. I toss my head back, all too aware that my soft moans can be heard from outside the room and not caring in the slightest.

I reach down to tug at Grey’s black swimming trunks, releasing his hard length with a sigh of happiness. I wrap my hand around him, squeezing, and he covers my mouth in a deep kiss as he groans.

He brings our bodies close when my hand falls away, slipping his own hand between my thighs and pushing my bikini bottoms aside to run his fingers over my slick core. His hand stills for a second before he groans again, louder this time. Then, running two fingers over my wet entrance, he pushes them in. His fingers sink down to his second knuckle, making me thrust my hips forward for even more friction.

Grey pulls his fingers away, and he picks me up to set me down on the little bed. I’m achingly wet for him, and I can’t wait to feel him inside of me, throbbing as he pumps in and out of me.

He pulls my bikini down my legs and kneels between them, pushing his fingers in once again. I let out a moan, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment as he bends down to gently and fully flick his tongue over the small bundle of nerves that is sure to send me right over the edge.

He looks up, watching the way my breasts bounce as he fingers me. He reaches one hand up and squeezes my breast, brushing a thumb across my nipple gently. My release comes

suddenly, blinding and hot with pleasure, that I ride out in waves.

Grey slips his fingers out just when I feel another climax rising.

“Grey,” I whimper, unashamed and wanting him badly. “Please, I need you.”

“I’m right here, baby,” Grey nods in response, crawling up my body and pressing our foreheads together as he holds his length at my entrance for a moment, letting me feel him rubbing against me, driving me crazy with need.

The need is inescapable and unimaginable. I reach down, and we line him up together, pushing the heavy heat of his arousal to where my body craves him the most. Yet, despite his obvious need, he takes it slow, letting me feel every inch as he sinks into me until his body is pressed firmly against mine on the bed. He pulls back, repeating the motion, each deep thrust punctuated with the sound of his skin slapping against mine.

Our moans join the sound, and Grey presses a kiss to my mouth, licking his tongue inside with smooth swirls of movement. He still smells of me, and I like that I can taste myself on his tongue.

He reaches down, and his fingers rub gently and purposely, building my release until I feel like I might burst, pulling exquisite pleasure from my core. I ride it out as Grey thrusts harder and faster, filling me until I can barely take it, again and again.

Finally, he lets out a soft groan, and his head falls to my shoulder as he fills me with his release, still buried deep inside of me. I push my hand into his hair, breathing hard as he lies on my chest. We’re both covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and I’m so spent from our lovemaking I can barely move.

When Grey pulls out of me, leaving me feeling empty without him, he pulls me into his arms to hold me tight. He presses a kiss to my temple, and I close my eyes.

I like the feeling of his skin against mine. I want to crawl inside of him and make a home there. He’s the other half of

me, and I can't get enough. I remember a book I read a while back, and recognition hits me.

"Do you know what a twin flame is?" I ask Grey, brushing his chest with my lips.

"Tell me," Grey says, keeping his voice low and soft with the quiet movie and the gentle rocking of the waves.

"It's a soul split in half, kept inside two people at once until they finally find one another," I tell him contemplatively. "It's like a soulmate, but more intense.

"Well, you have to be mine then," he murmurs, and whether he actually believes it or not doesn't matter. "You're my other half. I've waited for you, Rosie."

This is the one myth, the one flight of fancy that I choose to believe in.

"And you're mine," I answer him, pressing my hand to the warm muscles of his abs to feel him breathe.

We dress, and Grey just holds me in his arms for a moment, standing at the half-open door. He kisses me, brushing his tongue against mine, and I know I want him forever.

I will never be able to let this man go.

"Huh," Natalie says as soon as we get outside onto the sunlit deck. She's squinting knowingly. "That was such a long tour. Also, those noises. Weird."

"Yeah, that's so weird," I agree with her, nodding as if she's saying something very important to me. "The tour was great, though. Ten out of ten will do."

Natalie lets out a snort of laughter.

Grey has a basket in the kitchenette that his cook had put together back at the house, and he brings it to the thick blanket, sitting it down with us there. I pull Grey's sweatshirt over my bikini and sit down heavily on the blanket, entirely sated and spent. Grey winks at me from across the blanket, grinning widely.

I admire the long, thin lines of Natalie's body in her bikini, but I no longer feel any jealousy as I might have at an earlier time in my life.

Before Grey, I would always compare myself to other women and feel envy when I saw them in a better light than what I saw myself in. I can appreciate that his sister is beautiful, but I don't see her as a competition or as someone to make fun of me. Before, I would always assume that all women were talking behind my back because of my weight. Now, if they are, I really couldn't care less about them. Grey has unintentionally built me up to this glowing, confident version of myself, and I never want to let it go.

I'm a new and better version of myself and who I am.

I revel in the sun as the boat bobs peacefully on the water, laid out across Grey's strong thighs after our yummy lunch is mostly over. Natalie tips her head back, letting the sun's rays warm her face as she pops a grape in her mouth and then finishes off her lobster roll with a smack of her lips.

"So," she says brightly, dusting off her hands. "When are you two getting married then?"

I have to sit up when I nearly choke on the swallow of lemon water I had been trying to drink before Natalie said anything. Grey pats my back gently.

"I don't think that's any of your business, Nat," he says, shaking his head.

The familial ribbing that goes on constantly between them is hard not to envy. I have never had someone like how Natalie has Grey, but I always wanted it.

"Oh, my dear brother," Natalie laughs, smoothing her long red hair over her thin, pale shoulder. "Your business is my business. Where will it be then? Will it be in Italy? You do love Italy. Anderson, will you be my date to their wedding?"

The burly, tawny-haired security guard raises an eyebrow, and I see his lips twitch, but he doesn't say anything. I'm glad he's on board the boat, whether he's Natalie's date to our imaginary wedding or not. I feel safer with him here with us.

“When we get married,” Grey says, looking sternly at his sister. “I’m going to make sure there are no lobster rolls on the menu.”

Grey cracks a smile at his own joke, and I see Nat make a face. Truthfully, I’m just absurdly happy to know that Grey can see himself as my husband, just as I want to be his wife so very badly. He sees a future with me, and it means a lot to me to know.

“Maybe I want them too,” I say cheekily in response, shooting Natalie a wink.

“See?” Natalie says, grinning widely.

“You two are going to be a problem, I can already tell,” Grey says, shaking his head. He’s grinning, though, and I know he’s pleased.

He leaves to go talk to the captain, and I stand, looking out over the water.

Suddenly, gunshots ring out across the lake.

CHAPTER TEN

G rey

There are men on the shore, and in that moment I know where the Goblins are.

A storm has started to move in, and soft rain begins to flood across the surface of the lake. Of course, I would need to go and speak with the captain of our vessel at the precise moment Rosie needs me most.

She screams, and I lunge over the edge of the railing from the top deck, landing on my feet on the polished surface.

The boat hits a hard wave in the otherwise calm water as the captain responds to the urgent sound of bullets over the water, and I look at Rose reflexively. In the span of less than a full minute, my heart is in my throat as I watch her arms windmill for a moment by the railing where she had been looking out, and her pretty, pink mouth forms a perfect O in her terrifying surprise.

The world stops on its axis, and a cry wrenches itself from my throat. The captain is scrambling to get us back on course, but rain lashes across our faces, and it's hard to see. Thunder rumbles, and we need to get off the water.

