



MARRYING A
writer

SHANI HAIM

THE WRITER series book 3

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About the Book

I always thought my wedding day would be the happiest day
of my life.

I was wrong.

Because it wasn't my choice. I was forced into an arranged
marriage.

Roman Irving Gallagher was my childhood best friend, and I
loved him with my whole heart. Then one day, without the
slightest explanation, he was my tormentor. My bully.

Now he's my husband.

But I'm starting to see cracks in his cold façade. The boy I
once knew is still in there somewhere, trapped behind the
walls Roman has built around his heart.

And I'm going to break down those walls, brick by brick.

Because even though my wedding wasn't what I wanted,
there's no reason our marriage can't be *exactly* what we both
need.

After all, we're in this together.

For better or worse...

Playlist and Pinterest Board

Just a few extras to give you the full Roman and Justine experience.

Their [Pinterest Board](#)

Their [Playlist on Spotify](#).

From Eden – Hozier

New York City – Lenny Kravitz

Adrienne – The Calling

The Princess Bride - Storybook Love – Vitamin String Quartet

Stuck with U – Ariana Grande, Justin Bieber

Powerful – Major Lazer, Ellie Goulding, Tarrus Riley

DNA x House of Cards (Violin Remix) – OMJamie

Counting Stars – One Republic

She's a Beast – Lenny Kravitz

Cutthroat – Imagine Dragons

Love Me or Leave Me – Little Mix

Animals – Marron 5

22 – Taylor Swift

Closer – Kings of Leon

Nights in White Satin – The Moody Blues

You & I – One Direction

11:11 – Ben Barnes

Storybook Love – Mark Knopfler, Willy DeVille

PROLOGUE

Roman

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

“WHERE IS she?”

“Who?” My sister, Kennedy, tilted her head, gazing at me as though she had no idea what I was talking about.

Or maybe she gave me the look of *what a sweet idiot my baby brother is*, even when we had one year separating us and I was practically an adult, scratching seventeen. Because I *was* an idiot. I should’ve kept watch on where my friend who I cared for and needed to look after during our summer vacation would be. If I hadn’t been busy with other stuff.

The cool breeze that signaled the end of summer blew strands of my dark brown hair into my face. I swiped them away. They upset me almost as much as the taunting gleam in Kennedy’s eyes.

“Don’t start.” I glowered at her.

I didn’t bother keeping my voice down, seeing our parents and Justine’s had taken off on an afternoon stroll along Main Beach in East Hampton not too long ago. When I saw them wandering from the kitchen window, it’d been just the four of them. No Justine. She didn’t answer when I called from the bottom of the stairs, so where the fuck was she?

Kennedy pushed her sunglasses up her head, sitting up straighter on the lounge. “Roomie, I wouldn’t ask a stupid question, but since you asked me one first... I mean, it’s obvious she’d be in her bedroom after what happened.”

I ignored the annoying nickname, more concerned about Justine. My Justine. “What the fuck happened?”

The mounting concern made me oblivious to my sister's sigh of exasperation. "Oh, right, I forgot. You've been yoga-ing for the past two hours. Guess that's why you didn't hear her shouting match with Stuart."

Stuart, Justine's dad, has never let his only child feel good about herself a single day in her life. The number of times I'd had to pick up my best friend, my oldest friend, from the floor due to his cruel comments were so many I couldn't count them. But I loved her so much, I wouldn't have minded carrying her on my back my entire life.

That was how bonds worked. Because although I hadn't remembered being eighteen months old and waving at the newborn who'd wrapped me around her little finger, I did remember the after. The fun times of the two of us playing, or talking, or laughing until we rolled on the floor, or the fucking heartbreaking ones of Justine crying in silence and me finding her where she was.

I took my role in this friendship very seriously, especially during our yearly summer vacations. That day, however, I'd messed up. Rage boiled my blood from imagining her suffering alone in her room. The familiar anger that simmered beneath my skin sprinted me into motion. I spun on my heel, not sparing Kennedy another word, and ran into the house, past the French doors, darting up the stairs.

The hardwood floors creaked beneath my feet as I rushed past the hall of her parents' home in a flash. Less than two minutes later, I stood outside her bedroom door. I glanced down at myself, sweaty from practice, wearing nothing but sweats. We spent long days and nights of dipping in a beach or a pool together, though somehow, now, I couldn't bring myself to enter and hug her bare-chested.

Not when over the past months, maybe years, my feelings for her evolved from those of childhood friends.

I went to the room next door, the guest room they allocated for me since Justine and I were practically inseparable during

these vacations, throwing on the first T-shirt on my shelf. Decent as I could be, I knocked on her door three times.

Silence. I pressed my ear to the white wood. No noise carried from within her room, and then...a sniff.

Fuck me.

Three more knocks, more urgent this time.

“Fuck off.” Another sniff.

My lips curved to the side, the knot in the pit of my stomach unwinding just a little to allow air to flow inside. Despite her throaty, meek voice, Stuart’s torture hadn’t ruined her completely. If she could curse, she had fight in her. *You don’t get this round, asshole.* “Tina? It’s me. Can I come in?”

The painful silence ensued. I raised my fist to knock for the third time when the sound of her small feet padding on the floor echoed nearer and nearer. The key clicked inside the lock. The door slowly opened. The semblance of a smile that claimed my features vanished.

During my last junior year in high school, my growth spurt hit. From a five-foot-two scrawny kid, I jumped the impressive height of just over six foot three, while Justine stayed a foot shorter. My weight climbed as well, my bones heavier, my muscles more accentuated. Justine, on the other hand, remained the scrawny, five-foot-three kid she’d always been.

Our proportions changed, sure. Over a year. The two hours she’d been out of my sight weren’t supposed to accentuate that, to make her seem somewhat tiny inside her silk pajamas. And then there were her tear-stricken cheeks.

Fuck me.

Aside from cursing, my friend had nothing in her. Any hope I nurtured to find her with her spine straight sunk to the pit of my stomach in a bungee jump, the feeling of uselessness swallowing me whole. That, on top of the tide of self-loathing that all but consumed me for zoning out for over two hours. I got lost during my meditation and physical practice, my noise-

canceling AirPods blocking out another lash out from her dad I knew was bound to come.

I fucking knew.

If it wouldn't have scared her like it did in the past, I'd have bashed my fist into the wall. At least I wasn't an idiot bastard to conveniently let that slide.

“Ro.” Justine heaved a watery sigh, one of her hands grasping the door, the other extended to me.

Holding her hand wouldn't do it, nor would telling her she looked nice, which was our universal code for *are you okay?*—words that made her chuckle and shake off mild annoyances at her dad.

She needed more. I backed her up into the room, slamming the door behind me. She didn't put up a fight when I swept her into my arms, cocooning her. Her feeble body allowed me to shelter her as I should've earlier, and regardless of my strong hold, she clung to my shirt, same as a person who thought they might fall.

She'd known, however, that I would've never let her fall. We were too accustomed to this maneuver. It frustrated me to no end, the growl that lodged itself in my throat for Justine being broken was the proof of that. I stuffed it down, once more restraining myself from adding another stressor on Justine's already fragile state, more brittle than I'd ever witnessed her being. She needed consolation, a shoulder to lean on, someone to listen to her, things I'd pledged on giving her for the rest of our lives from the first tear she shed.

I lowered us to sit on her bed, not pushing her to talk.

“Did you hear him?” she asked after minutes of gazing at each other, her question barely audible.

Grinding my teeth, I answered honestly, no excuses whatsoever for my negligence. She wouldn't expect them, and they were worth jack shit, anyhow. “No.”

“He said he’s had it up to here with my grades dropping, with me being so goddamn rude.” Her hazel eyes glossed over. Fathomless depths reflected through a crystal. “He’s kicking me out of the house, sending me to a boarding school.”

The renewed flow of tears confused me. Her family could foot the bill for the best boarding schools New York had to offer, placing her out of Stuart’s reach for good. She should’ve been happy.

She was anything but.

“I have a driver’s license. I’d come visit every day, no matter which place in the state they send you.” My deft fingers ran over her arm, a mild attempt to stop her from crying. It soothed her before; it would have to soothe her this time.

I just have to try a little harder.

“You don’t...” Justine’s chest expanded, her eyes fluttered shut. I recognized the method she used to stop hyperventilating, to find her calm. I forwarded her the knowledge of a “Loving-Kindness Meditation,” a practice taught by Steven V. Smith. I repeated the few short sentences in my head as I waited for her, watching as she pursed her lips and focused her gaze on me. “You can’t.”

My bruised ego, my selfish ego, propelled me to ask, “You don’t want me there?”

The sadness of her smile matched the downcast corners of her eyes. She let go of my shirt, stroking the early stages of stubble with her thumb. “Ro, there’s one person in this entire universe I’d never want to be apart from, and it’s you, you idiot.”

Air returned to my lungs, quickly working on solutions. “I’ll drive to another state, not a problem either. I’ll put on a finance podcast and I can go for hours.”

“I told you, you can’t.” Another tear escaped her eye, then another one. A salty waterfall of silent tears tainted her beautiful face. I mimicked her gestures, swiping them from her left cheek, then the right. “You can’t drive to England.”

My heart ceased its beating, the trajectory of my thumb halting. The curses I tucked away for her sake flew carelessly out of my mouth. “Son of a bitch. He can’t do it. I won’t let him; I won’t let that fucker send you there.”

I squeezed her to my chest, desperate to conceal her from the world. To have her beside me. Always.

Her tears soaked through my shirt. The calls of gulls and Justine’s sniffing every few seconds provided the soundtrack to our predicament from hell. I rested my chin on the top of her head, forcing myself to concentrate on a plan instead of succumbing to the wrath that consumed me.

It blinded me from figuring out a solution, and I refused to be drowned out by it before I saved her. Before I’d be without her, stranded, floating through the dull gray of a life.

And on her bed, in her bedroom, I promised myself one more thing. Once this mess was settled, once I’d have found a way to keep her here, I’d quit being such a coward and ask her out. We’d be solid, we’d be together, and no one would take her from me. Not ever.

But if I was serious about any of this happening in the future, I had to get my shit together in the present.

Breathe in, breath out. In, out. In, out.

The concentration technique my yoga teacher had taught me was just as valuable to my internship at Dad’s hedge fund management firm as it was to mitigate the storm inside of me.

The more I repeated the words in my head, the easier it became to block out the outside noise.

To center. To focus.

From there it didn’t take long for me to concoct a plan to protect her, the details of which would be Stuart’s and my secret. Justine couldn’t find out about it. She’d throw herself into the flames instead of me, and I couldn’t allow for that to happen.

Until then, until the deal would be signed and sealed, I offered what I could—my comfort, my hugs, bathing her in warmth and sealing out the bad shit that hurt her.

“Everything will be okay, I promise you.”

Her sniff was followed by a profound gaze into my eyes. What came out of her mouth next was as sweet as it was unsurprising, “Can we watch *The Princess Bride*?”

See, while she considered me her comfort person, *The Princess Bride* was her comfort movie. I never said no to that.

“As you wish.” I repeated Westley’s response that meant more than just *we’ll do whatever you like*. The answer that said *I love you*. The reply I’d offered her in the past, and held all the promises in the world on this fateful afternoon. Then, because I truly felt it, I added, “I love you, Tina.”

She snuggled closer to me, sighing, her words being what I’d wished to hear. “I love you too, Ro. I really do.”

CHAPTER ONE

Justine

“I HATE your fucking guts, Roman!”

He huffed a tired laugh from the other line of the phone, the dick ruining my last Friday night as a single woman. Probably ruining a lifetime worth of Friday nights. No more dancing, bar hopping, having a random date every now and again. Just this angry version of my ex-best friend.

“Is that a way to talk to your future husband?”

I collapsed on the bed that took up most of my studio apartment, staring ahead in despair. Of course, that was the moment my unintentionally ripped Dior jeans chose to rip open some more. The tearing noise hadn't embarrassed me as much as it should have. Wearing a once-pink-now-almost-white Chanel T-shirt while having my friends with me didn't either.

Because I loved the garments. They held a sentimental value for me, even in their unkempt state. They represented memories of Mom's and my shopping dates before Stuart cut me off. Happy days where I wasn't coerced into a marriage transaction like a commodity.

Elsie, my best friend, plopped down next to me, listening in on the conversation and offering me moral support. Her boyfriend, Kyle, sunk into the worn-out couch two feet away, the cushions grunting under the big man's weight.

Unfortunately, his muscles weren't the only things responsible for the squeaking noise. My couch emanated a similar noise when I'd sat on it, and I weighed about half of what Kyle did. Ever since college I'd lived off an eclectic collection of second-hand, tattered furniture, but it was mine.

Living here far outweighed moving back to Manhattan and staying in Roman's luxurious penthouse. Not like I visited the asshole, ever. I had my father to thank for that valuable piece of information, which he volunteered repeatedly during his attempts to cajole me into marrying the man who seemed to wish I evaporated into thin air.

With my eyes closed, I did a quick repeat in my head of the sentences Roman himself had taught me years ago to help me relax.

May I be safe and protected.

May I be free of mental suffering or distress.

May I be happy.

May I be free of physical pain and suffering.

May I be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, with ease.

It cleared out, at least partially, the distress and bullshit around me, allowing me to respond with much more serenity than I originally felt. "Why would you want to go on with this sham of a wedding, when I clearly don't want to? When you don't want to?"

"Who says I don't?"

The groan that left my mouth lacked any semblance of finesse. It reverberated from within, carrying more than a decade-long frustration. "You've done nothing except torment me..."

"Torment is such a harsh word. I never tormented you a day in my life."

"Sticking avocado in my face and rubbing it in sounds like a normal, everyday behavior to you?" I snapped. No one, and I mean no one, pushed my buttons like Roman Gallagher did. No. One.

Continuing his ice-cold streak, he said, "Your skin always breaks in the winter. The mask did you good. Next."

What else? What didn't he do to abuse me? "When you gave me the wrong address to a party..."

"Mistakes happen."

"... Turned off the water in the house while I showered."

"The Hamptons' home was old even then. I prevented a leak."

"Changed the contents of my shampoo bottle to toothpaste? Released me to fall to the floor when we were dancing at a gala?"

I hadn't given him the satisfaction of hearing me lose it again. The rest of my anger manifestation, like my balled-up fists and red face, were only visible to Elsie and Kyle. Kyle got up from the couch, dressed in all black and looking ready to kick ass. He scowled, outstretching his hand for me to give him the phone and let him handle Roman. I shook my head, mouthing, *Thank you*.

"Hmm..." Roman sang more than hummed, riding the wave that took me all the way back to breakdown town. "Don't have a recollection of those either."

"Sure, you don't," I mumbled.

"Look, Justine. Whatever you think I did or didn't do, it's in the past. There's no use bringing it up." The silence was quickly filled by more cutting insults. "I can imagine this obstinance was what cost you your job, wasn't it?"

My boss, Stella, didn't sack me for being argumentative. She fired me because the truth clashed with her twisted perception of reality, but it was none of Roman's business.

Screw him for giving me his unsolicited and wrong opinion. "Fuck you."

"So mundane. From a copywriter, sorry, ex-copywriter, I expected something more innovative." He yawned, or fake-yawned to be exact. "What else? Because I'm getting real bored, real fast."

Don't raise your voice, don't feed his addiction to hurting you.

“Dickhead.”

Infuriating slow claps from his end had me rolling my eyes to the back of my head. “Well done, consider me offended. Now, playtime is over. Quit this immature tantrum. Us marrying will be the smartest move financially for our families, plain and simple.”

“Run this simple by me again.”

His derisive snort nearly had me pressing the *end* button and running off to the Bahamas. Or, with my nonexistent budget, to lock myself inside my head. As things were, the two months of unemployment dissipated the meager savings I'd accumulated and the unemployment checks didn't cover half my rent. I had nowhere to escape save Roman's claws.

Which wouldn't have been the worst scenario, if he wouldn't have done so much shit to prove he despised me. Since I lied. I didn't hate him. Despite everything he'd done to me, the last straw being him not helping me to fend off this stupid forced wedding, I couldn't bring myself to hate him.

I resented him. Was weary of him. Wanted to douse him in a bucket of piss—that was always a viable option.

Could not fucking hate him.

“I don't remember us talking about it, which means no one talked to you about it.” His hum trumped the pissing-me-off contest over his obnoxious slow claps. “Years of going to the finest tutors and a bachelor's in English Lit from NYU, yet Stuart still doesn't trust you with shit. Interesting.”

“He does trust me.” Roman had no business knowing Stuart's attitude toward me hadn't changed one bit. Any personal information that could be transformed into ammo against me was for me to seal in a box underground and for Roman to never find out. “But I hated the idea just as I hate him, just as I hate you, so I thought about other things while he blabbed on and on.”

“Like your job, I assume.”

I can't let him win. I can't.

The feel of Elsie squeezing my knee calmed me down, derailing me from falling into his trap and unnecessarily prolonging this conversation. I needed some logic to this madness, now that my back was against the wall, against the idea of becoming a married woman in less than two days.

“I'll stick to the highlights, then, my future bride.” The venom in his tone compelled me to listen harder. This *had* to be a really, truly convincing reasoning if the mere mention of me as his wife nauseated him. No way could he have *wanted* this.

“I'm the CEO of GallaTon Investments. My dad, who founded the firm alongside Stuart, retired and Stuart is the CEO. No one else, aside from the board, has a say in our operations. We don't plan on changing that, and we definitely don't intend to sit back while you inevitably marry an outsider who'd go after your inheritance without a prenup.” He sighed, sounding like this conversation was boring him out of his mind. “See, even in his death, Stuart doesn't trust you. With anything.”

To my chagrin, not a shred of surprise punctured me at this new bit of information. My dad plotting to control me beyond the grave sounded as plausible to me as rain during a New York winter. My hand moved to find Elsie's, our fingers linked.

“Roman, we can work this out,” I beseeched, breaking my promise to not beg anyone for anything. “I promise that when the day comes and I'll marry someone, I'll make him sign any prenup you dictate. I swear, your lawyers, your rules. I'll sign a paper guaranteeing this.”

He quieted. I glanced at the screen, checking the call hadn't been cut off. “Roman?”

“Too late.” The indifference in his voice struck me, potent and even scary, sending chills down my spine.

“Be sensible, please.” I was beyond begging at that point, appealing to his conscience. Assuming he had one. “Living in an unhappy marriage can’t be the life you imagined for yourself.”

“The moving company will be there tomorrow at eight PM.”

The line went dead. For real this time. I didn’t need to look at the screen to know it.

I stared blankly at the wall ahead of me. Not crying, not breaking down, but surviving. A defense mechanism I’d built when Roman ended his ever-devoted reign of love and began the era of king asshole.

Elsie untangled herself from my hold, enfolding me in a hug I’d grow to miss. Her moving out to Kyle’s from our shared apartment didn’t shake me as much as this wedding had. He lived in Brooklyn, less than fifteen minutes apart by foot. We got our morning coffees together, shared dinners a few nights a week, popping up tentatively whenever we had a few spare minutes.