Bullets continue to spray across the lake. The men on the lake's bank are aiming to kill. There's a scream from Natalie, and I spin around at that moment to look at her, turning back only when she points at me to turn. I catch the sight of flailing

hands and strawberry blonde hair slipping over the side of the boat and into the dark water of the lake.

She's screeching at me, *Get Rose, Grey! Grab her!*

My whole body seems to scream in response.

Natalie lets out another shriek of terror, and Anderson tries to scramble over the side of the boat without much success. The captain is on the top deck with a few of the other staff, and I can hear their calls and the sound of hurried feet as they fumble down the ladder in their rain-soaked, confused and surprised stupor.

There is no time. The love of my life is sinking beneath the water with bullets being hurled at us.

My Rosie is going to drown down there in the dark. The thought of leaving her in the depths, cold and alone, is terrifying and sickening. I can't even bear the thought that she might already be too far gone for me to be able to reach her.

Without thinking, I take the dive headfirst into the dark water. There are screams from my sister behind me as I plunge deep into the lake. The water is bone-chilling against my bare chest, shocking my body in the painful way that only really cold water can ever manage. I force myself to stay completely calm, and after my vision has cleared, I look around frantically under the water for the woman I've fallen in love with. I can't see her anywhere.

It's dark and murky, nearly pitch black in the depths of the lake.

I can see something out of the corner of my eye, and I push my body against the pull of the low current that tugs at me. If she's caught at the bottom of the lake, I fear I will never be able to find my Rosie again. But soon enough I catch sight of a pale shape in the black water, and my heart thuds painfully at the sight of her.

I pray to whatever gods are listening that she isn't already too far gone.

I wrap a strong arm around her waist, pulling her to my side in a quick move under the water. My lungs scream for air. Her

body, clothed in only my sweatshirt and in a bathing suit top and bottoms, is limp in my arms. From what I saw, she didn't hit her head or injured herself in any way when she fell over, but it doesn't matter.

The middle of the lake is a hundred and thirty feet of pulling currents and crashing debris. The whole thing is a nightmare to swim in, which is why no one does without a life vest and especially not when the water is still biting cold. This is probably the worst time to be in the lake at all, never mind the storm crashing over our heads.

If my Rosie is gone, if she can never smile at me again or touch me, I don't think anything will ever be right again. I will never be right again if she's gone.

I fight against the pull of the water below me, and both of our heads break the surface of the water. I take in a huge lungful of air before the both of us go under again as our weight pulls me down.

Panic threatens to smother me before I push the feeling down again, bringing the both of us back up into the open air again. The boat is nowhere to be seen, and I look around for it frantically.

How long have we been down there, flailing and grasping in the dark abyss of the lake? The limp woman in my arms makes no sound, and I am more terrified than I have ever been. I can still hear the spark and bang of a gun, but I don't feel any fear because of it. I'm only worried about Rose, lifeless in my arms.

I'm holding her very life in my hands, and I can't even find the damn boat. We fall back under the cold water once again, and I sputter, feeling my arms grow weak and tired. There's something white and orange in the distance, bobbing and floating toward us like a roadmap to immediate salvation – the boat's buoy.

My strength comes flooding back to me, and as the clouds churned and thunder rumbled overhead, I pull my Rosie through the frigid water and finally hold her against the lifeline of the buoy nearby.

Finally, I'm able to rest my arms and my aching body. I really need to hurry. Rose's life depends on me to be strong.

Every moment her lungs are full of water is another moment closer to death.

The sandy shoreline is close by. I can see it on the lower edge of the hillside, nestled under the thicket of trees. But it's far away from the house on the other side of the lake; I'm almost sure. I swim as hard and fast as I can, pushing my body until I start to believe that I might not ever recover from it.

Finally, my toes brushed the sand, scraping roughly, and I pull Rose's terrifyingly limp body onto the shoreline, tossing the buoy away from the two of us and settling for a second.

Her lips are blue and her lashes are dark and wet against her pale cheeks.

"C'mon, baby," I plead, performing chest compressions and willing her to open her beautiful brown eyes. "Please wake up. Please, *please* don't leave me."

I hold her nose gently with my fingers and press my mouth to hers, blowing air into her lungs and breathing life into her chilled body. I feel hot tears stream down my cheeks, and I don't care enough to wipe them away. This woman has filled my life with her affection and her beauty, and I don't want to live without her.

"Rosie, open your eyes, baby," I tell her, nearly begging her as I breathe for her.

Suddenly, Rose gasps out a breath, blinking open bloodshot brown eyes and pushing away from me to vomit into the sand, spilling water from her air-starved lungs. The relief and abating heartache that I feel can't be explained.

She coughs and gasps, and I fall back against the sandy shore once I realize that she is really and truly alive and breathing next to me.

Her body convulses and twists once again, and she vomits dark water onto the sand. I hold her tangled strawberry hair in one hand and wrap an arm around her and hold her against my

side, relishing in the fact that I can still. I'm so very grateful that she's still here with me.

"Grey," she mutters through chattering teeth with a hoarse voice. She was shaking uncontrollably, no doubt scared and cold and wet.

I search desperately for the boat and my sister, a new terror filling me, and I hope that Natalie is safe on the boat still.

What if she fell off, too, and she drowned, or the men on the shore took her?

I'll rip them all apart, rending them into tiny pieces that no one can find.

The lake is still and almost quiet but for the storm that has fallen over the water. Soft thunder crashes somewhere overhead, and frigid rain begins to fall in earnest, spilling over the water and the powdery sand on the shore. We can't stay on the beach, Rosie needs warmth badly. I can feel the cold settling into my bones, leaving me feeling distinctly empty and raw.

"Grey," Rose gasps out, coughing. She holds her ribs. "It hurts."

I turned to her at the sound of my name, and my heart aches. I wish I could take the pain from her and make it my own, but it's impossible to help her.

"I know, baby," I say, cupping her cheek in my hand with gentle fingers.

She's warm beneath my touch, and I'm so glad that she is alive to be here.

"The others?" Rose asks, looking hopefully out at the water around us.

I don't want to ruin her hope, but I don't plan to lie to her about anything.

"I don't know where the boat went," I answer honestly. I look around, pointing through the storm around us. "I'm not exactly sure what happened."

“The Goblins,” she says, coughing out a breath. “You said that we were safe here.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, pushing every ounce of remorse that I possess into the words coming out of my mouth. “They must have followed us and then hung back.”

“It’s okay, Grey,” Rose gasps through a coughing fit, curling up painfully against my side when she can’t seem to stop the coughing. “It’s not your fault...Their fault.”

I nod at her words, even though her eyes are squeezed shut in her pain.

“Can you walk for me, Rosie, baby?” I ask her in an even voice, keeping my voice pitch high enough to be heard over the crashing rain around us.

“I can walk,” Rose says, always independent like she often seems to be.

She stumbles only once, clutching at her ribs on her side, before I catch her tired body, scooping her up gently into my arms. She’s soaked to the bone, and she’s freezing cold.

I promised her that I could keep her safe, and I plan to do just that.

“Never mind, I guess I can’t,” Rose says as she gives a weak huff of laughter and lets her head fall against my shoulder. She’s so very tired, it seems.

“I’ve got you, Rosie,” I tell her, pressing my lips to her damp hair and closing my eyes. She’s really here. She’s really okay, and she’s in my arms.

Rose is safe and sound. My heart felt like a vice, and now it loosens.