Roman’s home was fifty minutes by subway from her home, and let’s not even talk about the heavy Manhattan traffic. I doubted I’d be seeing her beautiful face as frequently as I did up until now.

The support of my friends meant the world to me. They’d helped me stay above water the past two months, saving me from breaking down in tears during the miserable call with Stuart last week. They held my hands throughout the world’s most unromantic marriage proposal, from my father’s lips and not from Roman’s, then stayed over when Stuart sent Weronika, my family’s physician, to run STD tests on me.

They were, for all intents and purposes, my family. It was no wonder I lamented their constant physical presence in my life like a loss of a limb.

Woe is me.

“He’s an idiot,” she said, her love a warm, enveloping blanket. “And he’s dead wrong about you losing your job. If any of these pompous pricks would’ve taken time out of their busy schedules to actually ask you *why* you were fired, they would’ve talked differently.”

Kyle returned to sit on the couch. “I second that.”

“Whether he’s an asshole or not, he’s right.” I breathed heavily, scooting closer to Elsie and placing my head on her shoulder. “It’s too late.”

Kyle crouched down in front of me, his tender expression reemerging in place of his frown. “I realize our apartment isn’t huge, and yeah, sleeping on the couch may have its disadvantages”—he shook his head when I opened my mouth to refuse, like I did many a-times since losing my job—“but hear me out. I can switch the furniture around, use blinds to close off the space so you’ll have privacy. It’s temporary. One of our contacts or Elsie’s office will come through soon. Until then, we’d love to have you as our roommate.”

“Kyle!” Elsie jumped on him, nearly knocking his butt to the rug, covering his face with kisses. “You’re a genius! Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?”

He raised an eyebrow, cradling her into his lap like he always did. Like Roman and I used to be. “Because I just thought about it now. Pressure brings out the best in me.”

“What do you say?” Elsie asked, their expectant eyes pleading.

They were incredible to offer, and yet I couldn’t accept. The job market was saturated—they knew it, I knew it, everyone knew it. Finding a job could take forever, and thanks to the nonexistent references from my boss, my prospects of being hired by a business unrelated to my friends didn’t seem like something that could happen to me in the foreseeable future. I’d end up overstaying my welcome, and our friendship wasn’t something I’d gamble on.

I slapped both hands on my thighs, stood up, and grinned, putting a lid on the conversation and trying to revert to my fun and not fucked-over self. “Sorry, youngsters, last time you had a sleepover at our apartment I stayed up half the night, and I get cranky as fuck when I don’t get my beauty sleep.”

Kyle laughed; Elsie gave me the squishing hug I so desperately needed. “If anything, *anything*, goes wrong, you come to us. Understood?”

“Yes, Mom, I promise.” I chuckled, tugging lightly on her long, auburn hair.

“Ow!” she yelped, then returned the gesture.

We were back to normal. For today.

CHAPTER TWO

Roman

THE GREAT room of my penthouse basked in the evening's shadows. The natural illumination filtered from the street through the floor-to-ceiling arched glass wall, and diffused into the great room from the skylight on top of the barrel-vaulted ceiling above me. The rest of the lamps were off to welcome Justine into her new home.

Suitable, seeing as I needed a fucking minute, or a week, to adjust to looking at Justine Sutton, soon to be Gallagher, with the lights on.

Two years of complete physical distance on top of the emotional one I'd carved between us were an eternity for people who used to see each other every other day for half their lives. It started because she'd had enough of me, or of Stuart cutting her off, or both, avoiding every charity ball, every gala, every family dinner. She even forwent her mother's birthday, who seemed to be the only person in our circle whom she loved.

So, no, I wasn't fucking ready to see her. I'd looked at her in the past, at our childhood photos of us that I'd uploaded to my phone when missing her itched at my soul, but it wasn't the real thing.

Nothing could prepare me to have her here, her full effect thrust at me. The show I put on—the arrogance, belittling her, acting as though she was already under my thumb—it wouldn't stand the test of having her here, in the flesh.

I needed the dimmed lights, needed the few feet that separated us to ease myself into our new situation, instead of being flung into it. I needed to get past this weekend, or so I

rationalized with myself, holding my guard steady. Then, just then, I might manage a lifetime of living by her side as a strong individual, not a man succumbing to pitiful sentimentality. To protect her from afar.

That necessity compelled me to lurk in the dimness of my own house, lounging on the cream-colored sofa, and overlooking the foyer that led to the front door. Forty feet seemed prudent, a decent distance to allow me the space to adapt to the woman I would've bet my entire fortune was going to be my first and last and everything in between.

Lucky no one wagered me on that, because I wasn't in the habit of placing my money where I'd thought I'd lose. My job at the firm and the deal I struck were the evidence to support that fact.

The doorbell rang, the cheery *ding-dong* arresting my heart. It soon resumed its thumping when Edith, my housekeeper who stayed late tonight, opened it. The building's doorman, Bill, stood there, holding a blossoming orchid plant and an enormous bouquet of white roses, offering Edith help carrying them inside. He hadn't acknowledged me as I sat and observed the exchange in obscurity, away from the slivers of light, in complete silence.

I'd been grateful for the dark the second time that day. Bill was a good man; he shouldn't have witnessed my resentment at the surprise delivery. He wasn't the source of it. Someone else, though, orchestrated it. An elated woman, judging by the tone of her voice.

"Edith." I unfolded myself from the sofa and paced toward her, holding my arms out for the plant and roses. She passed them to me reluctantly. "I thought Gia said she wrapped up the flower arrangements."

Our wedding planner had hustled around the house for the past five days since Justine told Stuart she'd marry me. She refused to contribute any more to it than her presence, her mom who'd urged me and her husband to forget about it for over a decade taking the same route. With my side of the

family prohibited from meddling, from glorifying this arrangement more than necessary, I was the one in charge.

As such, I'd hired Gia. Begged her and spent a shitload of money, to be exact. Attaining the best wedding planner in the city to carve time for me in the middle of May was worth every grovel and every cent. Gia contacted the most prestigious vendors, calling in favors and having everything ready a day early. My roof terrace's slick and classic design converted into the-happiest-day-of-our-lives charade, or as I called it, the sham of the century.

I'd shelled out hundreds of thousands of dollars to enforce the show we'd put on tomorrow for our guests. A journalist and a photographer who'd I'd hand-picked to receive an exclusive, and sixty family members, friends, and those we'd maintained work ties with.

They had to witness a believable performance, a wedding they'd envisioned as a wealthy couple, so madly in love they had to tie the knot in less than a week's notice. Gina nailed it, too. To the last fucking flower, this wedding had *legit* smeared on it as a Times Square neon sign.

Edith narrowed her light blue eyes at the flowers, deepening the wrinkles around them, those of a woman in her sixties. "She did. These are for Justine's room."

"No."

"No?"

"Fuck. No." I turned around and paced through the great room toward the kitchen, disrespecting this woman who'd become an integral part of my life. Aggravation would be a mild description to what the idea of decorating Justine's room roused in me. She wouldn't have them.

She scurried on her Oxford shoes to catch up. "The room is as empty and impersonal as a..." She huffed, breaking off her scolding.

Her falter brought me to a standstill. I resumed giving her my eyes, my regret softening my tone. "What is it?"

“A prison.”

“A prison would’ve been me locking the five vacant bedrooms and forcing her to either sleep in my bed or on one of the sofas.” Scoffing, I continued to my intended destination, holding the plant and flowers at an arm’s length to not have the water mess up my white T-shirt. “It’s a far better alternative to that of staying on the street like her father intended.”

The smug, vile, piece of shit of a father, I thought, but hadn’t said out loud. Part of it, after all, had been my doing.

That didn’t mean it made him any less of a jerk. I’d met some asshole dads, the wealthy who threw money at their kids like it would solve their lack of parental warmth, and when it didn’t work, threw piles of cash at their kids’ shrinks. None of these crap parents, however, would’ve sounded as pleased as Stuart to string his daughter into marriage she did everything in her power to abstain from, for the sake of his two gods: power and money.

Gluing one-hundred-dollar bills to a pile of crap sure doesn’t make it any less filthy.

“Roman...”

“Don’t.” I pressed my knee to the pull-out cabinet, emptying the beautiful roses and blooming orchids into the bin. After closing the drawer, I returned to Edith, placing both hands on my hips. “Whether Justine wants flowers in her room or not is her business. She can go out and get them herself. She’ll have to learn to acclimate on her own.”

As if on fucking cue, three knocks boomed from the entrance. An alarm went off inside my head, my whole body stilling. This was the real thing. The moment I’d prepared for, but was in no way ready, regardless of the three-hour-long meditation session from this morning.

Edith and I stared at each other. Slowly, my blood resumed its flow through my veins, my heart beating at a measured pace and carrying me to the safe shore of my peaceful,

controlled, former self. The walls around my heart were resurrected. I was ready.

“I’ll go.” Edith nodded, striding off to get the door. For my fiancée. Who would rather be anywhere than here.

Life’s a fucking Disney fairy tale.

I walked stealthily on my bare feet toward the sofa where I’d sat earlier. The moment I stepped where I had a direct line of vision to the foyer, Edith pulled the door open.

And there she fucking was.

An aura surrounded Justine, radiant despite the murkiness of the house. The beacon she’d always been to me hadn’t changed. The circumstances and the way I saw her had.

Edith fretted around my fiancée, helping her out of her Chanel spray-painted backpack. Her movements woke me from my daydreaming, making my ears perk up and listen. “I’m so sorry about that.”

What the actual fuck? Apologizing? When I asked not to give her a fucking iota of special treatment?

Stepping out from where I hid, I stopped at the cased opening that separated the foyer and the great room. I chose indifference as my outward approach, lounging against the wall, crossing my arms on my chest.

“Sorry about what?” I asked in a dry tone.

The women swiveled their heads toward me. They were about the same height, same slim body build, standing side by side. My defiant eyes were drawn to the younger one, unable as hard as I tried to look at any other place or person once her gaze connected to mine. Those round, syrupy windows to her soul that in a happy, faraway past I’d considered my path to salvation from our reality—they did things to me. Many, many things.

Above everything, a desire assailed me like a wrecking ball—hard, forceful, and ruthless. A violent instinct to charge forward and hug Justine.

Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. In, out.

The repetition centered me just as my self-control began to slip away.

Remember what she did, asshole.

Oh, I remembered a whole fucking lot, down to the most miserable, pathetic detail.

Thanks to the breathing, and the less-than-fond memories, I restrained myself from acting on my impulses. I raged on the inside, though you wouldn't have seen any of it. On the outside, I hadn't so much as blinked.

Justine's initial shock at seeing me simmered down. Her pretty, luscious lips pinched into a thin line, her chin raised in defiance, her stance screaming *test me*.

Any place, any time.

Edith interrupted our silent deadlock. "Justine entered the building without the movers who are late, so Bill, who's never seen her, thought she was lying about her identity."

While Bill took extra precautions where the building's security was concerned, he hadn't been in the habit of calling our guests liars before verifying it with the residents first. Unless...

My eyes trailed along her body, on other parts besides her delicate, beautiful features. From her pale-pink cardigan that had seen one too many laundries to the crumpled Calvin Klein tee and down to the light jeans she used a clip to keep in place, I understood Bill's refusal to believe her.

Justine did not have the appearance of a girl whose father had accumulated over a billion dollars in his name. She looked like she hadn't eaten in a while, like she'd been struggling.

Bile climbed my throat. Had I seen, been told, that she'd been in that much trouble, I'd have slammed the brakes on this whole extortion shit that very moment. Even if the ship of Roman-the-defender had long sailed, I couldn't help but hate

her fuckface of a father for not caring what had happened to her.

What else couldn't she afford? What were her living conditions? What was her diet like? Because she definitely didn't look like she'd been eating anything.

She'd eat now.

She'd have clothes now.

Other than that, I shouldn't care.

I didn't care.

I truly didn't care at all.

“Judge my clothes one more time, Roman.”

My head snapped up to meet her glare, the fire in it. I recovered fast, clogging my eyes from any show of emotion. “Or else?”

“You'll be sorry.” She mimicked my stance unknowingly, tightening the hold her arms had around her. Her eyebrows lowered to her eyes in resentment. “Truth is, I'd give you a plethora of reasons to be sorry for.”

“Such a big word, plethora. You should've used that while you worked. Maybe then they wouldn't have fired you. Maybe.” I threw that comment to spite her, to ruin any chance of surfacing memories of the past. Not like I believed it. She was brilliant, my future wife, fuck what her dad said.

“My first job will be donating your whole fucking wardrobe. Then, the sky's the limit.” She shrugged, gesturing with her head to me. “That Rolex and the rest of the collection I imagine you jerk off to. Maybe.”

I smirked, her threat going right above me and out the window. “You can try. And you'll regret it.”

Her face reddened, her shoulders hunched. By then, Edith's palm on her forearm didn't even register when she lashed at me, “You will not threaten me.”

“Whatever you’ll do, I’ll be worse. Trust me.” I pushed myself from the passageway, just a step, restraining myself from advancing toward her. “So quit this bratty behavior. As of tomorrow, you’ll be my wife. You’ll sure as shit act like one and not trash any. Fucking. Part. Of. This. House.”

Edith, who apparently had had her fill, moved to stand between us. “You’re both on the edge; weddings are stressful. I suggest you two retire to your rooms, I’ll head on home, and we’ll reconvene tomorrow morning fresh and caffeinated.”

Seeing her trying to reconcile us did something to Justine. She hugged the older lady, speaking softly to her. “You’re right. Now I’m the one apologizing to you, Edith; you shouldn’t have to suffer through this.”

“That’s all right, dear.” Edith pulled back, taking Justine by the arm and heading to the left down the corridor. “Come, I’ll show you to your room before I go. We arranged the basic toiletries from a list your mother sent us, so you won’t have to wait until your stuff gets here.”

They were out of earshot when Bill called me from the reception desk. “Mr. Galla—Roman, I’d like to apologize about the confusion relating to your fiancée. I didn’t recognize her and thought...”

“No harm done, Bill,” I reassured him. “Anything else?”

“The movers are here. Should I send them up?”

“Yes.”

I let the movers in while Edith and Justine were still bonding over the shampoos or whatever kept them occupied there for over fifteen minutes.

“Where should we put them?” the monster-built guy asked in a heavy New York accent.

“Over there.” I pointed in the direction of her room, checking my emails in the foyer while they walked back and forth. When they finished, the younger of the two jogged

outside. I gestured with my head at his figure as he waited for the elevator, asking the one that had stayed, “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.” He accepted the tip I gave him. “Forgot about the dress. Oh, hold up. Isn’t it bad luck? If you see the wedding gown? Or is it with her in it? I got married years ago, and even then I had no clue.”

The knot I’d forgotten existed years ago wound itself in my stomach, coiling tight and painful. Reminding me of its existence. How it hadn’t really left.

“It doesn’t matter either way,” I answered, offering the man who cared about my fictitious romantic future a curt smile. “Have him bring it in. Close behind you.”

He nodded solemnly; I nodded in return. My silence hid how not too long ago, it did matter, I did want it, had been willing to accept whatever tradition Justine would’ve thrown in my path.

Anything to keep her happy.

CHAPTER THREE

Roman

I PACED inside my room. Left and right. Window to my bed.

All over the fucking space.

My spotless, brand-new black dress shoes bore holes through the rug. A light coat of perspiration broke out on my forehead, my tux suddenly suffocating me. I hardly ever sweated, or suffered from shortness of breath, even grueling Ashtanga yoga practices. Outside of my home studio, stress or irritation, both of which my job had offered in heaps, were a walk in the park for me. I learned to keep my cool under every fucking circumstance.

That was, until I insisted on going through with this ancient and most outdated idea of saving Justine and marrying her. But she agreed.

She could've found a job, gone down a million other roads, yet she agreed to marrying me.

Agreeing meant she actually had to attend her own fucking ceremony. *Our* ceremony.

Gia pressed a manicured finger to her ear. "She needs five more minutes, Mr. Gallagher."

"Roman." I raised my hand to rake it through my hair, stopping mid-air. I remembered I couldn't mess up my *wedding* hair. "I asked you to call me Roman."

Our wealth and status notwithstanding, neither my father nor I liked the Mr. prefix, mainly when we were having one-on-one conversations with anyone, didn't matter who the person was. Stuart loved it, making me hate and avoid it passionately.

“Okay.” Her wide blue eyes studied my level of irritation. I beckoned her to go on when it seemed like she had something to add. “It’s normal for a bride to have pre-wedding jitters, those who go through rehearsal dinners, too. There’s no need for worry, we’re not that late. Twenty minutes is within the boundaries of acceptable.”

Gia upheld her reputation as the bride and groom tamer, her self-assurance reflecting on me instantly. Besides, she had reason. What were five minutes more?

“I’m sorry?” She spoke into her earpiece again, distancing herself from me by pacing on her black high heels to the other side of the room. “You said five minutes about five minutes ago. Okay. Okay.” She nodded, starting her march to the door, not looking up. “I’ll be right there.”

Walking in these shoes might’ve not presented a challenge to her. However, regardless of how fast she strode in them, she was no match for my long steps and rising temper.

Justine had delegated upon herself to shake my frozen exterior, and she’d nailed it. She had an aggravated fiancé who was about to come and personally extract her from where she stowed herself away. *Kudos*.

I slipped outside the door, assuring Gia that I’d handle it, dismissing her with a hand when she asked to accompany me. My future wife and I were forced to start resolving issues my way and as of this minute, not in five, not in twenty.

Passing by three rooms and taking a right at the end, I marched to her bedroom, the largest one other than mine and the farthest from it as well. Gia’s assistant, Ana, had just closed Justine’s door when I got there. I yanked it right open. My mood had blasted like a fucking ping-pong ball that day, making it difficult for me to recognize myself through the recurring ups and downs.

Two men around my age united in front of me, elbow to elbow to form a barrier to separate me from Justine and her friends that sat on the bed. I hadn’t been personally introduced

to Justine's suited friends though I had an inclination to who Mr. Black Suit and Navy-Blue Suit were. Hadn't encountered the owners of the peach-colored skirts that popped from behind them.

But I had a good idea who they were. Justine's mom, Pauline, made sure to drop their names frequently. Like repeating their names and random stories about them would remind me her daughter had a real life with real friends, and was not a pawn to be moved around on the board.

I never thought otherwise. Deep down inside of me, my bones knew her true value. Her sperm donor, however, missed the memo.

"Noah, Kyle, nice to put a face to the name."

Me knowing their names caught them off guard, if the raised eyebrows were of any indication. I smirked, pleased to be one step ahead of everyone, if only for a minute.

Their confusion melted in a blink of an eye. Irritation marred their clipped *Hi*'s and hunched shoulders, none of which I cared about. Even when it came from people who I held a tinge of gratitude for, for looking after Justine as the rest of us had done, well...how much is nothing multiplied by nothing? Nothing.

I couldn't be kind, was done doing fake introductions. I needed them out and my bride's ass at the altar half an hour ago.

"Out. Everyone," I ordered, the chill in my tone reflecting that of my mental state.