I put her in danger once again, but she’s alright now. Rose is still breathing.

There’s a roar of an engine, and suddenly, the boat turns the corner where the trees obscure the house from view. The vessel is moving at breakneck speed, and when whoever is driving sees us, they turn the boat in our direction.

I hurry over to the trees because what if the Goblins took the boat? What if they have Natalie and everyone else in their slimy, turncoat clutches?

When the boat turns sharply to make its stop, lake water sprays over the sand.

“Oh my god!” screeches Natalie, and I see her standing in front of the controls. “Anderson, look! Look, I found them! They’re alright! Grey, Rose, you’re okay!”

Nat. Relief floods through me at the sight of my sister, pale and soaked by the pouring rain but otherwise completely whole and driving my boat.

Anderson is standing at the front of the yacht. He’s holding his gun, the one that was strapped to his hip, in his hands. His eyes are wild like he’s geared for a fight.

Natalie and Anderson jump out, and when they do, I see some of my staff cowering in the cabin of the boat, possibly due to Natalie’s driving. Anderson and Natalie help us up to the boat, and Natalie looks at Rose, her face grave.

“Rose, I’m so sorry, but they have your dad up there on the shore,” she says, and my heart drops. “They’re using him for ransom to draw us all out.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

R ose

I can see my dad on the shoreline, and there's a gun pointed at his head.

My lungs ache, burning with the lake water.

"Dad!" I cry as we near the sand in the boat. "Dad, no!"

Grey has an arm wrapped around my waist, holding me down to the seat that's almost fully shielded by the railing and the wall of the yacht. My dad is still wearing his apron from the bakery, and his graying blonde hair is wild around his temples. The dimples in his cheeks are not visible, and I wonder if I'll ever see my dad smile again or if this is the end of him and of me as well.

Natalie is still driving the boat, and she curves us, spinning the yacht to spray the Godwin brothers with lake water. The move makes them drop one of their hands from my dad's wrist, and I know Natalie is proud of herself for her move.

My dad still hasn't seen me.

Grey is holding me and watching the shoreline.

Rain slices across the water, but the men on the shore don't seem to care that they're being entirely soaked through, and their clothes are dripping.

"Sam?" Grey breathes, looking down at me and then back at my dad's figure.

What the hell? How does he know my dad's name?

"Come on out, Kingston," the taller of the men yells from the shoreline. He's wearing dark clothing and what looks like long dark hair covered by a navy blue ski hat. "Bring that pretty girl and yourself, and I won't kill him."

"You fucking assholes," Grey spits, standing and showing his face.

We're close enough that I can hear my dad's gasp.

"Grey, what the hell is going on?" he asks, sounding too familiar with the man who's taken residence in my heart. "What the hell am I doing here?"

"Your old business partner was easy to snatch up," the shorter of the men, brother to the taller man by the looks of it, with the gun against my dad's head, crows in delight. He laughs out loud.

"Business partner?" I nearly shout. When I stand up, my chest aches, and I'm woozy, but I make it to the edge of the boat, leaning against the railing.

"Rosie," Grey gasps as he turns, trying to wrap me in his arms, but I pull away from his touch.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I ask him, shouting over the thunder and the rain.

"I didn't know," Grey says in a pleading voice. He holds out his hands in surrender. "I didn't know, Rosie, I'm so sorry."

"I'll give you one more chance before I say to hell with it and blow his head off," the man with the gun shouts, and he sounds as if he's not just showing off.

"Rose?" my dad shouts out weakly, just as confused as I am. "Rose, what is this?"

"Dad!" I call out, nearly crying with terror for his safety. "Let him go, you assholes! He doesn't have anything to do with this! Take me instead!"

"Garcia," Grey says, his voice loud and deep as he shouts at the taller brother. "Just let this go. It's not worth your time and

your effort. The deal is done.”

“Or,” I hear from the shoreline even as Grey sucks in a breath. “I could just shoot you all and be done with the whole thing.”

I see Anderson move, grabbing his gun once again, but Garcia is quicker, and a shot rings out. Grey’s security guard falls to the deck in a tumble of blood and limbs, and I hear Natalie cry out, calling for him.

“No!” I shout as the gun is leveled at my dad.

I lurch against the railing and Garcia points the gun at me instead. The relief I feel is overshadowed by the realization I might meet my end.

My life flashes before me behind the veil of my memories, and I can recall my mother, raven-haired and beautiful and dying before her time. I remember my mother’s perfume and my black cotton dress, and my father’s tearful goodbye to her.

I think of my dad, cooking us eggs and hash on Sundays and just trying his best to love me as she would have. I think of Grey, tangled in my heart and aching in my soul.

I love him.

I know that I love him, and I’m leaving him.

Suddenly, my body is thrown to the ground by familiar, warm hands, and Grey lunges for something on the polished wood of the deck.

Three shots ring out in quick succession. My elbow throbs from the impact of the fall, and Natalie on the lower deck, screams something at me and points at Anderson.

He’s not dead! He’s not dead, Rose!

I sit up slowly from my spot under the railing, holding my ribs. I remember very quickly that there was gunfire, and I look desperately across the shore. My dad stands, staring down at the two men lying prone on the ground before him. I let out a sob of relief, clutching at the railing as I do.

I remember Grey holding a gun, and there were *three* shots, not two.

Please no, don't let it be him. Take me instead because I can't live without him.

I spin around quickly, and I can't see him. He's nowhere to be found. My mind conjures a horrible image of him being shot and falling overboard, lost in the storm over the lake's waves. My heart pounds, and I can't breathe.

"Rosie," calls a quiet voice behind me, and I turn so fast that my head spins.

I run to him, throwing myself into his arms. *He's okay. He's okay. He's okay.*

I kiss him deeply, relishing in his safety and the love that I feel from him.

"We're okay, Rosie," Grey tells me, breathing into my hair. "We're all okay."

Natalie is holding Anderson in her lap, but his eyes are open, and he looks like he'll almost certainly survive the gunshot to his shoulder. Natalie kisses him, and Grey raises an eyebrow at them both.

Natalie gives him the finger and turns back to Anderson.

"Those two?" I ask him, feeling surprised. I didn't even know Natalie knew the bodyguard like that.

Grey shrugs as if he expected it all along. "They've known each other for years now. I think he's always loved her, but they were afraid of what I might say about it. I don't care, by the way, Anderson, just don't hurt her."

Anderson lifts a hand weakly and gives him a thumbs-up, closing his eyes tiredly.

Natalie scoffs. "We weren't afraid of you, dear brother. I just didn't want you in my business, that's all. But thank you anyway." The last words come out soft and sweet. She curls around Anderson, and his hand soothes over her back.

Grey kisses my head and makes sure I'm okay before he goes up to the controls to drive the boat to the dock by the house. My dad is waiting on the shore, and when Grey exits the boat, my dad lands a solid punch to his jaw.

Grey stumbles back, shaking off the pain. He's wearing a T-shirt and his swim trunks, and he's barefoot. My dad looks him over, assessing him.

"Dad!" I cry, trying to hurry off the boat to reach them both.

He points at Grey, looking livid. "That's for putting my little girl in danger and for loaning her money in the first place without my permission. And also for being with her in the first place without my knowing. What the hell, Grey?"

"Dad, I came to him," I tell him, striding across the sand. I wrap him in a quick hug, squeezing him tightly before we both pull away. "Please, it was me that did it."

"No," Grey breaks in, rubbing at his jaw. He opens his arms, and I come to him, clinging to his side. "No, Sam. I'm sorry she was in danger, and you too, but the blame lies with me. I did loan her money because she wanted to save you."

"I didn't need saving, and I could have figured it out myself," my dad says, rubbing a hand over his face in a stressed-out way. "Rose, what the hell were you thinking getting involved with a man like Grey?"

"You never told me about him," I accuse him, pressing my cheek against Grey's chest. "I never even knew you were a part of a business before the bakery."

"I didn't mean to keep it from you," Dad says. "I just wanted you to have a normal life after your mom passed. I didn't want to change you."

"I've changed now anyway, Dad. That's what happens when you grow up." I tell him softly, and Grey squeezes me.

My dad stares between the two of us and seems to come to some sort of decision. I wonder what he's thinking as he steps forward toward the two of us.

Is he going to deck Grey in the face again, maybe?

He reaches out a hand for Grey to shake, holding his chin up as he does.

"You kept her safe," my dad says, looking at me affectionately.

“I’ll always keep her safe,” Grey tells him with a nod. My head tilts onto his shoulder, resting my weight there. “I would give my life to save hers if I had to.”

“I believe you, Grey,” my dad says, letting out a long sigh. “I guess I can be okay with this as long as you always promise to always put my daughter first.”

Grey nods and my dad shakes his hand again before he sits on the sand.

“I love you,” Grey tells me, keeping his voice soft and his lips on my ear.

“I love you so much,” I answer, and my eyes burn with happy tears.

Behind us, I can hear Natalie calling nine-one-one from the boat, still holding Anderson in her arms, and I wonder how long it will take them to get to the house.

“What about the bodies?” I ask Grey as I sit down heavily in the sand, putting my head on my dad’s shoulder. “Won’t the cops blame us and arrest you too?”

Grey shakes his head, glancing over at the bodies down at the water’s edge. I don’t want to look at them, lifeless and sallow in the sand. The only body I’ve ever seen was my mother’s in the hospital after her accident, and I have no need to see anything else that might traumatize me even more.

“They cause a lot of trouble with the police department,” Dad answers. “If we’re lucky, they’ll be grateful and just cover it up. Stuff like that happens all the time.”

Grey looks at my dad in surprise, just like I do, and he stares back.

“What?” he asks, shrugging. “I might not be in the business, but I still keep up.”

Grey nods, looking impressed. The cop cars and ambulances wail in the distance, and Natalie makes a sound of triumph from the boat, still holding her man.

“Let me tell you something, Grey,” Dad snaps, pointing at him from where we sit on the sand. “I don’t want to be a part of

this life. I don't want her to be a part of this. If you want to be with my daughter, you have to promise to leave all of this bullshit behind you. And move houses too, because the Godwins know where you live now."

"They won't come after us," Grey says confidently. "They'll be too afraid."

My dad nods, and I watch Grey kneel down in the sand in front of me.

"Well, what do you think, Rosie?" he asks, smiling at me. "Will you marry me?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Grey

The pale ships sway peacefully in the harbor as they move across the water, their sails white and frothing against the pull of the wind. The water glistens, shifting and splashing over the edge of the castle's walls that lead down into the turquoise ocean.

The towers and turrets rise up behind me, casting the dark flicker of their shadows down over the span of the wedding party below.

There's a glass of whiskey in my hand as I stand at the edge of what feels like forever, taking in the ocean breeze that rises up to waft across the green grass toward the courtyard of the castle. Italy has never looked so beautiful as it does today. Today, I'm a married man. Today, my beautiful Rosie is now my wife.

"You look like a man who's gotten everything he ever wanted," a voice says from behind me. I recognize it instantly and smile ruefully, taking a drink.

"Sam," I answer, nodding. "I'm a man who knows how lucky he is to be here."

"You're not the man I wanted for my Rose," Sam says, letting out a breath as he leans on the rough stone wall beside me. "You're not who I hoped for, Grey."

He doesn't mean it spitefully, and I understand what he's trying to say.

"I'll keep her safe and happy," I tell my former business partner. "If I can't even do that, I'm not much of a man anyway, am I?"

"She loves you," Sam answers me, taking a long swig of his beer.

"I can guarantee that it's not as much as I love her," I tell him seriously.

My love for Rose is all-consuming, and I don't want anything that might distract me from her. I want to be everything Rosie needs, and I will be.

"I think you're a good man," Sam tells me thoughtfully, and it surprises me. The six months that Rose and I spent together before getting married were full of mistrust and annoyance from Sam. "I know ending the business was a big step for you, and I want you to know that I think better of you for it."

"Thank you, Sam, that means a lot," I nod, reaching out to shake his hand.

He hands me something instead, and I stare down at the white envelope in my hand.

"Consider this a repayment or a thank you," Sam says with a shrug. "Use it for the honeymoon or use it on my girl. Either way, you saved my business and my Rose."

There's a crisp white check folded into the envelope and Sam smiles as he walks away, clapping me on the shoulder in a familial sort of way.

"Huh," Natalie says, coming up behind me in her clacking heels. "He actually looked like he likes you, brother. It must have been a trick of the light or too much celebrating."

She's dressed in a lace-covered gown with her hair long cascading down her back. Anderson trails behind her, looking uncomfortable in his suit, but devoted to following my sister around in a way that I can understand all too well.

“Why did we invite you to the wedding again?” I ask, trying not to smile.

“Because, my dear Grey,” Natalie says in a bright voice. She waves a hand, “I made sure this castle you rented was decorated beautifully. I did a great job, didn’t I?”

She *did* do an amazing job.

She’s just gotten her start in event decoration, but she’s already doing beautiful work. The trees that grow all around the courtyard are strewn with glittering fairy lights, and there are streams of lovely white flowers and purple pansies strung across the dance floor.

Inside the castle, the ceremony had been punctuated with soft, floating music and the smell of fresh flowers arranged in beautiful bundles in the candle holders on the walls. Out here in the fresh, ocean air, the tables are strewn with flowers, and our guests have their pick of an array of food.

I reach over, putting a hand behind my sister’s hair, and kiss her temple.

“You did amazing, Nat, thank you for all this,” I tell her honestly.

The sun is slowly sinking in the clear blue sky, and the birds chitter gently in the trees. Portofino is lit by flickering lanterns, shining across the resort fishing village.

The harbor is flanked by a lush hillside filled with olive groves, blooming vineyards, and bright, pastel-colored homes that line the seaside piazza. It’s a beautiful place, and I can remember it well enough from my childhood. My parents were always big on traveling, but this was the one place they would always come back to. They loved Portofino, and now my wife does as well.

Natalie blushes, and I can’t help but laugh. Anderson grins in response too.

“It was nothing,” she says, turning away to hide her smiling face.

Anderson pulls her over to the dessert table to pick at the little cakes and tarts, and my eyes find the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life.

Rose walks through the throng of people, bird seed in her hair, clinging to the strawberry blonde strands that are twisted into a soft bun at the nape of her neck.

She floats across the dance floor like a celestial being, heartbreakingly lovely, and I'm enchanted by her every move. Her silky white gown clings to every curve and dip of her body, and her skin is lightly tanned by the Italian sun from the few days we had spent lazing around on the beaches and getting ready for our wedding.

Her smile could knock a man to his knees, and I very nearly fall there myself to kiss her feet in awe of her. I can't believe I get to have her forever.