I regained my composure as the seconds ticked by, the center and silence I'd worked damn hard to attain in preparation for her. The peacefulness slithered through my pores, trumping the aftershocks of Justine's maddening actions.

I was the epitome of equanimity. For the time being.

Neither of them budged. The big one cocked an eyebrow like telling me to get lost. From my own house. *Yeah, right.* This illusion that they were selling themselves, of bending my arm to have things go their way, was just that, an illusion. The small-time bargaining they managed to crush with Hollywood producers were a shrivel of my daily ruthless, million-dollars-on-the-line negotiations I reigned over with some of the strongest and most prominent leaders of the country.

Arguments didn't frighten me. I thrived on them.

The low grunt from the back cut through our non-verbal head-butting. Her fragile figure rose from the bed, giving me more glimpses of the white cloth in the space between Noah and Kyle.

"Roman, I'll be up in a sec," she spoke, finally, her voice hoarse. "I have to fix my makeup."

Ignore the tears, ignore the tears, ignore the motherfucking tears.

I steadied my eyes on the white dress, the lace and the sheer fabric on her arm. "People are waiting. They *have* been waiting for the past half an hour."

"Oh crap." Her derision of me and this entire event emanated loud and clear, remnants of the tears and their effect on her speech gone. "People I don't give a shit about, some of which I downright hate, are waiting for me? Are they not enjoying tens of thousands of dollars' worth of champagne?"

"Stop it."

"I'd be really fucking bummed in your place."

Both her bridesmaids, Alda and Elsie, if I had to guess, stood up and stared at me, pity written on their features. For Justine? For me? For us? Seemed like all of the above. But I wasn't deterred, not from intimidation and not from pity alike.

"They're business partners too." I kept my voice steady and my gaze on where Justine hid.

“Oh, Roman, should I worry you’re on the brink of bankruptcy? That one late walk down the aisle would be the last straw for the clients and they’ll all dump you?”

Her auburn-haired friend sniggered, and Kyle’s lips quirked to the side. Mine would’ve too, in other circumstances. In another lifetime, more like it.

“Would you come out from behind the unnecessary human shield?”

“And fuck with our luck?” she scoffed.

“Heaven forbid.” A sudden pull tugged at me, and I couldn’t not answer her. “I’m assuming then that you brought something old, new, blue, and borrowed on our wedding night?”

“The only blue thing you’ll have is blue balls.” Not pausing to even catch her breath, she charged on, “Go upstairs, Roman. Ana, who was far more patient and lovely than your cranky ass, will direct your mannequin right behind you, parade her to your prestigious guests as expected.”

I could’ve argued that we’d passed the stage of expected, could’ve added these were *our* guests, not mine, but what was the point? Neither of us were bound to change.

At the door, I twisted my head to look one last time at the four bodies and one hidden bride. “Three minutes, Justine. Three. Minutes.”



For my walk down the aisle, they played no processional song. I marched up on my (our, I suppose, now that she was actually moving in) terrace, straight on the white carpet, glancing at the guests Justine chalked up as not worth sucking up her childish resentment for. I smiled briefly at the selected clients who’d accumulated to our largest accounts, nodding at Christopher, my lawyer and friend from Harvard and the two partners he’d worked under, Joel and Zach.

I was even a big enough man to smile at her friends at the altar. Her best men, her maids of honor. I hadn't thought anything less than equality and love for all emanating from Justine.

For all except for me.

My warmer gaze, I'd reserved for my father in the wheelchair, to my mother and to Kennedy, finally landing on my best man, Lennon Benedict.

"She's here." Gia appeared out of nowhere, her black dress a stark contrast to the white-themed wedding she'd orchestrated. White gazebo, white guest chairs, white roses like the ones I'd trashed a day earlier. I opted for the theme because black would've given away the truth behind this screwed-up wedding.

"Better be," I seethed, grinding my teeth.

As the words left my mouth, the band played the first notes of the bridal march I chose for Justine. An instrumental cover of a song we both recognized and one of the easiest decisions I'd ever made, hardly because I was such a romantic at heart. It encapsulated a sentimental value, definitely, one that'd mess with her badly. She'd hear it and have no idea whether remnants of warm, fuzzy emotions led me to pick it, or whether I selected this specific one to mock her and the concept of us.

To evoke a similar damage to the one she'd inflicted on me years ago, laying her final blow after I'd caught so many signs telling me we had a chance at being something more.

With the venom still dripping in my veins, it was only fair. All I had left to do was watch it unfold.

Justine stepped out to the terrace in a pristine white gown, donning dark makeup around her eyes, a dark red lipstick on her lips, and her hair cascaded carelessly at the front of her body to complete the morbid look. Inappropriate for a wedding, agreed, but perfect in every fucking way for her.

In, out. You'll never be anything more than married roommates.

Fortunately, her parents joined her a second later, grabbing my attention. Stuart who wore a black tailored tux flanked her from the right, her mother who donned a navy-blue dress, escorted her from the left. The three of them had thick masses of hair, hazel eyes, yet you could tell they weren't on the same level. See, the clothes, facial features—they attributed to someone's persona.

They weren't him, or her. The person's insides were what shaped them, their soul, and Justine, much to my chagrin, had it in abundance. She looked regal.

She also seemed agonizingly confused. It took less than a fleeting moment for the song to register, consequently morphing Justine's cold, tight-lipped expression into a slack-jawed, wide-eyed puzzlement. I'd observed it hours on end to call it for what it was, a manifestation of hurt.

That instant, I knew I'd hit the mark, got what I'd aimed for. The years we spent hating and distancing ourselves from one another hadn't made a difference to the one simple truth—that I understood each of her motives, sensed whatever passed inside that beautiful and deceiving head of hers from anywhere in the world, let alone a few feet that separated us. That Justine ran through my bloodstream, that I ravaged hers.

However, the prize I'd wished for, the smugness that I pictured would unequivocally follow, lagged behind. So far behind in fact, that I suspected it'd fail to land in my arms, ever.

I felt another range of emotions, a turmoil of them riling up inside me, dunking me balls-deep into my own trap. Regret, longing, nostalgia—these were just a few. And I had my own self to congratulate for it. I mean, I had to be one hell of a conceited idiot to lie to myself and say that hearing *our* song from *our* movie while watching her wearing a wedding gown would reward me with any measure of gloating instead of personal pain.

That tightly wound knot in the pit of your stomach, the slicing pang across your heart. That kind of pain. It swirled and punctured and wreaked havoc and damaged my organs and I had to shut it off. Shut myself away, protect myself from her, from the effect she had on me.

As my heart did everything in its power to rip itself out of my chest, Justine remained glued to her place. Hadn't budged an inch when Stuart and Pauline tugged on her arms. Her full lace ball gown rustled, the rest of her as still as a statue.

She gripped the single white rose between her fingers fiercely, as if the stronger she pinched it, the bigger her chances would be to stay in place. To withhold her parents from handing her over to the man who orchestrated her torture by reminding her with the song "Storybook Love" from *The Princess Bride*.

Stuart, true to himself, got exasperated with his daughter for not obeying him. The corner of his eye twitched, his global signal for *I'm not satisfied* demonstrated as he placed a hand at the small of Justine's back, moving her forward. I wanted to rip that hand off and throw it over the terrace of the eighth floor and into the busy New York street.

All in due time.

She acquiesced, moving forward. Her eyes narrowed, the hate in them crackling like hungry flames being fed by gallons of fuel. When Justine took her place in front of me, the string quartet brought the song to its finale, the chords fading into nothing.

Not that it loosened any of the stress that dominated my body, not that my shoulders relaxed. How the fuck could they with Justine up close and personal like that?

Justine dipped her chin, glaring daggers at me. At no point did she free one of her hands to hold mine. I didn't offer mine to hers either. Our officiant, Karina, glanced from her to me, ready to start the ceremony. Justine's sole focus and reproach remained on me, her spite blocking the rest of the world out.

Only when her red-headed friend tapped on her shoulder, then cleared her throat, did she separate the accusing stare from me.

“The rose,” the auburn-haired whispered to Justine.

I viewed the whole interaction, outwardly indifferent. The act I’d demonstrated had evolved from years of convincing myself that despite my love for and no one else, not her hate nor her love would impact me anymore.

On the inside, comprehending that soon her hand would hold mine brought me into the frame of mind of a person about to walk on hot coals. Would I die? No. Was I strong enough mentally to pass through touching her palm? Possibly. Could they burn me in the process? Most likely.

Not like I had a choice in the matter. With the flower gone, Justine returned to look at Karina. We were positioned side by side, but even from her profile, the spitting fire couldn’t be ignored. I stared at the coals, understood the severity of the burn that might scald me, and still linked our fingers together.

“Dearly beloved...” Karina started while I was burning alive.

She went on and on and on. I couldn’t hear her, remembering the feelings I’d buried in the innermost dark corners of my brain springing forth. I bit my tongue, hard, to restrain any reaction, good or bad, from unveiling to anyone.

That silence, where my soul nearly broke in half, was the space where I repeated my mantras as my final defense mechanism. They helped me reinforce my resolution against reminiscing on how I dreamed of marrying Justine, of that moment where we would be wed.

While Karina carried on with the service, reciting something about endless love, I averted my attention to my soon-to-be wife. Forcing my brain to revolve around sex made my emotions less personal, and I charged in that direction.

I raked my eyes over Justine’s snug bodice, how it hugged her curves and pushed her full breasts up. They were barely

concealed by the sheer fabric that connected to the bodice and covered her cleavage, and I lingered on the soft mounds.

Being attracted to her and not trusting her with my heart and lusting for her were two unrelated sentiments, I reasoned. It explained plenty, especially why her anger when she'd caught me staring at her pulled at the strings of my lips to draw a smirk.

"...Now turn to one another." Karina motioned for us to move, signaling to us by bobbing her head at each of us.

We abided, entwining the other hands into one. Our gazes collided, my cold one meeting her torches.

"Do you, Roman Irving Gallagher, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together in matrimony, to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?"

From this day forward was an understatement of the millennia. I'd devoted my entire thirty years on this planet to her. Even if it means she'd pissed me off in the process. Still did.

Justine's brows lowered, the deep hazel shade of her eyes almost swallowed entirely, shimmering past thin slits. *Last chance, asshole*, they taunted.

"I do."

Karina's voice lightened in relief. "Wonderful. And do you, Justine Noelle Sutton, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live together in matrimony, to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Justine practically spat out her reply. The people who weren't a part of our close circle must have thought it was so fucking romantic: she couldn't wait to get the words out to marry me.

They'd think it, and they'd be dead wrong. When this woman enjoyed anything—a song, a dance, a late-night conversation—she elongated the living fuck out of it. She rushed out her *I do* because her staying here, staring at me, accepting my wedding band on top of the six million dollars' worth engagement ring I'd bought her made her sick to her stomach. So did slipping the gold wedding band on my finger.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

At that sentence, the unexpected happened. My anger dissipated, my hands flinging to cup her cheeks. Justine's disgust gave way to heaving breaths and fluttering eyes that lost their sharpness, the tension dissolving from her with every inch I eviscerated between us.

And then I kissed her, slamming my lips into hers. She kissed me back, harsh and unrelenting, like she refused to let me win. My kiss was devoid of any softness or compassion, the complete opposite of how I'd dreamed our first kiss would be like. In my countless rundowns of it, I pictured how I would've given her the best of me, the tender, the protector, the lover. Slow swipes of my tongue to caress hers instead of sucking her face off and biting her lower lip.

“I still hate your fucking guts, *husband*,” she mumbled against my lips when we separated, the clapping of our guests muting her words.

I raised an eyebrow, not flustered by the kiss and seeing my goal much clearer. “That's perfect, because I can't stand you either, *wife*.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Justine

“WHATEVER HAPPENS, no matter what hour or day or time, you’re always welcome at our home.” Elsie gave me a lopsided grin in the well-lit foyer, a tear rolling out of her bright blue, gorgeous eyes.

Alda sniffed, her green eyes shimmering, her voice unsteady. “Ours too. You have a room in LA with your name on it.”

I twisted my lips, certain that a few more minutes of these would have me sobbing alongside them, something I quit doing ages ago. “I know.”

The wine we downed that night, the five of us including Noah, the whiskey aficionado, might’ve contributed to our state of emotional mess as we gathered in the foyer after the rest of the guests had departed. In my haste to have an ounce more of their warmth, and/or due to my semi-drunkenness, I stumbled over my skirt as I attempted to hug Elsie and Alda.

Kyle held me by the arm before I fell flat on my face; Noah caught one of the many ridiculous layers of tulle in the wedding gown Mom had bought me. I huffed, cursing under my breath the complexity of a simple task like walking or FUI—functioning under the influence—in the ostentatious dress.

Or maybe my whole situation sucked and I’d blamed the innocent dress for my troubles.

Definitely a possibility.

Whether this or that, I couldn’t bring myself to care. I longed for an embrace, and as I received a tight one from the two women who were like sisters to me, I allowed myself to

find comfort and extract the powers for the remainder of the night. Of my life. I inhaled their scent, buried my head in their hair right in the middle of the two. Engulfed by Elsie's long, red locks and Alda's soft, brown curls, I felt at home.

Thanks to them, the tear-dam withheld the onslaught of emotions. My usual smile crept up, latching itself onto my face. I sealed it there, released them from the hug, and glanced from one to another and whispered conspiratorially, "Quit the tears, ladies. Some of us need to take advantage of the wedding night vibes and it's obviously not going to be me."

My attempts to amuse them, to gain a bit of normalcy in the middle of this madness, worked. Elsie laugh-cried, wiping the tears that stained her cheeks with mascara. "I love you so much. And remember it's never too late to regret. Never."

Noah draped an arm around Alda when her nose scrunched and she spun her gold bracelets like she did when she got extra nervous. "Never."

"They're right," Noah contributed.

"They always are." Kyle chuckled, then patted my shoulder before joining his girlfriend's side. "Seriously though, we're a phone call or a subway ride away. Call us whenever."

I lifted the top layer of my skirt and wiped off the rebellious tears that let loose and roamed freely, unlike me in my current situation. The black splotches on the fabric stained the otherwise pristine dress.

Instead of lamenting about the expensive gown I couldn't care less about, I made a mental note to search for the nearest dry cleaners. I forgot I intended to donate it to Goodwill in tiptop shape, praying it'd gift another girl the wedding she fantasized about.

"I love you all to tiny little pieces." They backed out as I shooed them toward the door. "I'm not dead and we'll talk, maybe even tomorrow. Technology, imagine that."

Noah was the last in the short train of four people, his brown eyes landing on me and his tattooed hand resting on my shoulder. “You’re not alone.”

We hadn’t seen each other much, him having moved with Alda to Hollywood Hills a few short months after we’d met her, but I had no doubt in my mind they loved me like I loved them. Like family. Even in his short message, I knew he meant to show his concern, to relay that he’d always be there for me.

“Thanks, Noah. Don’t sweat it, really.” I widened my smile, hoping to assure him I was in fact, okay. “Take care of Alda for me, I don’t need anything else.”

“You know I will.” He winked and went out, pulling the door and closing it after him.

“You really are not alone.”

I slapped my hand over my mouth to contain the scream that burst from my chest. Why Roman sneaking up on me continued to surprise me, I had no idea. No one mastered an insane control over his body and movements as well as he did, a skill he’d perfected from when we were kids. He’d creep up on you in broad daylight and you’d never notice until you were face to face with him.

Despite remembering that about him, I wasn’t any less flustered and on the verge of having a stroke. The ear-piercing thuds of my heart echoed in the large house, pinging across the paintings on the walls, bouncing off the barrel-vaulted ceiling. Roman stood close behind me, not a tinge of alcohol on his breath, and a whole lot of his cologne wafting in the air and titillating me in ways it shouldn’t have. The way it stirred me under the altar, that virile fragrance of *him*.

Of the man who, to my demise, despite the cruel trick he’d played on me with the walking down the aisle song, I still couldn’t loathe him like he deserved. Throughout the ceremony, the longest ten minutes I’d ever endured, I maintained my contemptuous expression, refraining from

letting my lust for him manifest and the measly amount of affection I had for him reveal themselves.

But now, fatigued from the exhausting experience and alone to fend for myself, the mask wore off. Even without a mirror, I knew my self-pity and the missed opportunity to a genuine, unforced relationship with him reflected on my eyes, seeping out of my pores.

The lust though, the fierce clenching of my thighs when Roman's breath blew next to my ear, was disguised by my gargantuan dress. I guess I couldn't despise the silly garment after all.

Small comforts.

Collecting myself, I inhaled deeply, my lungs facilitating the breath that struggled to get in. When I felt confident my voice wouldn't falter, I answered, "Yes, Roman, I do understand the concept of marriage. Why do you think I've been avoiding it and you for as long as possible?"

His low, dark chuckle didn't intimidate me, instead soliciting sinister cravings I should've negated. These were urges and yearnings that I'd harbored for him since puberty hit, since I took the leap, listened to the heart palpitations, the butterflies in my stomach, the constant need to be in his orbit, and fell for him.

They were hidden, then and to that day, in the deep caverns of my soul like you would stuff an ugly outfit in the back of your closet. The sentimental value and attachment outdid the shame of being caught owning it.

"See, I don't believe you avoided marrying me because of me." Roman drew my hair away from the front of my body, the pads of his fingers brushing my shoulder, trailing to my upper back.

Shivers broke across my skin when he brought his lips to my exposed neck, touching without touching. "My opinion is, you're fed up with your dad. Been fed up with him probably

since birth. He insisted you marry me, and you in return insisted he go fuck himself. Am I getting close?”

He indeed got close, too fucking close, both to the truth and to me. He grazed his teeth on the sensitive skin of my neck, gripped my waist, scalded me from the inside as he pressed himself to my gown. If Roman would've gotten any closer, the bastard would've been inside of me.

“Such an impressive understanding of the human mind.” My breath hitched when he withdrew a little, only to pop open the bridal accent buttons at the back of my dress.

The meticulous movements traveled beyond pure, beastly sex, so unlike his kiss at the end of the ceremony. That one was a force that bruised me, sending a jolt down to my core. It had the power to destroy me, to drive me into pleading he place his lips on mine for an eternity.

This, this efficient yet slow undoing of each button, built a rising pressure between my legs, a slow cooker for my lust as it simmered and grew painfully slow. By the time he'd finished, grazing his knuckles on the bare curve of my spine, my nipples were two hard pebbles, my panties soaked.

“Sorry for underestimating you.” My voice quavered, biting my bottom lip, which did little to help it stop. “Who could've guessed you have so much more depth than being a mere numbers cruncher and soul crusher?”

Roman gripped my waist, swiveling me to face him. His short, straight hair was tousled, his black eyes were somehow darker. They raged, wanted, and dripped desire as they ransacked my body. His gaze stalled on the front of my body where my breasts were no longer contained by my bodice or the bra I attached to it, tongue flicking out to wet his lips.

I stuck up my chin, determined to convince him, and myself, that I didn't care. That none of his hot stares and even hotter touch threw me off-balance, not an ounce of them would make me melt for him.