She's mine.

"You're mine," Rose says, curling a finger at me and echoing my thoughts.

I take her in my arms, she smells of vanilla, warm and familiar. We head out onto the dance floor, and I spin my wife, bringing her back to settle in my arms. Others joined us there. Rose has already danced with her little cousins and her father after we had our first dance an hour earlier and now it's my turn again.

"Rosie," I begin, and Rose stops me, pressing a soft finger to my lips.

"You can call me Mrs. Kingston," she tells me, beaming.

My smile feels as if it might just have the power to split my face in two.

"Mrs. Kingston," I correct myself, gently pressing our foreheads together.

"Yes, Mr. Kingston?" Rose answers, brushing her lips across mine.

"I love you," I tell her, meaning the words with every ounce of my being.

“I love you, and I have a wedding gift for you,” Rose says, beaming at me.

“My Rosie, nothing in this world could top the present you have given me today. You!”

She looks at me with the slyest of smiles, and I can’t help but wonder what is going through her beautiful mind right now.

“Grey, I’m pregnant. We’re going to have a baby.”

EPILOGUE

THE HONEYMOON

Rose

Grey kisses my belly, my happiness enough to send me into oblivion.

The sea breeze carries salty wind into the room. I wake to the sound of birds chirping outside the open window, and the curtains billowing like crashing waves.

They are singing a bright morning song, full of joy and all the good things in the world. At this moment, in particular, nothing in the world seems bad enough to care about. I'm in a room that's filled with yellow light, the kind that's soft and warm, haloed across the bedsheets.

I'm finally the wife of Grey Kingston, settled into the title, and the relief is nearly overwhelming.

And best of all, I have my Grey here with me, wrapped in my arms and warm against me.

His breaths come softly, almost like a sigh at every exhale that he breathes against my skin. His lips trail over my belly, kissing lazily where his child grows in my womb.

Both of us are deep into our love for each other, and now that I'm pregnant, I need even more relaxing time than usual. I plan on staying in the villa's great, soft bed the whole day today. For Grey to sleep in longer than me is a near miracle, and I'm glad that we're both finally getting some rest together.

I'm almost sure that it has to be possible to become lost in this bliss we have together.

I wouldn't have a problem staying here in the sun's yellow rays with the man of my dreams. I could happily never return to real life again. This honeymoon is beautiful, the Italian countryside is beautiful, and this man who loves me is even more beautiful than anything.

It's been a long few weeks, what with the wedding and everything between us, but now it feels right. I feel as if the world has shifted on its axis, and we're right where we belong.

Grey lets out a soft, adorable little groan, and then he breathes in deeply in the way people tend to do when they're waking up from a particularly restful sleep.

He pulls my body closer to him, and I close my eyes, savoring this moment of simple happiness that comes from being held by the man I love, the man that is now my husband.

"Good morning, beautiful," he murmurs as he yawns, turning his face against my belly so that he can look up at me.

His green eyes are bleary and sleepy-bright, and his hair is tangled and dark, the steel glistening faintly in the morning light that streams in through the open window. I can't help but marvel at how I have someone as gorgeous as Grey.

He grins up at me, heartbreakingly attractive, and then he presses a kiss against my belly, his new favorite spot to lavish me. Before I let him know that I was carrying our child, the product of our love, his favorite spot to kiss was just behind my knee. He leans forward over me, and I release a sigh as he does so.

He nuzzles his face against my neck, breathing in deeply and sounding perfectly content to stay there all morning. "I love you," he mumbles against my ear, and I whisper it back to him, running a hand through his hair.

The day before was one of the greatest days of my entire life. Of course, it had been long, slow-going, and there had been a few bumps in the road. But, in the end, I finally married Grey, the man of my dreams and now I was having his baby. That

has to mean that the world is good after all, and the gods are smiling down on both of us.

I had walked down the flower-strewn aisle in my glimmering, white silk gown, stitched with the silver curling flowers and vines of a lovely forest scene and a long, hazy veil to accompany me on my journey down the aisle.

My father had given me away to Grey with tears in his eyes and a stern but affectionate look at my new husband. We both stood at the altar in our wedding attire, and we tried very hard not to kiss until we both fell over.

It had been everything that a person could wish for and even more to me.

And then, of course, the both of us made our vows to one another. I meant every word of love that I professed to this man at my side. The officiant was loud as he pronounced the two of us as husband and wife, and we kissed in front of the entire world, a kiss that would make poets weep and artists tremble at the sight.

It seemed like everything faded away at that moment, as if the world was ending around us. But the world is just beginning for us.

We kissed each other as if it were the first kiss of our entire life because it was, in fact, the first kiss of our new life together as one. Our friends and family clapped and cheered for us, and my dad might have grumbled a little. I will never forget that day. Never.

And now, I'm in bed beside the man I love more than anything else in the entire world. I know I could sleep peacefully again at this moment, perfectly content. The baby in my belly is a reminder that I'm forever connected to this man, and we are entangled completely in this new life together and we always will be.

I gently run my fingers through Grey's thick hair, bringing my hand up and playing with the inky locks. Grey keeps his eyes shut, enjoying the peaceful moment with me.

“This is one of those moments,” I whisper, my fingers curling around a smooth lock of my husband’s hair. “That’s just absolutely perfect.”

“I would have to agree with you, my Rosie,” Grey says, smiling as he moves up and presses his lips against my neck.

“Don’t start on that again,” I scold him playfully. “I’m Mrs. Kingston now, you know.”

Grey laughs, pulling back from my neck and propping himself up on his elbow so he can see me completely. He’s so beautiful.

“You will always be my Rosie,” Grey tells me in that soft voice that always sends shivers down my spine. My toes curl, and I let out a breath.

I will always be his Rosie.

“I think I could live here and be happy for the rest of my life,” I tell my husband because I might cry if we start talking about sentimental things. These pregnancy hormones are killer.

“Well, my love,” Grey says, only half kidding. “If you want, I can buy this villa for us.”

“That seems a little excessive,” I tell him in a mockingly stern tone. “But it would make me happy.”

“Hmm,” Grey says, trying not to smile. “I may have to make some arrangements.”

“But what about the home you just bought in the Hudson Valley?” I ask him as he brings one of my hands up to kiss my palm.

He shrugs, letting out a carefree laugh. “I guess we’ll have to live in both of them.”

I let out a laugh, and Grey leans down to kiss me. He smells of the ocean and of the clear blue sky above the villa’s lofty roofs. I reach up for him and cup his face, my fingers splaying across his cheek so gently that I barely touch him.

“And how is our little one today?” Grey asks me, tracing a hand over my belly.

“Growing,” I answer him, smiling softly at the way his fingers glide across my skin.

This soft, beautiful side of Grey is so endearing, so attractive, that I can’t get enough.

I remember our first meeting very clearly, and I marvel at the fact that we’re here now and tied to each other forever. That first week with him had been a whirlwind of danger and affection, but now we have a baby on the way, and our love is only growing.

My thoughts dance with the memories of our first kiss, our first time tangled up together. Grey is the first touch I’ve ever had from a man and the only touch I ever want to keep. I don’t ever want to leave his side, and I know that I need to be his forever.

There is beauty in our love, and that beauty seems to reach out and touch every other part of our lives. My dad’s bakery is flourishing now that the obstacles are out of the way, and Natalie is so very happy with Anderson and her event planning business.

Today feels like the first day of the rest of our lives, and Grey is my cornerstone.

And after all that we have been through, both the good and the bad, we are now here together, in a beautiful little villa in the Italian countryside. There is nothing in the whole world except for us in this moment in time, and it is complete and utter bliss.

I look at Grey, and he moves back up to kiss me again, holding my cheek in his hand. I let my tongue drift over his without urgency. We have all the time in the world to love one another.

“I love you,” Grey says, breaking the kiss. I stare into the bright green eyes of my one and only love, and I’m filled with the purest sense of finally being at peace with everything in my life.

“I love you too,” I say right back, smiling up at him for only a moment, before pulling his lips back to mine and kissing him senseless.

As night falls over the villa I lay on the mess of white sheets. The room is lightly lit by the silver moonlight that shimmers in through the billowy curtains that surround our king-sized bed by the window.

Natalie planned the entire honeymoon, and she did an amazing job. From the bed I'm lying in after my dip in the big pool outside, the view of the lush valley below the window is perfectly stunning.

The only sounds we hear are that of nature. Since there was no other soul near our villa, it really did feel like we were the only two people in our own personal paradise.

We've barely had any real time to ourselves before the wedding, but this is perfect. The remains of our dinner sit on the table, as Grey lays next to me. He's propped up on his elbow, his long fingers tracing along the short hem of my button-up silk top.

I feel my need crawling up my spine, and my body relaxes slightly out of pure instinct of his touch. His eyes flicker up to mine, and as he tilts his head to the side and raises his eyebrows, I smile at him and give a slight nod.

The man is such an angel, and I trust him completely and wholeheartedly with my body and soul. He holds my gaze as he undoes the buttons, plucking them apart as he pulls open my shirt. He lowers his head, brushing over the skin of my stomach with his warm breath. I let out a long exhale, and my fingers grip the sheets as he drags his bottom lip up my body and to my chest.

"Tell me what you want, Rosie," he whispers, his fingers moving up my sides, squeezing your curves occasionally, "I'll give you anything you want, even the stars."

I sit up, and he follows suit, sitting up too, with his legs stretched out. Wordlessly, I climb into his lap so I'm facing him, my legs wrapped around his waist and my hands on his shoulders. He rests his hands on my hips, his moss-colored

eyes lighting up as he stares back at me, mesmerized by my movements. I lean down to kiss him on the neck, unbuttoning his shirt at the same time and gently caressing him across his collarbone with my fingers.

He shivers slightly as I nip and suck little pink bruises along his collarbone, making my way up to his neck, his jawline, and stopping at the soft edge of his ear.

“You know what I want...I want you,” I say softly into his earlobe between nibbles, one hand on his cheek.

Below me, I can feel him getting harder against my leg. He brings my waist down and starts moving gently so that we're softly grinding, building the pleasure between us. He looks so damn attractive as he lets out little groans, his eyes shut tight, and his mouth slightly open, parted gently.

I bring my mouth up to kiss him, deep and intense. Everything else goes out of focus for me when Grey's mouth is on mine, and it's only the two of us. We're both so focused on the pleasure, lost in the desire of it all.

My arms slowly snake around his neck, and I run my hands through his soft hair, occasionally pulling when he grinds into me hard, eliciting a muffled moan from my throat.

He breaks the kiss, panting. “I can't take this. I can't wait anymore,” he says as he lifts me up. “I need you, Rosie.”

He doesn't even bother taking off my black lace panties, just flips me on my back and moves them to the side as I reach down to stroke him gently. He pushes down on me a little, and I let out a soft sound, slowly taking all of him in. He inhales sharply, holding his breath, and then exhales with a groan when he's completely inside of me. His hand moves down to where he is pushing in and out, and he rubs his fingers across my clit, bringing my pleasure to the surface.

His hands hold my hips, guiding my hips to move toward him again and again, at a slow, tender pace. He's been more gentle since he found out I'm pregnant, and I like the way he takes it slow.

We're both letting out quiet moans, his grip on my hips tightening as I move against him. The pace is slow, but the position that I'm in, under him with my legs around him, along with how big he is, makes him hit my sweet spot every time he fills me up completely.

His hard length is hitting me so deep, and I feel so very full, so satisfied. I look up to Grey, and his lovely, familiar face flushes as he stares down at his cock going in and out of me. I tip his face up with my hand and kiss him deeply.

I start to roll my hips slowly, pulling him in closer to me so that his dark head is tucked into my neck and we're tangled together so very close like vines twisted in a growing tree. He lets out a low groan and his hands move to my breasts, squeezing gently because they've been extra sensitive lately.

He starts to thrust harder into me, faster and more intense, holding onto me for support. He's pounding into me while pressing kisses to my neck and murmuring that he loves me so much as he chases his high. The both of us are moaning so loudly, so close to coming undone together, I squeeze myself around him as I lose myself to its pleasure, and I know my nails must leave trails on his back.

This man has me so tangled in his love, so deeply embedded in my feelings for him, that I can only think of his pleasure. I want him to feel good because of me.

It's amazing to have a man like Grey be so in love with me that my very presence makes him want me. The insecurities that once plagued me no longer take root in my mind, Grey has taken their place, keeping me confident.

Grey's release dawns just after my own, and he stays buried inside of me after. He can't seem to let me go, and I don't want to stop touching him either.

Our arms are tightly wound around each other's bodies, holding onto each other for dear life like it's the end of the world. His head rests on mine, our chests rising and falling together in unison.

We are one, Grey and me, forever and always.

MONTHS LATER

Grey

Holding my son in my arms has to be the greatest feeling in the world.

Besides holding his mother in my arms, of course.

Ryder Kingston is beautifully perfect and tiny, wrapped and swaddled in yellow blankets where he sleeps in my arms. The whirring and beeping of the hospital are background noises to my quiet moment with our child.

Rosie is sleeping on the hospital bed, her face turned into the pillow. She looks pale, her hair soft, in a limp braid, but she's the most beautiful sight I have ever witnessed.

I'm so proud of her, and my eyes burn with joyful tears as I remember watching her bring our baby into the world, giving him new life and letting him meet us for the first time.

"My love," I whisper, reaching over to tuck the loose strands of her hair behind her ear. "I would be nothing without you now, my Rosie."

I searched for the thing that would bring me peace and happiness all of my life. I wanted things that I shouldn't and needed things that I couldn't have or at least thought I couldn't have. Rose is the warmth that chased the cold from my nightmares, and she's the sunlight, bathing me in the golden beauty of her soft curves.

I know that I will never get enough of her body and her pretty face but most of all her love.

She sleeps peacefully, and I wonder if she knows how much she means to me. I wonder if she feels my love as I hold our newborn son.

Ryder makes a soft sound and his little face screws into a tiny grimace. His eyes are blue for now, but I can already see the slow crawl of whiskey brown across the round irises. Like mine, his hair is dark, but I muse that it might lighten to a soft, strawberry blonde.

What a thing that would be, for him to have my face, but her pretty features. It feels so strange to have something like this in my life, something so awe-inspiring and lovely that it covers everything else. Whatever bad there was in my life has been brushed away, wiped clean by Rosie's love for me.

Somehow, Rose has taken every version of me that I resented and wanted to forget, and she's made them her own. I want a lifetime in her embrace, and I am a better man because of her. I feel as if I've been searching for her since the beginning of time, and I never really knew love in its entirety until I met her.

How could I have gone my whole life without her in it?