Roman, as obstinate as I was, refused to believe it, resorting to the infuriating smirk from the ceremony. That was, until he didn't. Until I reached to the front of his black pants and cupped his dick in my palm. Roman was already hard, growing harder as I stroked him, throbbing and aching for me as I needed him.

He tilted his head, intrigued and undeniably hungry, not trusting me, yet unable to resist how good it felt. He was clever, my husband, to listen to his instincts. As much as rubbing him turned me on, having him orgasm was out of the fucking question.

Beckoning him to lower his ear to my mouth, I whispered, "Told you you'd have blue balls tonight."

"Huh," I heard him say with my back to him.

Huh and nothing else as my dress sashayed and my heels clicked down the corridor.

Huh and my furiously beating heart as I slammed the door to my room, leaned against it, and dragged my aroused self to the floor, for the first time today genuinely laughing.



Two days in Roman's penthouse, which I still couldn't call my home, and I'd finally learned how to use the buttons of his fancy coffee machine. It poured the boiling liquid into two expensive white ceramic cups, one for me, one for Mom, spreading the delicious smell of the exquisite coffee throughout the kitchen.

She asked to visit me the Monday morning after the wedding, and given we hadn't talked since the wedding-tornado and my lack of employment, saying yes came easy.

I carried the cups from the main kitchen—the auxiliary ginormous one was on the second floor, so prince charming wouldn't have to bother himself with going up and down the elevator—through the open plan to the great room.

Mom examined me as I placed the cups on the low, square Carrara marble tabletop. “Doesn’t Roman have people to wait on you?”

“He does.” I slumped down on the sofa that overlooked the terrace and the city by Mom’s side. She arched an eyebrow, from either me crossing my jean-clad legs on the cushions, or from my short reply. Possibly from both.

“I’m perfectly capable of pouring my own coffee,” I elaborated.

Like I made it through two years that you forbade your parents to help me financially just to appease your husband, I thought, but hadn’t uttered. I’d accepted my reality, no hard feelings. I couldn’t hold her love against her.

“I’m even good at it. Try it.”

She reached over to the table, her nails bearing a different color from yesterday’s onyx black. They were a light shade of beige, complementing her tweed beige skirt suit. Sybil, who’d been employed as her personal hairdresser for as long as I could remember, did an incredible job styling her thick, brown hair in waves, leaving no errant strand out of place. Immaculate and fresh looking, no one would’ve guessed my mom was a day over forty.

“You can do anything you set your mind to, my love, I’ve always known that.”

Suddenly, the coffee hadn’t tasted as sweet. “You did. Stuart didn’t.”

“Stuart—your dad, please call him Dad.”

“No disrespect, Mom, but we’re way past the happy family shit.” I was inclined to add *The day he wanted to send me to boarding school on another continent and you’d magically dissuaded him from it,* and stopped myself. It would’ve saddened her, something I’d avoided at all costs.

I learned long ago that whenever I breathed the word *boarding* around my mom, she’d change the subject or claim it

upset her, and why couldn't we be satisfied with the fact I remained at home. Over time I stopped trying and thanked her internally for keeping me here.

Mom's head shook subtly. She returned the cup to the table, crossing her legs at the ankles like the pristine woman my grandparents raised her to be. Like the one I refused to be. "Dad loves you and believes in you very much. He wants nothing but the best for you, Justine. Just because he's not as good at showing his emotions, doesn't mean he doesn't have them. That's why he paid for your tuition and living expenses during your studies at NYU—"

"For the sake of appearances."

"—and for Elsie's doctor appointments—"

"When I threatened to protest under the GallaTon offices for any number of crazy reasons and call the press."

"—and why he pushed for this marriage to Roman, one of the best men we know."

I folded my arms around my torso, feeling peculiarly petulant and stubborn, much like Roman in his incessant attempts to push me away. I hated it when he did that, yet couldn't stop myself from acting just the same. "Again, for appearance *and* for the company not to be snatched by the man I would've chosen. Zero love, zero faith."

The collected composure Mom had maintained, fractured. She pursed her lips, blinking succinctly a few times. Yup, the truth about Stuart sucked. "Who told you that?"

My harsh laugh was void of humor. "Clearly not Stuart who, so-called, believes in me and my judgment. I heard it from my darling husband, who, I suspect, got a kick out of informing me Stuart thought I was a moron in the relationship department as well as in everything I do."

Mom's hurt expression sliced through me, breaking my righteous speech. "Look, Mom, I'm sorry. It's not your fault these assholes—"

“Justine...”

“These *men* thrust us in the middle of their lunacy. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

She sighed, her lips curving up. “I wasn’t a fan of forcing you into anything either, and I tried dissuading your father out of the idea for many years. But Roman is a wonderful man. He was a good kid, and he’s grown to be a mature and stable adult. You two used to fall over one another. You had it once, you can have it again.”

I wanted to laugh, to cry, to claw out my hair. I’d always loved Roman, never stopped loving him, not for a second. Our problem was, he’d outcasted me from the circle of people he treated with grace, handed me a one-way ticket out of it, never to return.

“You’re already married. What’s done is done,” she said, firmer than I’d heard her in the past, her delicate palm squeezing my knee. “In the meantime, why don’t you try to find the positive in the situation? You implement it in every other aspect of your life.”

I had to agree on that. In fact, I agreed with her so much that her statement spurred an idea on how to bake a three-layer lemon pie out of this lemon I’d been handed.

“Justine, that look, I don’t like it.”

“What?” I swiped my phone, shooting out a text and putting the wheels of my plan into motion. “I’m following your advice. Everything will be just fine. You’ll see.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Roman

LENNON, CHRISTOPHER, and I were wrapping up our midnight discussions the day after my wedding. We sat in my office, the rest of the analysts, portfolio managers, traders, and most importantly Stuart long gone for the day.

I'd assumed he wouldn't be thrilled about me excluding him from a closed-door meeting with both the owner of the largest independent news blog in the country—Truth to the People—and my lawyer.

Them being my friends wouldn't have contributed to his mood either. Holding a meeting far from my wife's eyes gave off vibes of anything but a friendly meeting. Nor did the late hour and the absence of documentation of said meeting in my calendar. As far as everyone knew, we went off the grid.

Christopher wore a black V-neck shirt and jeans, casual, vacation-mode style for him, and the perfect alibi for elongating his stay before returning to his home in Boston. That, and *The Lion King* on Broadway. The only thing he'd missed to be on complete tourist-mode was an "I Heart NY" T-shirt.

"Zach will appreciate the added information Faye collected. I mean, the files you brought up to us about Stuart, the details you collected from working next to him, it was good, but this"—he scratched his stubble, then mussed his already tousled brown hair. More signs of *I'm not here to work*—"it'll build a solid case on the off-chance Stuart will try to fight your claims."

"I should've asked her to do it sooner, it made her so fucking elated." Lennon grinned, a set of his pearly whites

flashing. And fuck me, he blushed. I'd have told him to go after her, but I mean, me? Give relationship advice? What a joke.

“Tell Faye someone’s abusing his power and she’ll be all over his ass in a second.” His smugness from her achievement lasted for the whole of two seconds, melting from his glimmering eyes when he added, “She also brought up a seriously valid point, for us to ensure he’s not tailing us in return.”

I got up, kicking a red balloon, one of many the staff had tossed in my office to celebrate my marriage. They’d surprised me this morning, almost all of them gathered outside in the hall, clapping and cheering for me. Stuart’s head vein blew up to monster-size, witnessing such a show of emotions, glowering in our direction with the perpetual scowl he paraded from observing any friendly workplace interactions. For that reason alone, I let them stay another five minutes after his sourface closed the door to his room, being extra loud in my thank you’s before sending them off to get on with their jobs.

I buttoned my dusky-gray suit jacket, escorting my friends and myself out. The trading floor seemed like an entirely distinct place without the humming of phone calls, the shouting, the live energy I’d grown accustomed to.

“Valid, yes. Necessary, no.” During the years I had him tailed, of finding my own information on him, I hadn’t gotten a single indication from my detectives that he contracted someone to have me followed as well. Not that it mattered. “I don’t have any skeletons. I don’t drink, don’t do drugs, don’t party, am not a dick-pic sender, and don’t have a kid from a one-night stand. I’m untouchable.”

The doors to the elevators slid open, and Christopher punched the first floor’s button. “You, yes. What about Justine?”

“What about her?” I watched as the floor numbers changed quickly.

From what Pauline had recounted and from my memories of her, I knew she liked to dance in her room, read and go on shopping trips with her mom. She drank at our wedding, which everyone did except me, and even then, she looked composed. As for the documents I'd kept on him, I installed a safe the second Justine agreed to marry me, and ever since been watching my steps at the apartment, careful not to leave any document out of place. She shouldn't have been an issue, not her.

"Does she do any of these things?" My silence propelled Lennon to think I'd been missing the obvious, or so his tone implied. Fifteen years ago, he probably would've added *duh* for good measure.

We paced through the large lobby of the Wall Street building, crossing the granite floors to the entrance. Larry, my driver, waited outside the glass doors to take Lennon and me to our homes and Christopher to his hotel. "Justine's fine. Nothing to worry about."

"Great," they said in unison.

Larry opened the door, and we climbed in the black Mercedes.

"Did Mrs. Gallagher indicate when she'd like me to pick her up?" he asked.

My friends swiveled their heads in my direction. The term *Mrs. Gallagher* had been new to me, and the wheels in my brain spun slowly. It took me way longer than it would've on any other day to analyze the stacks of information that'd been bombarded on me in a matter of one sentence, but when it landed, it felt like an explosion in my brain.

I retrieved my phone from my suit pocket, dialing her number while questioning Larry, "Pick her up from where? Where did she go? You were supposed to stay outside all day and take her wherever she needed."

The phone didn't ring. It went straight to voicemail.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Gallagher," he blurted out.

I lost the ability to speak, much less the mental potency to correct his use of my prefix. Stress claimed my vocal cords; unsolicited and sure-as-fuck unexpected worry froze the blood in my veins. My second call went to voicemail, then the third, and fourth. Justine could be anywhere, bumping into anyone, hurt or drugged or whatever, and I wasn't there for her.

The unbelievable tsunami of concern that hit me made me consider, for the very first time, the idea of hiring a detective or ten to keep tabs on her. As fast as the sick idea arose, I labeled it for the no-fucking-way box. A sick, needy part of me wanted to trust her, to not be the stalking, depraved husband.

And it wouldn't matter in the slightest in any case if she was hurt right now and I couldn't even trace her phone.

"A taxi with another girl in it waited for her. She said it's a friend who is taking her to a party," Larry interjected my crippling thoughts.

What fucking friend?

Since no sign of worry showed on my features, Christopher chose this moment to taunt me, "Nothing to worry about?"

"Shut up," I quipped, not verbalizing what I might've been the only person in the car to realize. That yes, there were a fuckload of reasons to be worried, and no, Stuart trailing her or not hadn't even made it into the top five of them.



Larry dropped my friends off and we drove around the city for two hours, cruising through side streets and areas where a girl in trouble might find herself. During these one-hundred-and-twenty hair-pulling minutes, I'd called Elsie and Alda to check whether they'd heard from her. Besides making them worried, I got nada. The hospitals turned up empty, that was if she carried her ID to wherever she went.

"No call from Bill?" Larry asked.

My eyes glanced briefly at the phone, then returned to fixate on the window. “Nothing. Let’s circle back home, I’ll wait for her there.”

“No problem.” He nodded once, driving us in that direction.

At the penthouse, my mood worsened somehow. It varied between panic and fury, had my fists clenching and unclenching in attempts to soothe myself. Suffice to say its effectiveness verged on nonexistence. I slumped into the sofa, glaring daggers at the door, like that’d force her to magically appear there. It was childlike, idiotic, and wishful thinking, but also my last resort before five AM, the deadline I set myself to give a national wake-up call to my connections in law enforcement to go start a search for her.

I couldn’t remember when I had ever felt a smidge upset as I did that day.

After about an hour, the lock clicked. Justine pushed open the front door, her hair and her ruffled mini dress swayed as she struggled to stay upright, a challenging task when one was intoxicated and wore three-inch heels at three o’clock in the morning.

She’s so fucking cute. That was my only thought, accompanied by my only need to leap forward and stabilize her, to hug and laugh with her over her cute, drunk hiccup that damn near melted my heart.

And then I remembered the fear for her from a second ago, the mind-numbing dread to have a random police detective discovering her lying in a ditch. I said goodbye to marveling at her endearing hiccup thoughts as the feelings I hadn’t felt in forever, like annoyance and being out of my freaking mind with worry, encumbered my entire being.

I shoved up to stand, taking one stealthy step after the other. Justine hadn’t heard me, locking the door and dropping the key an inch or two away from the console.

“Oops.” She giggled to herself as it clanked on the hardwood floor, unaware that I’d stopped not too far from her.

“Welcome home, Highness.” The endearing term I used to love tasted putrid on my tongue. Sounded like it, too.

My sudden appearance hadn’t spooked her like it did yesterday. She continued on her mission to bend for the key, her dress hiking up higher. I was honed in on the show of more skin, *her* skin, missing completely the point in time when she lost her balance and began tumbling to the floor. However, halfway through her fall, I caught her.

I leaped forward, wrapping an arm around her stomach and pulling her upright. We both breathed heavily, pressed against each other. Our faces were side by side, her cheek close to mine, the scent of something alcoholic and sweet wafting in the air. I shouldn’t have liked it, this nearness, though nothing in me rebelled against it.

And when she hadn’t made a move to wriggle out of my grasp, I hadn’t budged to set her free either. The intimate touch of her small body encapsulated in mine evoked an abundance of memories from older and better times. They ate at my anger and washed away my concern.

Nothing happened to her that evening, and I planned on maintaining the status quo. Forever.

“Nice to be back, Mr. Soulless.” She hiccupped and giggled, again. “Ha, that rhymes, Soulless and Highness. It suits this weird-as-shit era of our lives much better than Tina and Ro, don’t you think? Soulless?”

At the mention of the old nicknames we had for one another, I released her, the burn stinging my broken soul. I hadn’t commented on it, not indulging her with seeing them get to me. “Where were you?”

She twirled to face me, using one hand to brace herself on the door. The engagement ring I gave her shone brilliantly even under the low lights of the hall. I’d planned on buying it for her in my teenage years, knowing I’d have kneeled on

whatever surface available to offer it to her. Never in my existence had I imagined she'd have it waiting on her bed in a separate room as a fact rather than a proposal.

Justine waved the other hand in the air. "Out, obviously."

"With whom?" I returned to our topic, remembering the critical topic I'd needed to find out.

Had the friend that took her out partying was an old family acquaintance, it was damn near possible they were one of Stuart's minions, being called in as a favor to spy on her. He wouldn't have instructed them to get her drunk, but any information they'd come back with, the fucker would take notes. Assuming he'd sent someone.

"Not that it's any of your business"—hiccup—"but I called Chloe."

She growled, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow. Although it seemed obvious to her, I had no clue who this Chloe person was.

"She works for Kyle, his literary agent in Manhattan when he"—her ass slumped against the door, her exhaustion visible—"works in Brooklyn or travels to other states."

Crisis averted, her health and Stuart-wise for the short term. For the long haul, no one knew better than me of the high probability of unforeseen risks to arise. Dad had nurtured me to learn it from the moment I could walk, and that was the course of action I planned to take with Justine going forward.

I sucked my lips in, blurting out what needed to be said, cognizant she wouldn't like it one bit. A price I was willing to pay, because fuck it, how much lower can it go from hating your fucking guts? "That was the first and last time."

She sobered up pretty fast after that. The bored look had transformed to that of determination as the sound of her heels stomping on the floor boomed in the house when she walked to me. She stuck up her chin, bumping her chest into mine. "Last time what?"

“That you’re going out to parties.”

“The fuck I am!”

Explaining to her that I acted for her and my benefit would’ve been futile. Regardless of my desire to trust her, I couldn’t, not yet, not when she considered me the villain who tried to force her hand. It took one fit of rage over something I would’ve done, one slipup, and I’d lose the element of surprise and years of preparation would’ve been for naught.

What I had to offer her, in the volatile state we were in, was an excuse to match my behavior toward her for the past thirteen years. The asshole approach. “You’re my wife, and you represent me. You can shop and do whatever the fuck you want with my credit card that doesn’t entail you being an embarrassment at parties, photographed drunk by tabloids. As of now I’ll see that Edith will take your card each evening before she leaves the house.”

Her jaw ticked, eyebrows raised up her forehead. “Fine, I don’t want your or Stuart’s stupid money anyway. I’m qualified. I’ll find a job eventually.”

“Try me, *Tina*,” I spat out, putting on a show, pretending I was immune to our past. Backing her up to a wall, I bracketed her with my hands on both sides of her head, using the worst possible ultimatum, which I had zero intentions of following through. I just needed her to get it into her head that I wasn’t fucking around. “I’ll get this marriage annulled and have you on the street the second you do.”

She filled her lungs with air, quieting for what seemed like an eternity. It wasn’t though. It’d been the exact time it took to repeat the soothing sentences about peace and safety and all that and I hated myself for putting her in that position, but she left me no other choice.

When she spoke, any trepidation she might’ve felt had vanished from her voice. “Why don’t you just do it now?”

I lowered my face so we were nose to nose. “Why don’t you just listen?”

Justine's eyes darted between mine, dry without a single hint of a tear glimmering in them. Either she didn't want me to bear witness to her crying, or she didn't anymore.

She looked furious. "I hate you."

"You what?"

The mixture of heightened emotions, good and bad, and the essence of her so close to me fucked with my head and common sense. I grabbed her by the waist, my big palm digging into her skin, pulling her to me.

My pants and the thin fabric of her skirt separated us, but she could feel how hard I was like I felt her heat. "Repeat that for me."

"I hate you, Roman. I despise you, I loathe you, I can't believe I used to be your friend." With every word enunciated, her lips were a breath from mine as she seethed at me. She meant to hurt me, but her eyes and how easily her body drifted to mine had another message.

Apparently hate and lust weren't mutually exclusive. Sometimes, the two were one and the same.

"That makes two of us," I snarled, then willingly accepted her unspoken invitation.

I cupped her cheeks, crushing my lips to hers, coaxing her mouth open. Our tongues waged war, turning our kiss into fire, in the fucking hottest way possible. Like they were made for each other, like our bodies were as they molded into one piece of this insane puzzle.

We were the irony of the fucking universe; we fit, through the anger and resentment and the shitshow we put ourselves through. But what good did it do us? We were broken beyond repair, the living definition of hopeless.

At the end of a few passionate and painful minutes, Justine broke the kiss. She breathed, I breathed, that was that. No further attempts to take out our suppressed emotions on the other, no reverting to something that'd end up destroying us.

Quiet.

“Good night, Roman.” She broke it eventually, sliding beneath my arm and to her room.

I banged my forehead to the wall, replying to her under my breath, out of her earshot. “Good night.”