It's strange to remember the days before Rose came into my world, using her mother's maiden name, so I never knew who she really was. It's odd how circumstances bring people together and how two people will always find one another.

Sam was just a precursor to Rose, and I was always meant to be at her side.

I would give everything else up just to be with her, and I did. My only regret is that the two of us didn't meet each other even sooner so that we would have more time together. My soul is complete now that Rose has made a home in my heart and will be forever by my side.

She is my heart and my everything.

All of the good in my life is because of you, Rosie.

Little Ryder is what makes me want to be even better than I am. I want to be a man that he's proud to call father, as his mother calls me *husband*.

There's a knock at the door, and Natalie steps in on quiet feet, making sure her sneakers don't squeak on the freshly waxed hospital floor tiles. I put up a finger to my lips, and she nods, keeping her voice low but where I can still hear what she has to say.

She makes grabby fingers at me, mouthing, "Can I hold him?"

I'm reluctant to let my son go from my arms, but this is Natalie, and I would trust my sister with his life if it came to that.

I shift the dozing newborn into her waiting arms, and she looks overly delighted to have him there for the moment. Earlier, various friends and family filled the room to witness our little man's glorious arrival. Natalie and Anderson left to get food, and the others have just gone home, leaving Rose and me happy wishes on their way.

Sam is downstairs in the cafeteria, getting what must be his tenth cup of coffee of the day or night. Midnight is quickly approaching, and the stress of the birth is finally starting to weigh on me. I want to sleep curled up next to my wife, but I don't want to leave our son in the hands of the nurses. It just doesn't feel right. I want him to be in the arms of someone who loves him.

I'm as fiercely protective of him as I am of his mother. They are one and the same in my mind, safe and sound here.

"I can stay with him for a while if you want to get some sleep," Natalie says in a quiet whisper, nodding toward where Rose is sleeping on the bed.

"Are you sure?" I ask her softly, though I'm relieved to have someone to care for our child that I trust so deeply. "I can hold him if you want to sit down."

She nods, looking down at my son in awe, and I can understand the feeling well enough. "Anderson is working

online now, so he's down in the cafeteria with his laptop. I want to be here with you, Rose, and my little nephew."

"Thank you, Nat," I tell her, reaching forward to kiss her cheek. "Thank you for being here for this. You don't know how much it means to me."

She shrugs, and there's pink in her cheeks. "I'll need the practice anyway."

I stare at her in surprise. "Do you mean to say that you're...."

She nods, and I put a hand on the nape of her neck, pulling her into a half-hug with my son tucked between us. My sister looks radiantly happy, and she appears to be almost glowing in the poorly lit hospital room.

It's a really good look for her.

"Soon, little Ryder will have a best friend," she whispers, beaming with teary eyes.

"Nat, I'm so happy for you," I whisper. "A baby? I can hardly believe it."

"We've been trying for a little while now, and we finally have what we wanted," Natalie says, letting out a happy little laugh at the admission.

"You're pregnant?" Rose's sleepy voice comes from the bed, and we both turn to see her trying to sit up. "Natalie, is that what you just said? You're pregnant?"

I stride over to her, tucking myself behind her to hold her up gently. She leans against me, putting her weight on me, and I kiss her temple.

"I'm three months along," Nat whispers with a nod, still holding Ryder in her arms.

"Nat, that's amazing," Rose tells her softly, bleary-eyed from sleep.

The door to the hospital room opens once again with one quick knock, and Sam shuffles in slowly. He looks at all of us, surprised, holding his coffee in hand.

“What?” he asks, looking in confusion at all of us. “What happened?”

Rose lets out a tired laugh, and I wrap an arm around her, careful of where I hold her. She tips her head back, still clearly exhausted.

Sam comes over and kisses his daughter on the top of the head.

“Sam, why don’t we step out and let these two rest for a little while?” Natalie asks Rose’s father, nodding her head toward the door.

“Right,” Sam nods, taking a long sip of his hot coffee.

He smiles at Rose, and he shakes my hand, following my sister out into the hallway of the hospital.

The room is silent, and the only sound is the bed’s beeps and soft clicks. Rose lets me help her to lay back down and I crawl in beside her, being extra careful of the IV in her hand.

“I’m so proud of you, baby,” I whisper, breathing in the scent of her soft hair. “I love you.”

“I love you, Grey,” Rose tells me, curling into me. “I love our life.”

“This is where I want to be forever,” I tell my wife. “Right here with you.”

“God, I love you so much, Grey,” Rose admits, moving even closer.

“We did it,” I tell her, shaking my head in awe. “We did this together.”

And we have. We’ve made a home in each other’s hearts, and we’ve grown together, learning from our mistakes and making each other better for it. Good things grow like flowers between us, blooming in our love. In the garden of our life.

It’s only up from here.

THREE YEARS LATER

Rose

I drown my pizza in ranch, folding it up like a burrito and Grey makes a gagging noise.

“Oh, really now?” I say with a laugh. “You’re not going to pretend you don’t like it?”

Grey face colors, and it’s amazing. “I just wanted to impress you that day.”

“Saving me from being shot impressed me well enough,” I answer him, leaning in to kiss my husband quickly.

My dad chokes from where he sits on the blanket. “Saving you from *what?*”

Natalie snorts out a laugh. “That’s a long story that you probably don’t want to hear, Sam.”

“Yeah, probably not,” I tell my dad, patting his shoulder heartily.

The sun is shining brightly to the right of us, still golden even late in the day, and the boxes of pizza have grown cold and are half-empty on the blanket. The sound of frogs in the distance and the chirping of crickets are both wonderful additions to our holiday picnic.

There are other families basking in the warmth of the day across the park. I wonder for a moment what they’re talking

about and how they are. Surely they can't be as happy as we are.

Surely, no one can be that happy. Somehow, I can't imagine anyone being as content as we all are with each other.

This family that I've built is sturdy, and I know I can always lean on them.

Ryder flips onto the picnic blanket, carrying a frog in his hand. Natalie shrieks as her nephew tries to show it to her, and Anderson lets out a laugh. Their little girl crawls across his lap, and when Ryder shows the frog to her, she giggles happily, drooling with bubbles popping out as she grabs for the slimy thing.

"Allie likes the frog, huh, baby," I say to my dark-haired son with a laugh, pulling him in to take the little creature from him. "Aunt Nat Nat, not so much."

"Definitely not," Natalie says, scooting into Anderson's lap for protection.

She still looks happy, though, and I think that her disgust is mostly performative to make her nephew laugh. I've seen her pick up plenty of little animals.

At her wedding, with her belly swollen and just about ready to pop, I saw her with a stray cat, leading it to a plate of food. That night had been a good one. My dad had watched Ryder and Grey with a sappy grin. He's a man who becomes exceedingly sweet and loving when alcohol is in his system, and that night, he nearly suffocated me on the dance floor in front of everyone.

The Grey and I had to sneak off as everyone was doing the electric shuffle, finding refuge in the greenhouse by the big mansion where the wedding was being held.

Grey held me in the moonlight, as bodies came together like the rush of the sea over the sand. We stayed in the greenhouse most of the night, curled up in each other's arms before we made our way back onto the dancefloor with leaves in my hair and dirt on our clothes. In her white dress, Natalie shook her

head at us, miming a gagging motion, but she was grinning. She loves us both, and we love her just as much.

That had been a damn good night.