CHAPTER SIX

Justine

NOTES WERE scattered on my bed, a pile of unsent letters to Roman which I wrote constantly for years, without looking back to read any of them, not once since he stopped talking to me.

The mere thought of going through them hurt. They were a mountain of unspoken sentiments, of wants and desires and longings that were a part of who I used to be, of moments we'd shared. Reminiscing on a past you can no longer have hurts like a motherfucker, worse than a nine-inch blade to the chest.

By locking away these letters, I eradicated the longing and our friendship, the one that could never be. It safeguarded my heart from breaking in two from Roman's avoidance and torments. The more I forgot what we were, the easier it became to antagonize him, too.

Over the years I kept writing to him, though. Writing was my form of escapism, and even though Elsie never, ever failed to be by my side, a part of me held on to the solace only Roman could provide, the same part of me that never stopped loving him.

And now, a week after he angry-kissed me, a week since he stirred me from my drunken haze into a lust-filled one, a week since, despite the animosity in his ultimatum, a spark resembling concern flashed in his gaze, I longed to remember the goodness of him.

I needed the reminder of a gentler Roman so that maybe I could find it in me to reform our friendship like Mom had suggested, to make it tolerable for me to stay here. Because as

of last week, I had an ulterior motive to being Roman's wife, besides being annoyingly attracted to him.

My lifelong dream of volunteering finally took shape thanks to Chloe, who, over cocktails, directed me toward the best place to do just that. She volunteered as a sports instructor for the youth, a field I couldn't really connect to. Other than dancing, physical activity had never been my thing. But she did tell me about the academic tutor programs in the center she'd mentored, ones that offered kids extracurricular activities in terms of learning all year round, even during summer vacation.

This opportunity thrust life back into me, had given me a silver lining. A chance to pay it forward, help kids accomplish their dreams, fall in love with writing, all of which I'd longed for. Marrying Roman, and staying married to him, was my key to pouring my time and energy into it. His fortune held no significance for me in the traditional sense of clothes, shoes, cars, and the like, not in the slightest. It'd bless me with the rare chance to give freely without a full-time job getting in the way.

Hence my agreement to Roman's demands, hence my desperation to rediscover the kindness in him, to not see him as the devil, to not claw my eyes out from living in this house. Didn't mean I'd share it with him, not ever. Him vetoing it would've broken me, forcing me to be of less substance than a plant. No thanks, this one I held close to my chest.

I started hovering my hands over the dated letters, seeing the words but not really able to read them. My blood whooshed through my veins, nervous of what I'd discover, stressed from the reaction it'd cause.

Closing my eyes, I tilted my head up, took a deep breath, repeated my self-love and security sentences, and opened them.

"I can do it," I told myself as I searched for the oldest one, uncovering a pink page with a child's handwriting scribbled all over it. "I can do it."

Summer from sixteen years ago

Ro,

When I woke up this morning, I didn't feel a whole lot like myself.

I stared up at the fan as it spun, at the slithering light from the early sunrise, and tried to understand why that was.

There's the more evident culprit, my new—sorry for being gross—stage in life. Last week Mom hugged me, took me to the side, and told me I'm a woman now, and a day later Kennedy slapped me on the back and whispered, "I can teach you how to use a tampon." Gross, again.

You didn't like the secrecy of us three, and I don't like keeping things from you, but like, how would this conversation even begin? "Guess what? From now on I get to experience the joy of monthly cramps, mood swings, and bleeding from downstairs. Fist bump!"

No. Sorry. Not happening. I'm writing it here because you'll never see it, and still, I am not the most comfortable ever with it.

Back to my feeling different and it's why—spoiler alert—my cycle isn't it. Cause the other-ness that courses through my body isn't a depressing one; it's a completely different one. It's you. You see, this past July that we hung out together, or maybe even before, you stopped being my Roman.

Let me rephrase that.

You're not the skinny kid who raced me from one point on the beach to the other, who then carried me on his shoulders into the ocean as I squealed. You're not the sweet boy who built tents in my room to shield me from Father's random shouting and told me scary stories to distract me from the monster outside. And you're definitely, most definitely, not the

best friend I've ever had who cuddled me when I cried and from whom I sought to be comforted.

You're none of these identities, not because you're nothing to me, but because you're so much more.

Because when I'm on your shoulders now, I feel like the queen of our universe and I'm fighting the urge to run a hand through your long hair and kiss the top of your head. Because when you're telling me these scary stories and look me in the eye while making those funny, so-called spooky expressions, I become the sole and unique audience to the Roman show, an experience I'm greedy to save for myself alone.

Because, FML this is a tough one, when I'm in your embrace, protected in that human capsule you create with your thighs and arms and the cheek that rests on my hair, I don't just feel safe anymore.

I feel like I want you to kiss me. I feel like I want you to call me your girlfriend.

Ro, with you I...I feel.

And that's the big difference.

My secret. One I'll never tell.

Writing it down is one thing—there's no risk of rejection, of losing you, my constant warm light in every dark room. By telling you, there is. And I'm not ready for that. Don't think I ever will be.

I'm probably too young to say such bombastic words like Fitzgerald and Shakespeare and Rumi wrote about, but fuck it, no one's gonna read it anyway and I don't mind being secretly dramatic—I love you.

Probably did from the moment your dark eyes latched onto my lighter ones, probably will to the end of times.

Eternally yours, even from the shadows,

Tina

CHAPTER SEVEN

Roman

AN ECHO of a familiar tune permeated from somewhere within the first floor of the penthouse that evening when I returned from work.

Six nights had gone by of us skirting around one another, distanced and silent. Nights marked by exhales of relief for her hiding in her room as opposed to straying the streets. Almost a complete week for me to reclaim my poise as the unperturbed man I recognized myself to be.

An unhappy one. Because my fulfilled demands notwithstanding, the past hadn't freed me of its talons. The resentment, disappointment, my trust shredded—they sprawled out on my skin, as vigorous as ever.

Her, though? She got to live her life unbothered, truly unbothered with a heavy dose of contentment, to the point that she had the urge to parade her joy by listening to loud music, and surely, dancing.

I contemplated my two options, leave her be or face her, level the field, make her suffer like I did through day in and day out because of an onslaught of memories. And while my brain contemplated the subject, my body proceeded to do whatever the prick wanted.

Keys and briefcase were set aside, blue tie undone, the matching suit jacket's button unfastened. My feet drifted, tethering me toward the source of the noise. In the great room, the darkness engulfed me, hiding me from Justine's view while she danced to Major Lazer's version of "Powerful."

And she was—powerful, that is. Fuck me sideways, she had immense leverage over me. She swayed her hips sensually

under the moonlight, her hands gliding on her thick, brown hair she let loose, over her slender neck, caressing her curves, her waist.

The recessed deck lights from the floor bathed her in a soft glow and I ate her up. My eyes roamed her lithe body, how the pink tattered dress clung to her breasts, how with each move, the thin fabric's hem rode higher up her thighs. How her lips, those plump lips, pursed into a beautiful pout when Ellie Goulding hit a high note. She owned the song, and as much as it pissed me off to admit it, as much as I couldn't trust her, she owned me.

No other woman with whom I'd had casual relationships had that effect on me, that pull. They weren't *her*. She drew me to her, overriding my pride, my angst, my vow to never let her in again. And I wouldn't. In the darkness of the house, with my cock straining in my pants, I reasoned that this was just that, being turned on. Primal, carnal attraction that had nothing to do with past feelings. It couldn't. I adjusted the bulge in my pants, rounded the sofa, and opened the French doors of the glass wall.

“Roman.” Her eyes fluttered open and...her mouth curved up?

For me? What the...? Also, why is it making my heart gallop like that?!

“Hi.” The late May air felt cool on my cheeks, a solace after the heat that'd run rampant through me. I put my hands on my hips, glanced up into the Manhattan skies, then back at her, back to not wanting her, not being attracted to her, back to screwing with her head like I aimed at from the start. “What are you doing here?”

She strode toward me, her grin widening. The closer she got, the clearer I could make out her body—the outline of her curves under her dress, her taut nipples stretching out the fabric.

Focus.

“What does it look like I’m doing? Celebrating this lovely evening and dancing. At home, like you asked.” She outstretched her hand for me, her features as inviting as her words: “Join me.”

A blitz-attack of memories throttled me at the nostalgic scenario—her tone, the pleading in her eyes, the content of what she’d said—a rerun from hell. A glance into the years of my pure, wholesome love for her, of times when she’d have wiped off her tears and whispered to me *Fuck Stuart* before curling her fingers around my wrist and asking me to do just that...join her.

It looked the same, it sounded the same, and it hurt like a lightning bolt struck me in the chest, shattering what was left of my heart.

“What the fuck are you trying to do here?”

“You ask a lot of pretty self-explanatory questions.” Her head tilted to the side, her eyebrows lowering and wrinkling her otherwise smooth forehead. “What I’m trying to do is to make the best out of a not-so-best situation. I’m trying to be nice and not simply exist.”

“We’re not friends,” I stated adamantly, carving it in my head as a stark reminder.

Two steps in and we were glued to the chest, me glaring down at her while she fiddled with my half-undone tie. “But you are my husband, aren’t you?”

It required an insurmountable level of self-control to still myself. To not wrench out of her hold, to not scream at her from the pain of her burning touch. Every muscle in my face and body locked itself in place to maintain the façade, the act of total indifference.

“Come on, Roman.” She stepped back, allowing me air, only for a moment. “Stop pretending you don’t want this.”

Because then she had to undress in front of me. Under the night’s sky, Justine inserted her thumbs under the straps of her dress, dropping it to the floor. The punch to my lungs knocked

the air out of them, and it was fucking brutal. I couldn't even utter the question *what in the ever-loving fuck has gotten into you.*

But I watched. I watched her bare body on display through the thin material of her white lace bra and panties. I watched her, a manifestation of everything I'd hungered for and then some. I watched a woman that, had my memories been wiped out, I would've ascended us to the Garden of Eden and become the one and only woman I'd ever need.

New York City, however, was no Eden and in any case, even Adam wouldn't have been dumb enough to bite the apple the second time.

"Let's be real about what this is," she enunciated the word *this*, signaling with a finger from her to me. "I don't buy into the conspiracy theory bullshit. From Stuart, yeah, maybe, not from you. You'd have found a way to crush any potential threat, easy. Wanna know what I think?"

Engaging in a serious talk and focusing on her face while her clothes were strewn at her feet grew increasingly difficult. As was keeping my interest of what misguided conception she concocted at bay, to dig deep into her brain and what she'd made of me.

"Indulge me."

"For years you've been fucking with me." The delicate strap of her bra seemed to be on the precipice of being torn from her tugging on it. "I think, the time came that you wanted to actually fuck me."

"Is that so?" I backed her to the wall, removing my white shirt from my pants, proceeding to unbuckle my belt. She nodded, pacing backward in confident steps, far from recoiling from my predatorial gait. Her eyes blazed with desire, her teeth piercing her lower lip with want.

I locked my gaze on hers, caging her in when her back hit the brick wall. "Then what, you prepared this whole setup to test the waters for friendship, but are just as willing to settle

for a meaningless fuck? With someone who values you at less than nothing?”

She ignored my lie, reading me as if we reverted to being the teenagers who knew the other inside out. Flicking open my pant buttons and shoving my slacks and boxers to the floor, she countered, “It isn’t meaningless when I do mean something to you.”

Justine wrapped her hand around my throbbing cock, her strokes firing intense shots of pleasure. My lips curved up in a snarl, lowering to hers. Our foreheads were pressed together, breaths mingled, heat emanating from bodies that were swarming with rage and lust and vulnerability. I needed to steer clear from all that, I did, but not as desperately as I needed her.

“You’re my wife,” I grunted, breathless when her other hand cupped my balls. I swallowed, closing my eyes and shutting her from view, minimizing the contact from reaching my soul. A fruitless battle. She took up my space, every part of it. “You’re a signature on a piece of paper. Strictly business.”

My words were lost on her, barren of significance when my wife wanted to make her point. “Fuck you. The Roman I remember would’ve never said something like that. It’s not true.”

The vehemence in her voice pulled at me, commanding me to open my eyes. They’d collided with her enraged hazel ones, making it hard to breathe, hard to concentrate, hard to stay in one piece and not kiss her.

Unlike the first two times I’d kissed her, moments of absolute control, today I was weak. Her lips on mine, at my untethered, raw state, would be a mistake of epic proportions. The way she looked and touched me was a sufficient reminder of how I did, after everything, love her. A kiss would be the last straw before I admitted it to her and myself, to see through my impenetrable shield. I wasn’t about to ever permit that to happen.

But fucking, rough and detached—that I could give her. I tore the lace of her bra, cupping her breast and pinching her perfect, round nipple. I tweaked and tugged it, inflicting pain and sparking pleasure. As she moaned, I moved to the other breast to have her sting and ache everywhere.

Fuck the neighbors, fuck anyone who might've had an eye on us. We were consumed by feral, years-in-the-making desire, breathing it in, suffocated by it. How was our fervent yearning not one-sided considering my attempts to push her out of my life, I couldn't tell, but with the blood rushing to my groin and emptying any other vein and artery, I couldn't give a damn either.

Because when she rubbed, tugged, and squeezed me, I knew she wanted me. Rough, real, honest. And I, I wanted to devour her, until her pliant limbs and tremulous gasps for air were what remained of Justine.

With my lips untethered to hers, they were free to carry the aggressive tendencies I'd applied with my hands. I dipped my mouth to the dainty area between her neck and shoulder, bit her and sucked on her in such voracity she was bound to have marks the next day.

The mark I branded her with, her husband's mark, the man who made her cry out into the night, to dig her fingers into his waist, to discard him of his shirt like its presence offended her to her core.

Justine's younger version, the weak and fragile, had vanished. In her stead I challenged a fearless woman who took what I threw in her path and begged. Her insatiable need brought her hand to wrap my length again, her face tilting lower to seek my lips.

As I moved to avoid her, I freed one of her tits from my punishing twists and molding, the tender flesh undoubtedly on the brink of bruising, and curled my fingers to get a gentle grip on her neck. A subtle choke to angle her head up higher while I captured the bottom of her jaw in hungry kisses.

My ass clenched as I drove into her palm, my cock grazing her naked stomach. Drifting from her neck to her nape, I made a tight grip around her hair, drawing it to her front. I gazed down to her breastbone, captivated by how my knuckles looked against her chest, how her skin prickled with goosebumps when I tugged on her hair harder.

She swept her head up by the sheer force of the pull, straining to say, “More, Ro.”

I froze, raising my head slowly to meet her eyes. The name. That fucking name pronounced in a tender voice from her tender fucking lips. I didn’t want Justine to be warm and fuzzy, didn’t care to recreate our lousy, ruined history. What I needed was to own my sanity as I’d always done and reinforce the belief I’d survived by the true depiction of her character. How she’d made rubble out of me in the blink of an eye.

Towering over her and meeting her eye to eye, I seethed, “Don’t you ever call me that.”

The menacing edge to my voice hadn’t stirred the oceans of lust and determination behind her eyes. She returned to rub me, the head of my cock dripping precum on her belly. Her glare, the one that screamed *dare me, fucker* became another catalyst to smash my lips into hers and I almost fucking did with how agonizingly desperate she made me.

I hung my head low, growling, “Do you want me to fuck you, Justine, yes or no?”

“Look at me.”

“No.”

I pulled on her long tresses a second time, eliciting the reaction I’d been searching for. Her back arched in my direction, giving me easy access to her breasts. I scraped and licked one of her nipples, swirling my tongue over it in intervals. Scrape, suck, lick, repeat. Her tits were soft, her nipples unearthly, and thank fuck they hadn’t provoked a single emotion kissing her lips would’ve.

Bliss. Erotic motherfucking bliss. I could've come from that alone.

If only bliss was ever in the cards for me.

Tracing her fingers over my chest with the hand that wasn't giving me the best hand job of my life, Justine covered my stubbled cheek. She coaxed my head higher; I steeled myself. She upped the pressure, and realizing she had no plans of caving in, I obliged her.

“Kiss me.”

On this alone. “Never.”

The games were wearing me out, and I could sense either of two possible outcomes happening eventually—either this jerking around, literally, would end, or it would've ended me. And I wasn't one to lose. Ever.

I snaked a hand into her panties, feeling her swollen lips part for me, her wet walls welcoming me when I penetrated her with my thumb.

“I'm going to give you two options now, clean and simple. There'll be no bargaining, no in-betweens,” I whispered into her ear. My thumb, like the laced garment she called panties, was soaked from penetrating her. “We can fuck, right now, without talking or kissing, none of that shit, or I'm walking away. I'm good with whatever.”

I wasn't. I was fucking in pain just at the thought of having her, but I might as well have shot myself before I confessed that to her. She hadn't answered, so I used her wetness to knead her clit, evoking choked whimpers from her.

Her palm dropped from my cock, digging her fingers into my waist to force me closer, the hand that held on to my face following suit and grasping at my stubble then my hair to draw my face to hers.

I sidetracked my lips to the right, lapping my tongue inside the shell of her ear, nipping along her jaw while I rubbed and finger-fucked her. “You like that?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” My fingers curled inside her cunt, hitting her pleasure centers.

She tightened around my hand, barely breathing a short, “Yeah.”

She was close, twisting her head to find my mouth.

No fucking way. I withdrew from her slit, distancing myself as much as I could, though she made it virtually impossible. When she put her mind to it, her strength outweighed mine, her grip on my torso and cheeks drawing holes in my flesh.

“Why did you stop?” Her hot breath wafted over my neck.

“I thought we established that things in this house will happen as I say they will, or they won’t happen at all.”

“Fuck you,” she spat out. “You can’t threaten to kick me out every time I’m not acting like a lap dog for you.”

“Justine, I’m cruel, and we’re not friends, though let’s make two things crystal clear—I’m definitely not a rapist, and I won’t kick you the fuck out.” I trailed a finger from her collarbone to her navel. “In fact, we can decide to have a contractor come separate your side from mine, and we’ll never cross paths in this house. Up to you.”

Her body quavered from my finger trailing circles around her cute belly button. “No.”

“No, what?” I moved down her stomach, resting my palm above her panties.

“I don’t want to be in separate rooms. Not all the time.” She gritted her teeth, pushing back to the wall instead of into me. “Don’t even fucking kiss me, fine with me. But you are going to fuck me right this minute, Roman Gallagher.”

Similarly to our first kiss, I never in a trillion years imagined this would be how the first time we had sex would happen, or that we’d even call it a fuck and not love-making—no John Mayer in the background, no luxurious hotel room

with a hot tub waiting for her to relax into after, no sweet promises entailing how I'd do everything in my powers not to hurt her, since we would've been each other's firsts.

Yet here we were.

Knowing Justine got tested and was on the pill, I spun her around without a word, pinning her to the wall and her holding her hands above her head. I clutched her underwear and tore them off her in one swift motion, lowering myself to stand right at her entrance.

She felt so good, so hot when my cock began stretching the delicate tissues of her tight cunt. She was mine and she wasn't; she was the love of my life and my biggest regret. Her eyes shimmered from her profile to me. My silent siren called to have her, to hold her, to love her.

Instead, I drowned my resentment by sinking my teeth into her shoulder, shoving my dick inside her, all the way in. She writhed from the size and from having me fill her like that, so I gave her a moment to adjust.

"Fuck. Me," she growled. And I did.

I fucked her, channeling our baggage into forceful thrusts, her face always in my sights. She hadn't given me the look from before, the hope for me to kiss her, to form some kind of a connection through this sex gone, and although my cheek couldn't have been more than a hairsbreadth away from her lips, she made no move to kiss me.

Good.

Out of the list I'd given her earlier, of what I was and wasn't, I forgot to mention I always wasn't a selfish lover. Moreover, despite the energy I'd put into barricading myself from getting attached to her, I'd never treat her like a toy to dispose of later. I came, she came, no fucking question about that.

When I felt my orgasm build, my muscles clenching and racing toward my release, I slipped my palm from her stomach

down to her clit, massaging it in circular movements to have her orgasm before me.

Justine's thighs squeezed around my cock, and I swear I saw stars the minute she pulsed all over me, letting out guttural moans that emanated from deep within her. The pressure got me so high to the moon, and then I let go, free-falling to my orgasm, spilling my cum inside her, thrusting two, then three times as one shock after the other rendered me senseless.

I settled, eventually, along with my senses, covering her with my suit jacket. Every neighbor who'd have glanced out their window in the past half hour would've had a view of her almost naked and then two people grinding in the shadows; it should've made no difference to have her cross those few feet as she were. Still, I had no intention of shaming her, to march like that into the house or even walk the few short feet to where her dress lay on the floor.

So, I safeguarded her from the world first, pulled up my pants second, and disappeared to my room in silence last.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Justine

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

MY “SWEET” Ro,

Oh, shut up. I know you hate it when I call you that. When I tell you you're sweeter than Serendipity 3's Forbidden Broadway Sundae with all its chocolate cake, hot fudge, ice cream, and whipped cream.

I'm fully aware of your wincing when I say it a moment before I pinch-assault your cheeks like an old aunt (which, btw, is the world's best excuse to feel your newly grown stubble under my fingertips, to feel you #SorryNotSorry).

But I bet you wouldn't hate it as passionately if you suspected what I really think about you today. It's vulnerable. You're vulnerable.

So yeah, I scribbled the despicable adjective that hints to weakness, your most hated word in the English dictionary. You're wrong to hate it though, wrong to think it means anything other than you, or anyone else, being themselves. Being human.

It's not good or bad.

It's just a description of us, humans.

And admit it or not, you're terribly human today. My human, my hurting human that I write about as I watch you from my windowsill. You're curled into a ball, still in your jeans and your dad's Harvard sweatshirt, hugging my pillow to your chest. I placed it in my stead when I snuck out from your death grip, your need-for-comfort grip. Even in your sleep.

I didn't want to remove myself from you, but I had to. Not to document your pain, nothing like that. I was determined to vomit on my notes my personal pain for what happened so when you stir awake I could be a forged, unrelenting wall for you to lean on, was guided by a pull to put on paper and commit to my memory every tiny action I made to give you a sense of comfort tonight.

Unlike you, I don't excel at this soothing-thing task. I never needed to, given my best friend and the boy I'm madly in love with is the strongest, fiercest man I'd ever met. For years you held the torch of the caregiver, treating my first-world problems as if they were as important as climate change, tending to my bruised soul as one would an abandoned puppy.

Then today happened, and I was forced to learn fast what I could do to protect you.

Forgive me for being shocked for a second. The fear of failing the task of helping you crippled me, not the unwillingness to help you. I'd take a bullet for you, to not see you in this much pain in this lifetime or the next.

The irony was, you helped me with that, too. You saw through the confused mess I was and guided me in how to be a you. You directed me to open the door to my room, to say nothing as you wept on my shoulder, to crawl into bed with you into an embrace like we haven't done for the past year or so. You inhaled my hair and spooned me to you, and in your wonderfully suffocating hug, you wished me to take all your sorrows from you.

I cross my fingers that I did well, that I managed to conceal my private agony for your dad's heart attack. I'd always hero-worshipped Michael, the boy who started as a ball boy at the tennis club Grandpa went to, who Grandpa recognized for the brilliant mind he was and nurtured. Eat shit, Stuart, I always think when I look at your father with pride, for being a man Grandpa believed in more than the almighty Stuart.

I love him, and he doesn't deserve such a near-fatal heart attack at the young age of fifty-five. Not him.

And now to you. Roman Gallagher, when you had the whole city at your feet, when you had your room and personal space at your disposal, you told Larry to bring you here. You chose me.

Know that this is my vow, my pledge, my cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die promise to you—I'll never disappoint you. I'll forever be there when you call for me.

Like you do this moment as you stir in my bed and murmur my name.

I'll wrap up this letter as I did the rest since I confessed to myself that I love you: I love you, like a friend, like a woman, like your soul mate.

Maybe one day you'll want me to be exactly that. Yours.

Tina



“You’re grinning,” Edith remarked from the other side of the kitchen island. “A text from Roman, by any chance?”

“A message, and a nice one from him?” I huffed a laugh, instinctively reached to where the hickey Roman had left me used to be while scrolling through my phone. “That’ll be the day.”

Ever since I moved into this penthouse and during the long mornings and afternoons Edith and I had shared there, she never ceased being Roman’s greatest advocate. Her excuses for his terse greetings and avoidance were in the form of *His work is very demanding, He does care for you*, and my favorite being *He still struggles with having someone other than me in this house*.

She offered them despite me not having asked, or needed them. The nature of a bond between two people didn’t require

excuses, nor did it make sense. I accepted him, through equal parts of hate and affection.

That said, I understood why Edith repeated them, seeing my half pokes, half not-so-subtle cries for attention from him. In each morning of the two weeks after we had sex, we collided into one another while waiting for the coffee machine in the kitchen, and on each of them, I provoked him, or tried to, by either offering an obnoxious *Good morning, hubby* or hummed Pharrell Williams's "Happy" on repeat.

Not subtle and not successful.

I guess, beyond the layers of taunting, I just sought some sort of a reaction from him, to stop being this stoic man who truly acted like our sex meant nothing to him. Thirteen years of him being a dick to me, of the moment he'd switched gears from cherishing me to wishing I'd vanish off the face of the planet, and it still stung.

"Why not?" Edith opened the fridge, taking out eggs and cream cheese and placing them next to the fancy KitchenAid mixer.

"Why not?" I choked on my coffee, coughing to clear out my esophagus. "Let's start with him talking to me?"

She turned around, bracing herself on the counter. "His work is very demanding."

"Yup." I chuckled, my point made.

The two of us resumed focusing on our business, her to baking, me to browsing through cute memes.

"He does care for you," she commented while folding the eggs into the batter.

"I'm sure he does, Edith," I murmured, complying yet again with the inaccurate assumption.

A caring Roman hadn't resembled anything I'd encountered daily. A passionate Roman would've given me warm-laden eyes, not treat me like I was the devil or a nuisance to avoid. An affectionate Roman ignited thoughts of

a dreamy future together, not wishes of dousing his privates with a bucket of ice while he slept.

Most importantly, when Roman truly and wholeheartedly cared for a person, he'd make sure they knew it, instead of wiping out the gleam of a not-hateful emotion from his expression. It flashed across his face as he thrust in and out of me, as he tried to turn our sex into a soulless fuck. In a promising second, I saw it, and in a hurtful second later he slipped on his mask again to keep me at bay.

Whatever he felt for me, he didn't care to bring it to the surface no matter which tactic I chose. And even though I wouldn't give up, wouldn't stop badgering him to at least acknowledge we were married, these feelings might as well not exist at all.

My phone vibrated in my hands, calling me to return to earth from wherever my mind had traveled.

"Eep!" I yelped, seeing the caller's name, anxiety and joy scrambling in my stomach. Skylar, the coordinator of the volunteering program. I crossed my toes for good luck, unable to contain my excitement as I slid down from the tall stool.

Edith swiveled so fast she nearly knocked over the batter bowl. "Roman?"

The woman was even more hopeless than I was.

"It's Elsie. Her period was late, so she might be calling me to tell me I'm going to be an aunt," I lied.

Elsie left nothing to chance, apart from the accidental mass email she sent over two years ago, and as of right now she and Kyle weren't in the baby-making business in any sort of way. Edith, of course, didn't know it, and I hated lying to this nice lady who spared me kindness when Roman's cold attitude could substitute for our use of the air-conditioning. But my volunteering gig outweighed my friendship with Edith, and I couldn't risk her snitching on me.

My excitement about future nonexistent babies seemed to appease her. Her eyes warmed instantly, and she shooed me to

run off. I gave her the thumbs-up, sprinted farther from her to my room, and swiped to accept the call when I put enough distance between us.

Bringing the phone close to my ear, I answered quietly, “Hello?”

Skylar replied as I shut the door to my bedroom. “Justine, hi, this is Skylar from the School is Cool center.”

“Yes, hi, how are you?” The excitement seeped through my voice, covering my brightly lit room.

“I’m calling to inform you that the background checks we ran came through okay.”

I paced to the window on the other side of the room, the farthest possible from Edith’s earshot, just in case. The afternoon sun contributed to the fuzzy feeling of Skylar’s call, though I had one final item to check off my list before I succumbed to complete happiness.

“The parents of the kids I tutored were sufficient?”

Skylar had mentioned that should they require additional interviews, she’d ask to hear from my high-profile parents, who, in her opinion, were a credible source. With a suppressed tremble to my tone, I’d given her Mom’s number, emphasizing both she and my *dad* were extremely busy people, praying the good impression I left while tutoring was sufficient to get me cleared.

Once Stuart had wind of it, the road wouldn’t be long from them, to Roman, hurdling my ambitions to their bitter end before they even began.

“Definitely, they raved on and on about you.” Her smile permeated through the phone. “I apologize it took so long, but when working one-on-one with kids, everyone needs to be vetted carefully.”

My excitement blossomed into full-blown elation, my feet breaking into a little dance. I allowed myself a second and a

half to let loose, then calmed down. “For sure. Kids shouldn’t be subjected to sick f—people.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page, and to have such a motivated person like yourself on board.” She paused, shuffling papers on her end. “Now to the other matter at hand.”

“Anything.” She didn’t finish the sentence and I shot out my response. I already agreed in my head to any assignment she’d have delegated to me.

“The schools we work with are spread out across every borough of the city. Usually, our volunteers mark one or two areas near their home and preferred days of the week, and we assign them to one of them. In the form you filled out, you checked every area and every day.”

“I did.” I nodded emphatically to no one in particular.

“Right, I wanted to verify there wasn’t a mistake. I have a school here in the Bronx with the least number of volunteers at the moment that I believe would be a great fit.”

“No.” I flopped down on the bed, firing up my laptop to load up my calendar along with setting the ground for operation hide-shit-from-Roman.

Skylar hadn’t spoken for a moment as I tapped away. “No, as in we can allocate you anywhere?”

“I’m sorry, I got too excited and got my intention mixed up.” The colorful websites I’d uploaded popped up on the screen. While I waited, I corrected myself, “One isn’t enough. Send me anywhere, everywhere, five days a week. I’ve got a lot of time and motivation. Seriously, any school that could use help, I want to be there.”

“Umm.” I stifled a laugh when Skylar quieted again. I could tell she didn’t expect that. “This is a bit unconventional, but nonetheless highly appreciated. There are always kids who could use extracurricular activity, and helping them by giving them the tools to enrich their creative writing skills is perfect for that. Could you start Monday?”

“Absolutely.”

“Great, I’ll line up the schedule for you. You’ll receive a detailed email in the next hour.”

“Perfect. Can’t wait.”

My finger drifted on the laptop’s touchpad, blindly selecting a couple items from the Dior online shop. Then on Prada’s, then Chanel’s. Roman had agreed to shopping. He never added a requirement that I spend hours in the stores to do so.

The beauty of semantics.

CHAPTER NINE

Roman

“HOW’S MY kid doing?”

My pupils steered from the screen toward Stuart, the arrogant man perching himself at the doorway to my office. No other part of me acknowledged his nauseating presence, my tone as level as Central Park’s lake. “Like you ever gave a shit.”

“I always took interest in her.” Unbidden, he strolled inside, forcing me to tear myself entirely from my work and turn my chair to where he stood in front of me. I stopped myself from rolling my eyes at his custom-made Wednesday attire, the striped, blue suit with gold buttons and cufflinks that screamed *I’m filthy rich*.

Filthy and rich if someone would’ve asked me, two descriptions he felt compelled to prove as he said, “She’s my only child. The apple of my eye.”

“More like your Cinderella,” I mumbled under my breath, which was very out of character for me.

Stuart heard my opinion of him enough for him to recite it in his sleep and vice versa. My disdain for how he treated Justine, the one I concealed under hundreds of layers from him. He saw only what I’d chosen to show him, to the stellar father he was, that we had a falling out, that I disliked her, that I still insisted on marrying her as a way to fuck her over.

That Wednesday night, unfortunately, it slipped, a result of my mounting ache for her. It’d been two days of this clutching in my chest from returning home to find piles of shopping bags in the foyer, left strewn and unwanted like she bought them in an attempt to compensate for something. My bet was

retail therapy, a mechanism to cope with my ignoring her, of not seeing Elsie during the weekdays, of being forced to marry me against her will.

I ached, and I hated myself.

But most of all, I hated him for giving her to a man who, as far as he was concerned, hated her. For putting us in this situation to begin with.

He dumped his old ass on the chair, clasping his hands together. “You’re the one who’s shackled her to the glass slipper. Don’t you forget that.”

I would’ve requested him kindly to go fuck himself if my aggression wouldn’t have shown a sign of weakness. I crossed my legs, then glanced at my Rolex. Nine. He hadn’t stayed here later than five in ages, so what was the fucker scheming? Better just ask it. “What do you want?”

“What’s mine.” He smirked, the smug bastard. “What’s indebted to me.”

My muscles coiled, my jaw ticked. The primal instincts in me assumed their position, ready to strike. A line had to be drawn, and Stuart crossed it repeatedly whenever he’d hinted that he’d been robbed of his fortune. The man who’d had billions from before the idea of his was even conceived, to whom my dad and I had accumulated a couple billions more. Who was still a fucking billionaire regardless of how Justine’s grandfather spread the inheritance.

It was my turn to smirk, glancing sideways and up and ridding myself of the aggression, of the impulse to tear off his salmon-pink tie and strangle his aging, wrinkled neck with it. Years of studying and practicing patience had taught me to not act on urges around him, to remember the bigger picture and not beat the shit out of him.

But having the option never ceased to entertain me. That, and his nearing downfall.

“You’ll get it, Stuart. You’ll get every bit that’s coming to you,” I spat out, ending the conversation by getting up and

buttoning my tan jacket. “It’s late, and I need to get home. To my wife.”

Stuart’s ugly grin widened when he followed my movements and stood. “Let’s not have any illusions about what this whole marriage is, shall we? This marriage is a fraud. Any inkling of compassion you have for her, she won’t ever reciprocate. That’s the one accomplishment I can credit her with, for closing the door in your face and never looking back. She never cared about you, doesn’t care about you, never will care about you.”

I hardened my heart and stilled my soul. I’d spent long and lonely nights questioning and doubting what Stuart said, hating that maybe my head had played tricks on me for seventeen years of friendship. That I imagined what I felt, what I thought she felt, useless reminiscences that had plagued me, delivered bouts of pain, and in time were dulled out.

No answers had come to me to that day, and I decided that fucking Stuart knew much less of his daughter’s thoughts, wants, and needs.

“You can show yourself out.” I bypassed him, leaving my office without breaking my stride until I entered the Mercedes where Larry had been waiting for me.



The obscured foyer, illuminated solely by the soft glow of the wall lamps, held enough light for me to read the brand names on the bags Justine had discarded at the entrance to our home. I crouched down, rummaging through them out of sheer interest. Three from Stuart Weitzman (you’d have thought she’d had enough of the name, but oh, well), four Jimmy Choo’s, and one from Christian Louboutin.

Just like she’d done in her previous shopping sprees, she just left them there for Edith to place in her room the following day. The money spent meant nothing to me; she

could've bought the three shops out of their stock and it wouldn't have put a dent in my wealth.

What boggled my mind was why she left them here and not hung them in her walk-in closet, where she had a ton of free space. It seemed serious, more than a simplified explanation of over-compensating or her morning teasing, and taking the shape of a cry for help. Making me consider that maybe, just maybe, she had the sincere intention of placing aside the years of bullshit, to eradicate the hate, take the painful emotion and swipe it off the board altogether.

To be like we were. And if I was being honest with myself, I missed us too. I missed the boy I was with that girl, and it exhausted me to pretend I didn't, to cling to the mistrust and animosity.

These longings, piled up on the ideas that Stuart had tried to poison me with, eventually drew me to her room. I walked over there, not having a clear vision of what I'd do once I got to her. Fucking her, hurting her, forcing her to endure the torture I'd suffered during thirteen fucked-up years, I had no desire of those. I just walked.

Outside her room, I pressed my ear to the door like I had many times in the past to hear nothing. It occurred to me that after a month of marriage, I hadn't once asked what she did at nights when her door to her room was closed.

Did she eat in her room? Sleep? Dance free of my attitude?

Did she cry? Did she need a hug? A sharp pang of guilt slashed through me as the last questions surged, a knife gutting me from my navel and up to my throat. This whole maddening snowball started rolling to save her, yet somehow my need for vengeance took precedence and I lost sight of what really mattered.

She mattered.

Silently, I kicked off my Oxfords and socks, removed my suit jacket and vest, the garments cast to the floor. My hand hovered over the door handle, and for an excruciating moment

I was convinced I'd find it locked. I closed my eyes, relief flooding me when it turned, the door pushing inside and granting me access to her room.

Justine laid on her side facing the windows, curled up into a ball, her small, fragile body hidden under layers of blankets. At her sight, the reason for my being here revealed itself to me, the compulsion to protect and hug her whenever I sensed she was hurt burning strong. Too strong, even, plunging through my defenses, putting my frayed heart at risk, the barely beating bastard who I'd stitched back together all wrong.

My feet carried me one foot in front of the other to the woman who, unbeknownst to her and sometimes to me, owned me. I traversed over the cool wooden floors and to the off-white rug, dallying at the edge of her bed. I stared down at her, at the long locks of hair covering half her face, at her full lips and long lashes draping on her cheeks.

And I hesitated. I fucking hesitated. Me who saw the world in black or white, right or wrong, and had my life's plan figured out, I contemplated. My self-preservation implored me to spare myself the torture, to return to my bed where no cruel memories could hurt me. My conscience? It told me to grow a pair, to follow my heart.

"Fuck it," I muttered, my voice barely audible, raised the covers, and in I went.

At first, I mirrored her posture, lying on my side without touching her. My pulse quickened, my mind coming up blank.

In, out. In, out.