“Here we go, Buddy, let’s take him back to the trees,” Grey says gently, bringing me back to the present and holding the frog in his cupped palm after I’ve taken it from our son. My heart swells whenever I watch them together. Grey is made to be a father. “He probably has a family that would like him to come home. Don’t you think so, Ry? We don’t need to keep him from his family.”

“Come home!” Ryder repeats in his little voice. “Come home!”

“He’s in the repeating phase, huh?” my dad asks, grinning. He takes a drink of his beer. “You were stuck in that phase for a whole year, Rose.”

“Don’t say that, Dad,” I reply with a groan. “He’s repeating curse words too.”

I watch Grey walk them both over to the forest at the edge of the park, and I lean back on the big picnic blanket. The sun is still hot on my face, and I let it warm me from the outside in, taking in the rays like they might fuel me.

I love being outdoors, and I love being in the sun. I love it even more in the company of the people that I care most about. They are the most important thing to me.

Anderson shrugs. He kisses his daughter. “I’m ready for it. All Allie does is drool and cry.”

“That’s not true,” Natalie counters with a laugh. “She can say *poop*.”

“Yeah, she’s a scholar, our girl,” Anderson says in a deadpan voice, and Natalie bursts out laughing at her husband.

Grey comes back and Ryder settles on my dad’s lap, stealing pepperonis from his pizza slice. My dad lets him, ever the soft grandfather to his grandson. I can’t help but smile at the adorable little display, and my dad smiles back at me.

I can't believe how far we have all come from the beginning and how much we've grown.

"I'm glad we could get together like this for the 4th of July," I say to everyone. "We can watch the fireworks over the lake tonight. Grey is grilling steak for everyone."

"Count me in," my dad says with his beer in hand, patting his belly with a loud burp. Ryder pats his little tummy, too, copying my dad's movement.

Little Allie crawls up to me, and I lift her into my arms, holding my niece close to my chest. She takes deep, sleepy breaths as she sits on my lap, curling a hand in my hair. Her red hair tickles my nose, and she makes little gurgling sounds in my ear. Her green eyes are closing in sleep. I feel so content in the sun's golden rays, surrounded by my family and the people that I love. I can't imagine a better day, and I wonder if anyone has ever been as happy as I am at this moment.

For years, I felt like I wasn't doing enough in my own life. I felt like I wasn't good enough to be with anyone, let alone someone like Grey Kingston. The fact that I've been his wife for a few years now is a testament to the fact that I was so very wrong.

I have confidence in myself that I never had before. I know my worth, as a wife, as a mother, and just as a person in general. I can't believe now that I had ever thought of myself as *not enough*. Grey looks at my body, a little different from carrying our son, but not with disdain but with even more need, he wants me even more than before.

After my mom's accident, I had been so afraid to make any sort of connection that might hurt me. I wonder, sometimes, if I didn't hate myself back then, but rather I hated what someone could do to me if I let them. I didn't want to be vulnerable in my own life and not be able to protect myself from others. I wanted to be strong and capable, and now I am.

I put myself on the line for my love and for my family, and I've come out unscathed and completely intoxicated with the love of my family. This man at my side is so deeply in love with me and me with him that nothing can tear us apart.

I would move heaven and earth for Grey Kingston, and I would fight off anyone who tried to take him from me. He is the one thing that has never let me down, and I need him like I need the air moving in and out of my lungs. I know he needs me the same way. My life now is one that I have always wanted. I've always wished to be loved and to be taken care of, and Grey goes above and beyond for me in that aspect.

He is the same man who covered every inch of me with his body when bullets rained down and who branded his name into my skin with his touch. He is the same man who loved me then, and he loves me now even more.

All of my friends always talked about this kind of love when we discussed what we wanted. I never set any guidelines for myself or who I wanted to be because I never thought I could have anyone worth laying down rules for. Men didn't want me like that. They just never did, not until Grey came into my life and changed everything.

This is the man all of my friends dreamed of when they conjured their future husbands, imagining him in their heads because the boys in real life could never measure up to that kind of man.

I'm living out their fantasies now in real life, and it's the most amazing experience. This man would go to the ends of the earth for our little family, to hell and back, and I would follow close behind.

I see them sometimes. My friends, in their lackluster relationships and with their needs barely met. Grey could never be that for me. He will always be right there when I need him, and I have complete faith in him and our relationship. He has set the bar so high for what I will accept from other people that I don't even know what to say when my friends discuss their husbands with me.

I don't even remember what it's like now not to feel wanted and feel like someone is always waiting to hear from me and see me. Grey has given me that gift so easily.

"I love you," Grey whispers with his mouth to my ear on my other side.

“I love you,” I echo, pulling him in for a quick kiss to end our day with love.

“Mommy!” Ryder calls to me in his little voice, and I let my niece down, giving her to her mother. “Mommy, look!”

The sun isn’t yet low in the sky, but my dad has brought out sparklers, and he lights them. I watch Ryder’s little face grow enchanted by the flickering sparks, and I want to stay in this moment forever. I want to relish every moment with my child that I can, and I never want to miss anything. I take out my camera, the vintage polaroid that Grey gifted me a year earlier for my birthday, and I snap pictures of everything. I get Grey kissing my ear and Natalie holding her baby girl with Anderson kissing her shoulder. I get my dad grinning and Ryder holding the sparkler in his chubby little hands, smiling his wide, gummy smile.

“The light of my life,” Grey says in my ear, and I can’t help but smile as we watch the sparkler die down, drifting into nothing. “Both of you are.”

“More!” Ryder cries, clapping his chubby little hands.

Little Allie is entranced by the sight, watching with bubbles escaping her open mouth. Natalie and Anderson are leaning together as my son, and my father stand together. Grey presses a kiss to the back of my head, and I know in my heart that life can’t get much better than this.

YEARS LATER

G rey

Never could I have imagined how much I love being a father in my lifetime. Ryder is becoming the best big brother I have ever seen, and his sisters adore him, as do his mother and me.

This weekend, Rosie and I are on babysitting duty with Natalie and Anderson's two children. Allie has herself a little brother now, Devon, and we have added to our family with twin girls, Theresa and Morgan.

I thought I was overly protective when Ryder was born, but it is nothing compared to having little girls. I am already devising questionnaires for potential gentlemen callers when the girls are old enough to date in my eyes.

My beautiful wife, Rosie, has a continual glow about her. Family life certainly suits her, and she is the best mom, wife, and lover there is. I might be a bit biased, though.

Sometimes, when I reminisce about how Rosie and I met, I know that I wanted her to be my wife from the moment I saw her. Some animal instinct told me she would be the mother of my children. I'm just damn lucky that she felt the same from the beginning. I can't imagine not having her and the children in my life.

They are my reason to breathe, to live.

Watching our children, who you played a part in making, grow up is one of the most magical things there is. My little man,

Ryder, is very much the typical, loud, get into trouble, curious little boy. But, when it comes to his sisters, he becomes a very caring and accommodating big brother. Truly amazing. And I can see both Therese and Morgan already have a semi-stubborn streak running through them which Rosie says comes from me. But, hey, who am I to argue?

I've been thinking about talking to Rosie about having one more baby, but I don't know if she is up for it. However, I can see how tiring it was for her when she was pregnant, and she has already given me more than I could ask for.

This is a subject I have yet to broach with Rosie. I know she loves the children like life itself, so maybe the suggestion of one more little one will go over better than what I am thinking.

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