The familiar repetition dissipated my anxiety. The longer I repeated it, the slower my heart beat. Soon, my breaths synchronized with those of Justine, our shoulders rising and falling in tandem. Only then did I move, draping my arm across her pink nightgown, sheathing her waist, scooting closer to her.

Hate would make you forget a lot of things. It'd wipe out lazy afternoons of lying on the beach together. It'd box and store away secret moments you glanced at the girl you loved while she gave imaginary classes to her dolls, while you were supposed to be reading finance articles. It'd bury the time she caught you doing it and smiled at you as if she loved you too.

It could try to drown, by a small portion, the memory of how your love felt beneath your fingertips when you hugged her through days and nights, through tears and laughter in the intimate position you'd shared with no one ever since. It could try, but it would fail.

Because once reality kicked in, it didn't stand a fucking chance. The instant my palm spread on the silk fabric around Justine's stomach, a lifeline had been thrown for me to pull on, to save me from the dark hollows of the ocean into the light. I finally breathed again.

A violent current gushed from the top of my head where pain and love and anguish resided, shooting straight to my heart. Rather than rendering me immobile, the potent shock drove me to seek Justine, to press myself completely against her, to return to what we were. I molded my body into the shape of hers, my chest to her back, my chin to its rightful place at her shoulder. Incapable of stopping myself, I inhaled her hair, her sweet perfume, reveling in that home feeling that evaded me for what seemed like an eternity.

“Roman?”

I pinched my eyes shut, expecting her to elbow me, to tell me to fuck off. I had it coming, sneaking in like that, but I didn't care. For the slim chance she really did need me, I forewent my ego and stayed by her.

“It's me.”

“You.” She shook her head subtly, her hair brushing my cheeks in the way it used to. “Is that because of my shopping?”

“No.”

Her next words sounded more like an accusation than an attempt to defend herself. “You said I could shop for whatever.”

“I did,” I said. Candid, natural, true.

Silence. Her limbs were wound tight in that flight-or-fight mode. “You’re mad that I left them at the door?”

“I’m not mad. And it’s not about the shopping.” Another truth. The cherishing side of me, the one I dreaded from even before I’d dragged her into this apartment, annihilated the resentful side. If only for now.

“At all?”

“At all.”

At that she eased into me. A little peculiar, considering her next question. “Did you come here to fuck me?”

My vexation made her uncomfortable, and me creeping up to allegedly fuck her, the man who claimed she was as inconsequential to him and treated her as such that for two weeks after, *that* was okay?

An incessant suspicion of something being amiss nagged at me, though it lasted merely half a second, when Justine placed her palm on top of mine. Anything other than the tingling sensation of her fingers on the back of my palm, of her guiding me up her gown and lifting the fabric up with it, had dissipated.

She consumed me, and not in that primal sense of the desire to fuck her. As she dragged my fingers to her hard nipple, guided me on how to knead it the way she liked it, I knew it transcended anything as basic as getting off.

And against all common sense, I’d allowed her to do that to me.

“Well, have you?” she called for me out of drifting into wherever she led me.

“No,” I grunted, sinking my teeth into her shoulder. For some reason, I needed her to be aware of that. To lower my iron-made shield by an inch. “Wanted to see you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.” Her fingers curled around my hand, clutching it, gliding it from her breast and down her body.

Justine stopped at her crotch, placing my palm directly on top of the wet patch of her cotton panties. Her moans clashed with my loud exhale in the dimness of the night, in the silent house we occupied. Desperate for more friction, I jutted my hips forward as I pressed my palm forcefully into her cunt, and having her like that, I was fucking lost.

We were lust-driven, sexually possessed, yet it didn’t take away from the fact that we touched each other with painful, scorching intimacy, so much so that I just had to pause, to refrain from any other movement that’d cause me to lose my breath altogether.

How things had changed in me from the last time, from me taking, commanding, leaving her no choice but to do as I bid, to this frozen person behind her. She sensed it, my wife, and she took advantage of it, swinging around to look at me. Her forehead rested on mine, her fingers flipping open my shirt buttons.

I gripped both sides of her face, digging my fingers into her hair, my thumbs massaging her scalp with the angst that mounted in my chest and fought to be set free. I shut my eyes to the sight of her impassioned gaze, to her lips and how precariously close they were to mine. As long as I wouldn’t look into her eyes, be bombarded by memories and whatever emotions they’d revive, I would be spared. I wouldn’t be ruined.

I could lie to myself to pretend we weren’t real, weren’t damaged, weren’t nothing. A defense mechanism I was able to uphold from afar, not when even without seeing her, I felt her everywhere. Her breaths, her sighs, her hand shoving my shirt from my shoulder then rushing to my belt.

While she pulled down my zipper, I trailed my hand to land on her throat. Unhindered from the pressure, she reached for the inside of my boxers, rubbing my cock up and down. Her tenacity lit a torch from under me, the tempo of her strokes turning me on to act without a shred of patience.

The nightgown she wore ripped in half down to her navel from my violent tug at it, her panties too, then my boxers and pants. Both of us were naked, a view I withheld from myself and could only feel as I slid my palm from her hips to her thighs, to her breasts and neck and back to circle her sensitive clit.

We touched and explored each other's bodies. I hadn't made a sound as I reveled in her little cries and rasps of need. Listening to her ignited fire all over my skin, and it also made me hyperaware of her. My reflexes rescued me, triggering my hand to snap from her sex to cover her mouth when those sweet noises closed in on me.

"Don't." Unlike our first time sleeping together, neither my actions nor my plea had spite in them. I just couldn't handle her kissing me while being so raw. I wouldn't recover if she did.

Justine wasn't deterred in the slightest. She nibbled on my fingers, swiping her smooth tongue over them, driving me even more mad with desire. I had to divert her from her attempts of getting at my lips, snaking my arm from under my body and shoving one finger and then another into her slit.

Her cries pulsed on my hand, her back arching for me.

"So fucking wet. So fucking drenched for your husband, aren't you?" I found my voice somehow, slithering my fingers from her entrance over her swollen nub. "Nod for me if you agree."

Despite the conviction in my tone, I yearned to have her affirmation. Seeing her wearing the rings I gave her on her finger daily wasn't enough. Having her claw and strip me as

though another second without my naked body would ruin her wasn't fucking enough.

I ached to have a direct answer, and she gave it to me. The attempts she made to remove my hand from her lips ceased, her forehead brushing against mine in a bobbing up-and-down gesture.

Then she rendered me silent, directing my shaft between her lips and at the opening of her pussy, stroking my length, pushing me inside her little by little. Her thighs squeezed when I started shoving further, her teeth bit my fingers as she whimpered into my palm.

“If I'm going to release you from my hold,” I snarled through clenched teeth, the red-hot ball of fire that burned down my stomach telling me that like her, I teetered on the precipice of an orgasm. “You'll have to swear not to come at me. Not for my lips. Justine, you. Cannot. Kiss me.”

She nodded once and managed to hum in agreement between moans. I pursed my lips and removed my hand from her mouth. “Roman.” She sounded broken, withdrawing from my cock and releasing it to place her soft palm on my stubble.

In a dire attempt to regain control of my life and over her, I glided my hand to the area behind her knee, lifting her leg on top of mine. Flexing my fingers and digging them into her flesh, I drew her so our legs were entangled, settled myself, and in one thrust pushed deep into her.

Her labored breaths felt so excruciatingly close, toppling on me, covering me. Healing me. When I fucked her that night, I realized just how perfect we were to each other. We fit and swayed and gasped together, sweaty bodies and messed-up hair, and us.

“Roman,” she called out, gripping on to my face.

My own fingers wounded her with the force I applied on her soft ass, fucking her harder in a last attempt to silence what I knew she'd say next.

“Roman, open your eyes.” Her moan morphed into a half cry and it sliced me in the gut as much as her plea did. “Look at me.”

“No,” I said, but nothing but a whisper came out. I pinched my eyes even tighter. “No.”

I felt it, I fucking felt her leaning in again to kiss me. I pulled out of her before she could realize it, flipping Justine’s svelte body to have her back to me. I gave her the part of me that didn’t threaten to break me in half, pummeling into her from behind, sucking on her shoulder, grabbing her breasts.

She reached a hand back, clasping my nape, pinning me to her. When she held her breath this one last time, her whole body tensing in preparation for her orgasm, I made the fatal mistake I swore not to.

I looked at her.

She called my name, her eyes glossy, her mouth agape. I didn’t stand a fucking chance at that. I slid my hand up, taking her by the chin and kissing the life out of her as I kept thrusting deeper and with more force each time. That kiss was unlike the cruel ones; it brought light into the room, an implosion inside my mouth that shot right to my soul.

This was supposed to be our first kiss, our first screw, fucking eons ago. With her lips and tongue on me, I came so hard my lungs stopped working. And even as my body was rendered immobile, I still hadn’t let go of her chin, still kept kissing her way after I drove into her for the last time.

“Ti—” I caught myself from administering any more damage than I already did, for her and for me alike.

The realization that I’d almost slipped, of what that kiss did to me, it set me straight. It emphasized the epic mistake I made by kissing her, how thoroughly fucked up this whole situation was. I let go of her chin and removed myself from her warmth, releasing a slow exhale as I squeezed her hips once more, a final, reverent touch.

She hadn't turned around when my feet hit the floor, hadn't searched or spoke my name when I pulled on my boxers. I tossed the rest of my clothes on my shoulder, waiting a second longer. She said nothing, and with the deafening silence, I left her and her room.

CHAPTER TEN

Justine

ROMAN IRVING Gallagher was a highly intelligent and shrewd man. As such, I'd expected to hear a remark, a question, regarding my reckless shopping of clothes I hadn't worn, of shoes I'd kept in their boxes.

Sure, almost two weeks ago he'd entered my room for the purpose of asking me if I was okay, and even though we were in the middle of groping and touching, I'd imagined my plain reply that I was, indeed, okay, wouldn't pacify him.

I thought there'd be at least a little snooping around on his part, a private investigator even. Whenever I headed to my volunteering sessions slash picking up my pre-ordered clothes from shops on Fifth Avenue, I remained vigilant, looking over my shoulder to check for a tail, some kind of proof that Roman who hadn't trusted me one bit had suspected something.

Because he should've realized my behavior morphed into that of a different person. He should've remembered that aside from my desire to spend mornings or afternoons with Mom, I'd never taken too much to wasting money on clothes for the heck of it.

Should've, but didn't. As days went by where he hadn't asked, hadn't spoken to me yet again and hadn't shown any sign of concern for my growing pile of unused designer clothing, I came to a depressing sort of acceptance. Roman forgot who I was, eradicated the good, wonderful friendship memories and anything about them, including my consumerism habits, due to whatever happened that got him to want to detach himself from me.

He obliterated me and in that, obliterated us, and I needed to make him remember.

“Ms. Gallagher.”

I perched myself on my elbow on the table at Krieger Middle School where I’d been volunteering on Fridays, glancing aimlessly outside the window, affixing my mind to Roman while I waited for Max, the thirteen-year-old boy I tutored.

“Ms. Gallagher.”

This Ms. Gallagher should really stop ignoring her student, I thought, wondering which of the three other volunteers in the small classroom was this spaced-out.

A finger tapped twice on my shoulder.

Oh! I’m a Gallagher. One and a half months of marriage and the new name refused to settle in my ears as mine. I turned around in the low plastic chair, erasing the confusion from my features. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Max, who was a little short for his age but mature beyond his years, already took the adjacent chair, his soft curls bouncing around his head. “Whatcha dreaming about?”

While most teenagers guarded themselves when interacting with authoritative figures, making them work to earn their trust—a lesson I’d learned over the years I’d tutored since I’d graduated from NYU—Max and I got along right off the bat.

On our first and only meeting the previous Friday, he’d fist-bumped me as a hello, asked a million questions regarding the theory behind creative writing, and was eager to rush home to engross himself in the assignment I’d given him. Choosing favorites wasn’t something I did, but...yeah, I did.

Coincidentally, his school was the one I liked the best too. Contrary to the other schools where I’d received a list of books to teach the kids in preparation for September, in Krieger’s I received a green light to teach however I saw fit. They already implemented the Erin Cooke Program to teach arts, so they

were open to trying new forms of teaching in the writing department as well.

“Not much.” I smoothed down the second-hand jeans and gray T-shirt I bought at a thrift shop, the clothes I hid in one of the drawers of my walk-in closet. Wearing thousands of dollars of designer brands, even my worn-out ones, would’ve given off vibes I preferred avoiding.

“Yeah, right.” He huffed a laugh. “I called you like, I dunno, a million times.”

How could I even begin to explain why after swiping the credit card Roman had on my name a million times, after signing under that name when you entered the program, after motherfucking fantasizing about bearing this surname for the first half of your life, that you don’t, not even a tiny bit, feel like Mrs. Gallagher yet?

I couldn’t. “How did you manage the assignment this week?”

“Piece of cake.” He twisted to pull it out of his backpack, cool and unaffected by the sudden change of subject.

I whistled at the four stapled pages he slid in my direction, then apologized as another tutor shushed me. Leaning forward so he’d hear my whisper, I said, “Max, I’m impressed.”

He tilted his head, squinting his eyes at me. “At the papers? The ones you haven’t looked at? What if I Bart Simpson-ed it, writing *This is the answer to my assignment* on every line of every page?”

Max acting more mature than your typical teenager didn’t mean he didn’t have an attitude. At least it was positive, good-natured—kind of like me and the topic I selected for his homework.

“Huh. If memory serves, you said you had a ton of ideas about a story and characters that incorporated themes of what makes their lives better,” I performed an exaggerated gesture of opening my arms, which earned me another shoosh.

The spark in Max's eyes was worth it. He liked that I remembered, that he mattered to me. "I did. So, the hero of my story, Max..."

"This is creative writing, remember?" I lowered my chin, my lips pinched together to withhold a laugh.

With a cast of his hand, he dismissed me. "I'm the hero of my own story, facts. Anyhow, this dude led a tough life, and he's sick of it, and he wants out, you know? To live better, to be better. To change."

That I unequivocally knew my fair share about. I bobbed my head in silence.

"Then this super smart dude..."

"Lest we forget humble."

"Obvs," he agreed in faux-seriousness. "He goes to his past, in his head, lists the puzzles he and his mom used to put together, the Yankees games he watched with his dad, how he helped his grandma in the kitchen, shit like that..."

"Language," the nosy volunteer commented.

Before she twisted back, I interjected, "Why don't you take your own advice and shush? Jeez."

She scrunched her nose in indignation, while Max fist-bumped me from under the table. The kid hadn't hurt anyone, so I saw no foul in allowing him to express himself as he so wished.

"You were saying?"

"That's how he reclaimed his life, his happiness, come full circle." He tapped his finger on the papers, raising his eyebrows. "For the how's and why's, you'll have to read the rest."

His pure, simplified, and fantastic logic clicked in, the answer to solve Roman's and my issues. If Roman forgot, then flashbacks from the past were bound to remind him whether

he liked it or not. That was for later, though. Now I had to focus on boy genius.

“Spoken like a true author.” I clasped my hands, in a shushing manner, and scrubbed them. “Let’s start. I’ll read and we’ll discuss it as I go along, what do you say?”

He laughed at my theatrics, mussing up his hair. “Fine, Ms. Gallagher.”

“It’s Justine.” During many painful days I’d negotiated with God to make me a Gallagher, a family where my father wasn’t a world-class asshole. But now, doing my own thing, somehow I just wanted to be myself. “It’s just Justine.”



In the late afternoon I returned to the apartment from Max’s class; Edith had already left for home to celebrate her daughter’s birthday. I dropped the two bags I’d collected from Neiman Marcus on my way back at the front door as per usual, waltzed to my room, and launched at my Roman letter pile.

“Ha,” I marveled as the next letter in line, chronologically, was the one I’d been hoping to find after reading Max’s essay and our discussion.

I read it, enriching my soul with our memories, and darted out straight to the kitchen.

Thanks to Edith’s endless baking, I had every ingredient I needed to make Roman pancakes and a trip down memory lane.



Fifteen years ago

Ro-bster,

*You're lucky the name Ro is so ingrained in my blood, or else Ro-bster would've become your new official nickname given today's fiasco. Honestly, even now, after hours from the *event*, as I'm up here in my room and you're in yours nearby, whenever I remember it, I still believe it's the most hilarious thing I've witnessed, like ever.*

How can I not, with the images of the miserable lobster you bought at the market making its escape from you, scurrying away on the kitchen counter to keep you from catching it?

You tried copying Gordon Ramsay to prepare me a nice dinner while our families were out at a fancy restaurant (side note—thank you for saving it for when Stuart couldn't ridicule our friendship; you don't give a fuck for his reactions, but you sense that I do, so yeah, you're the best). In reality, it ended up looking very a-la The Little Mermaid and a touch of sadistic and totally unlike you. I swear that if I wasn't crying my eyes out from laughter, I would've jumped to salvage the animal much faster.

I hate eating lobsters and crabs because of the inhumane methods they're being cooked. I only told Stuart about it once, months ago, and he mocked me for my weak heart and said that this attitude will get me nowhere. The last thing I needed is for you to think I'm nothing, so I kept it a secret from you.

And you giving up helped me hold on to it. You, the kindest boy-man on this planet, found mercy for the innocent animal and aided it back into the plastic bag.

"What do you say we set it free?" you asked, outstretching your other hand to hold.

Any remainder of a smile vanished from my lips, the butterflies in my stomach raised hell and abolished any semblance of humor. You do that to me, Roman. Your kindness kills me every time, leaving a small piece of me with you. Thought you should know.

When I accepted your offer, like I always do, I feared this is it, this is the time a large enough chunk of my soul will depart from me and I won't survive this.

Miraculously, or perhaps through the confidence you embedded in me, I did. From the deck to the sand to the ocean, you uplifted me. The salty water brushed at our feet and we waved at the cute animal as it crawled into the water.

I love you. Every minute, of every hour, I love you more.

And I love being the one to whip up food for you. I love that this was how our night ended, with me making you my famous pancakes, that the sweet scent cracked the biggest smile on your lips and brought forth the heartiest laugh from your mouth before you chewed on a maple filled one and said, "This beats any other food, any day."

Ro, I'm brimming with love, drowned by it. It pours out of my heart, fills my cells, resilient to my attempts to shut it down for our friendship to be salvaged.

I'm clueless as to what to do anymore.

I'd ask for help, but you're my savior.

I'd petition for space, but I can't live without you.

I'd confess my feelings, but they'd ruin us.

So instead, I'm writing the imaginary you how I love you as if I am your girlfriend, and tomorrow I'll play on the beach with the real you as if we were nothing more than friends.

Good night, my Westley.

Forever yours, even if you aren't mine.

Tina



“Good morning, husband dear.” I played out my daily act as Roman poured himself steaming coffee into his travel mug.

He paused and swiveled to me. His midnight-blue suit rested perfectly on his sculpted body, his Rolex twinkled in the early morning sunbeams, and the scent of his cologne wafted over to where I leaned against the kitchen counter. Last but not least, the corners of his eyes crinkled in the slightest when he told me, “Thank you.”

I bit the inside of my cheek until it felt like a tiny vessel would rupture soon, withholding myself from gasping. For the past week and a half, I’d prepared him pancake dinners every evening without fail, placing them on either his bed on a weekday or at the foot of his closed door during the weekends.

The first three days, he’d place the plate at my door. Empty. Since the fourth day, to my insane delight, he’d added a note in his clean handwriting, a short *Thank you*. These were small steps, like my small gesture, but hey, any move ahead far outweighed trudging in place.

Then came today, this verbal acknowledgment, this huge fabulous leap, and my emotions were splattered all over the room. The memories I’d hoped to evoke slithered into Roman’s consciousness, the profound truth of them unfurling in his smile.

I wanted to pat myself on the back. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and bounce up and down. I wanted to sigh with relief, and I almost did. But I didn’t allow myself to demonstrate even the slightest recognition, figuring Roman still needed time.

Edith, on the other hand, had no qualms showcasing her enthusiasm. She put down the cloth she’d used to wipe the counter, turning from Roman to me. “I like the sound of that. Thank you for what?”

“Have a good day, Edith.” Roman squeezed her shoulder once, and headed out.

Her kind and curious eyes narrowed at me, her grin impenetrable. “Thank you for what?”

Washing the last of my coffee down the drain, I placed the cup in the dishwasher, kissed Edith's cheek, and sauntered to my room. "Have a good day, Edith."



Roman came home from work.

It appeared like any other night where I shacked up in my room since I'd become Mrs. Gallagher, lying in bed and reading an early copy of whatever romance novel Elsie had sent to my eReader. But it wasn't. That night was entirely different, and not because I donned jeans and a tank top in place of my regular pajamas, not due to me leaving my door open and perking my ears for any sign of the heavy door of the penthouse shutting behind Roman.

The air I'd inhaled smelled of change, the cold four walls around me felt somewhat like home, the bones in my body had a strong sense of belonging, all thanks to Roman's smile from that morning. I'd carried his sign of recognition with me everywhere, when I taught, when I traveled the streets of New York, through the shops and meaningless clothes I intended to donate in the near future.

He injected optimism in me, and I applied said optimism and bravery into fixing dinner we'd share in his room. For two. What conversation would ensue from sitting on his rug, eating pancakes, and—fingers crossed—looking at each other, the answers escaped me, but I felt compelled to do it. Heaven knows it must've been preferable to having him spiral again from my dancing.

Allowing him a few minutes to settle in his bedroom, I finished the last paragraph of the chapter I'd been hardly able to read and set the eReader on the nightstand. I slid off the bed, grabbed the pancake plate I had for myself, and stilled in place.

The low, familiar thump of Roman's Oxford shoes echoed outside my room. Despite Roman's high chances of winning

the gold medal for the Stealthiest Walker in the US—if such a competition ever existed—I heard his soles hitting the hardwood floors, given I was so attuned to him that day.

Gripped with immense desire to have him make the first move, I shook out of my static state and tiptoed my way to sit on the edge of the bed, anticipating his knock or, even better, him letting himself in like he did the other night.

But nothing happened, not for a long while. My whole body tingled, one of my feet tapping nervously against the rug. *Come on, Roman, just knock on the fucking door.*

Not only did he not do as my mind summoned him to with all its might, but Roman's feet did the exact opposite, pacing away, sounding farther and farther from my room. The opportunity for us to talk, to begin the healing process of our long-time mess slipped through my fingers, and this soon-to-be missed salvation was the last fucking straw.

Two months of loitering in this home and a couple of random sexy sessions were plenty enough for him to get accustomed to my presence, to get his shit together. For us both to act like adults, like people who were friends, like maybe people who were destined for one another.

We deserved this, me to finally have Roman treat me the way I knew his heart had craved, and Roman to receive a pure, honest version of me, to have my love grow unaffected, bare of fear and of the past weighing us down.

I'd rather eat lobster every day for the rest of my life than let this break evade us.

I dropped my plate on the bed, pushed away from it, and scurried out the door. In front of me were my unwanted shopping bags in the foyer, no Roman though. I made a right to the other hallway, following his trail. My steps were small but determined, and as I turned to the left, there his tall figure walked, distancing himself from me.

“Roman,” I called out. “Wait up.”

He halted mid-step, his shoulders tensing, then relaxing in a slow shudder, eyeing the door to his room. His pause, the willingness to listen, invigorated me to pick up my pace. I jogged the remaining distance, rounding his statue-like figure to face him.

“Hey, Roman.”

“Hi.”

“Umm.” I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear nervously. “Can we talk?”

A pained, rugged sigh slid out of his slightly agape mouth. He rubbed his forehead with his thumb and forefinger, then said, “I don’t think so.”

“Now, or never?” I ransacked my brain for anything humorous to lighten the situation. Roman used to laugh at my oddities, at least in past tense, and it felt as good a place as any to start unfolding ourselves and our past.

Think, Justine, think.

“I understand if you’re tired, we can have this conversation today or...”—I scratched the top of my head dramatically—“how long do you say we have left? Fifty-sixty-ish years, until death do us part?”

He suppressed a smile, a barely-there hitch of his lips. An indiscernible twitch to anyone less in tune with Roman than myself. “Justine, please.”

“Please, what? Make me some more of those awesome pancakes you’ve spoiled me with?” Wagging my eyebrows, I waited for his response.

When he upheld the semi-amused look yet said nothing, I took from it that he left the stage empty for me to grab onto the mic. In his silent self-assuredness, Roman emboldened me to just spit out whatever it was that bothered me, even if in a not-so-straightforward way. “Brings back good memories, my pancakes, don’t they?”

“They do.” With one of his large palms cradling my cheek, his thumb caressed me absentmindedly, naturally. The harshness disappeared from his black eyes, swiped clean. “And that’s where my issues stem from.”

“Such big words, *stem from*. Was that what you said to Stuart to convince him to be my betrothed?” The reiteration of the insult from our phone call a lifetime ago arose from the need, again, to make him laugh.

Roman didn’t see the humor in it. At all. In fact, by his grimace and pinched lips, he gave the appearance of a tortured man, not the smug one who mocked me when I begged him to call it off.

“You don’t have to be nice to me.”

“You don’t have to be such an asshole either.” I covered his hand that cupped my cheek, a gentle touch so he knew my retort wasn’t meant to mock him, that it was simply the truth.

The silence engulfing us boomed, pounded at the walls. A warning of an impending earthquake waiting to tear down the house. Roman swayed toward me, the fragrance of his cologne entwining with the sweet frying scent that lingered in my hair from making pancakes. Same as it used to be, as it should’ve always been before whatever it was caused him to stop talking to me.

“Why would you want that, Highness? I thought you hated me.” I could tell Roman had aimed his tone to be tinged with sarcasm, considering he inserted the spiteful nickname.

However, the word held no meaning, didn’t hurt when his body spoke a totally different language. His eyes were desolate and soulful, not mean. He brought his other hand to join the first one in cupping my cheek in an agonizing tenderness. Even his cadence remained beautifully soft. Any remnant of cruelty had left Roman, if only for tonight.

His kindness encapsulated me, bringing forth a heap of answers to his question.

I'd want that so I could gain my best friend back, to be the source of his joy and the sanctuary where he'd relay the secrets intended for the two of us alone.

I'd crave that, so I could have the power to untangle the net of obstinance he'd woven with webs stronger than those of a spider, and understand what went wrong in the first place.

I'd yearn for him not to be an idiot in order to have a deeply rooted, sincere connection more profound than the cold, sexual one. A tender embrace, a toe-curling kiss, a love declaration. The woman in me unraveled at his touch, while the girl from the letters tugged at the hem of my metaphorical shirt relentlessly, reminding me that we had unfinished business with the boy who became our husband.

But I couldn't vocalize any of it. Most of all, because despite his sudden compassion, regardless of the sincerity in his question, the mistrust in Roman's eyes steeled itself from hearing these concessions. They'd be dismissed.

In an agonizing move, I removed his palms, talking as I walked backward, "I don't know, Roman. I truly, honestly, do not know."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Roman

I SPUN my chair, taking my eyes off the office's floor-to-ceiling window to let my secretary, Ralu, in with my lunch, nodding and smiling in gratitude.

“Addison, the fact that you weren't working with Crane & Daughtrey Comms when we saved their asses from the oh-eight recession doesn't mean we didn't do it, and when the market takes a hit again, which it will, you'll be sorry you went to our competitors.”

“I hear what you're saying, but...” Addison, the investor for the pension fund of one of the nation's largest telecommunications companies, started losing the confidence she began our conversation with.

The usual reaction to my assertion of how no one analyzed the market and got higher returns better than us. Because when I demonstrated self-assuredness that was backed up by decades of keeping our clients' money safe, they retracted the option of leaving as fast as they articulated it.

“But what?” I raised an eyebrow, my tone steady like we weren't discussing hundreds of millions of dollars possibly walking out from our firm. “A few cents? That's it? A few cents were the difference between our clients, and clients who still recover their losses after years.”

She quieted for a few. “I'll have to get back to you on that.”

“Take all the time you need,” I said, hanging up the phone to let her marinate in the new point of view I'd presented her, unphased.

I already knew what her answer would be, my emotions in that regard locked tight and under control. Doubt, anxiety, anger, and confusion were the types of feelings I had long since learned to handle, practically washed out of my system and never showed in my dealings with anyone or in any decision I had to make. Dad groomed me to be that way, knowing that otherwise having me as the head of a hedge fund that managed billions of dollars would verge on the impossible.

Taking risks according to my analysts' diagrams, and adjusting to market fluctuations our data somehow missed, required a cool and calculated heart, not a trembling finger when I pulled the trigger on signing off my name. I owed it to my investors to possess a monk-like serenity to make the hard decisions, owed it to my employees to ensure we got the biggest accounts to rake in more money than we already did.

That meant keeping my shit together.

An easy enough task where work was concerned, not so much so in regards to Justine since I dragged her back into my life. It was hard enough to hide my intentions about her dad and the calls I had with Lennon regarding any new information he and Faye had brought in while having us live under the same roof, and keeping my emotions under control, fuck, she made it near impossible.

Being in the same house as her, seeing her on a daily basis, it gave me a rude awakening of just how volatile I could become. How all my feelings weren't contained, but stewing in me. How they boiled, oh boy did they fucking boil, the closer I came to her.

Like yesterday, hell, the past two weeks if I was being honest. The thing was, resentment and agitation didn't take the lead as they normally did when I thought or dealt with her since the day she bled my heart out. Justine's attitude toward me changed, less pushing back and continually being kind, regardless of my attempts to maintain the walls between us.

And for a man who worked at predicting trends, anticipating a blow before it hit, the twist to her behavior left me confused, unsure, unsettled. Since my sister knew us both, I counted on her to be the one person to offer me solid advice. When my schedule was free, I picked up my phone and dialed her number.

“What’s up, Roomie?”

Yup, Kennedy hadn’t quit calling me by the baby brother nickname she always taunted me with, not giving two shits that I was a thirty-year-old man or that I stood at the head of what used to be our father’s company, and Stuart’s empire. I’d given up trying to convince her it hadn’t been appropriate for a good two decades, conceding to her taunting slash form of endearment and never answering her calls on speaker.

I was used to it. Her future children, though? May God have mercy on their souls.

“Hi, Ken. I’m good, you?” I fiddled with the salmon on the ceramic plate. My stomach should’ve gurgled from hunger by three in the afternoon, and yet I felt nothing. The one thing I seemed to be hungry for, and craved constantly, were Justine’s pancakes. She knew how to get to me.

“Great.” A loud crunching voice followed by chewing carried through the phone. At least one of us had an appetite. “I’m down at the shop at SoHo. Penelope called in sick, so I’m taking over until she’s better. Sorry for eating in your ear; I’m taking a twenty-minute lunch break and then I have to run back.”

More chewing—an extra cheesy nacho, her favorite, would’ve been my guess.

“You’ve been chewing in my ear since I was in Mom’s utero.” My chuckle sounded natural, no matter how many weeks or months it had escaped me. Talking to Kennedy offered me a sense of home, of peace and I felt stupid for not calling her sooner instead of handling this on my own. “What

about your new collection? You said you had a deadline next month.”

“Ah, you do remember I’m alive.” She finished her bite, then gulped down water. “Yeah, I do, and it’ll wait. I won’t force her to work with a bug.”

“Why not let another employee run the store for the day?”

“Because Penelope is irreplaceable, and I don’t want anyone else here thinking otherwise.” Impatiently, she blew out air. Kennedy took the artistic path, sure, rejecting Dad’s attempts to take the same path I did. She even had a kind, soft heart.

Didn’t make her any less shrewd of a businesswoman. “I appreciate your advice and everything, but a) This is my business, kindly stay the fuck out, and b) I have a feeling you didn’t call to lecture me about deadlines and store managers. So, I’ll ask again, what’s up?”

“Hmm...” I mulled over the right words. I hardly ever contemplated.

Ken softened her tone when she asked, “How are things in marriage-ville? Were the two months’ radio-silence from you not related to you two patching up what would be the most moronic fight in the history of fights?”

Teeth grinding, I spat out, “It wasn’t moronic.”

“Enlighten me then, after years of secrecy, why did you cut your best friend and one of the sweetest girls alive, at least in New York, out of your life?”

I dropped the fork on the plate, losing interest in the food altogether. “It’s not why I called. I need your advice.”

“See? Exactly my point. If you don’t want to open up about it, you must know yourself that it’s due to some seriously dumb shit that you’re too embarrassed to share.” She sighed, making a dramatic pause before continuing, “Listen, I have less than ten minutes left, so I’ll let you off the hook,

again. Go on and tell me what advice you require from your all-knowing sister?”

“She’s too nice.” I rubbed my face from my chin up to my temples. “Too nice.”

“Are you saying relatively to her, or relatively to a prisoner?”

Had she and Edith only known the truth, that despite the shit I threw at Justine, I overall acted in her best interests, they would’ve talked differently. That soon, when exposing the plan wouldn’t compromise it, my wife could have her revenge, would never be pestered, and would have everything she wanted. Including breaking free from me, if it would come down to that.

For now, I’d have to agree to the role of her prison guard. “She’s made me pancakes. Every evening, for almost two weeks in a row.”

“Holy shit, Roman, plotting to kill you with good food! Anyone but my brother!” Kennedy made an exaggerated gasping sound. “Gotta hang up, I must alert the NYPD on this assassination attempt.”

I rolled my eyes, unable to stop myself from laughing. “Idiot.”

“Cryptic asshole.” She groaned, the sound of her high heels echoing on the tiles of the employee room she took her break in. “It’s *Justine*. You’ve forgotten what a good person who always cared for you she is. It’s like doting after you was her calling in life, just as like it was yours.”

My sister knew the two of us, but not the whole story, and I had no intention of going there. “*Was* being the operative word.”

“Okey dokey, brother, can we please stop ignoring the gigantic elephant in the room?” Her patience ran out as her speech came out faster. “You resented her for years, never afraid to show it, and to top it all off, you’ve colluded with her

asshole of a dad to get her to marry you—for a fucked-up, unknown reason if I might add, and I fucking may.”

“How very ladylike of you, Ken.” I chuckled, trying to put a dent in the speech I asked for, though I wasn’t invested in hearing any more.

“You say that like I ever cared about mannerisms.” She huffed, and, I imagined from her tone, rolled her eyes. “Listen, I haven’t spoken about it before, but now that you asked, I’m telling you how it is. You were cruel to a girl who isn’t a pushover. Of course, she fought back, even though—in my belief—she loves you. Accept that love, and maybe try to extend to her an equal measure of compassion. Be the brother I love and the friend she remembers.”

While I pondered on that, Kennedy continued talking, “Anyhow, on another topic. When are you coming over to see Dad? He hasn’t been great for a while.”

I sighed, just realizing now how caught up I’d been in all of this. “I hoped to catch up with him and Mom at the fundraiser, but I guess he can’t go?”

“He’s, well...” My sister faltered, her pause raising my concerns. “I didn’t want to do this over the phone so you wouldn’t worry. There’s really no reason to worry; he’s okay, it’s just a nasty bug. He’s being taken care of at home so you know it can’t be that bad.”

“All right.” Breathing became a little easier once Ken affirmed there wasn’t any major concern for Dad’s health. “I’ll call them now and head over there tomorrow between work and the fundraiser.”

“Maybe even take Justine with you?”

A small smile crept on my lips. “That’s a good idea.”

“All of my ideas are. Roomie-licious, I have to get back to work.” The metal door shut as she left her room. “Go be a good husband. Love her, make this right. You two weirdos deserve it. Talk soon.”

She didn't give me a chance to respond, hanging up when voices of customers blurred around her. Running her talk over and over in my head felt like a woodpecker beak hitting incessantly against my ice wall that separated me from Justine, from the prospect of getting hurt. What I'd witnessed in the past happened over thirteen years ago. Maybe the time had come to move the fuck on. To trust again.

I admitted to myself it wasn't that farfetched, not like Stuart's claims of his daughter hating me since forever. After all, Ken spent hell of a lot more time with us than he'd ever bothered to.

We were real. And if we were real, we could at least try to have our second chance.

My heart thumped faster, suddenly starved to beat for Justine, up against hers, to hear her voice and see her face barren of the hurt I'd put there. With half a workday ahead of me and no opportunity to go home, I decided the first step, the easier one, would be to call her. To ask how she'd been. To tell her she outdid herself last night, that the chocolate chip pancakes were her best to date. Anything would do.

I contemplated what I'd start with when her phone rang and rang and rang, sending me to voicemail at the end of all the ringing. The second time too. I texted her, asking her to call me, fully aware she might be out shopping and didn't hear the phone, then returned to my screens and meetings and my employees.

Five hours flew by and she hadn't replied, hadn't read the messages either. Kennedy's reassurances were a mild help to keep me from assuming the worst, like the possibility that Justine chose to screen my calls because she did other things I'd rather not think of.

I wanted so hard to believe Justine left her phone at home by accident, misplacing it, or forgetting to take it off of silent mode after the night. These were the bright-side options, which were reserved to people who hadn't had their skin seared in the past.

Or to fools.

Like me.

Because I, Roman Irving Gallagher, was in fact a full-fledged fool.

“Hi, Roman,” Edith answered on the first ring when I called home. “I’m heading out soon; anything you’d like me to take care of?”

“Hey, Edith, no.” My cheeks heated and I scratched the back of my head. “I was wondering if Justine’s home?”

“Oh!” The pleasure in her exclamation was tangible. I hoped by the end of the conversation, my feelings would match hers. “She went out shopping at around noon, she usually returns after I’m gone.”

“Well, could you put her phone on the console? I called and texted her earlier and she hasn’t seen the messages, and I...I want to talk to her. It must be somewhere in her room or the bathroom.”

A pause.

It stretched, the stupid pause, playing on my nerves. “Out with it, Edith.”

Edith, who, despite her height, held the confidence of a six-foot-five person, sounded extremely small when she said, “She...she’s with her phone. She had it on her when she went out.”

I bowed my head down, dumping my forehead in my palm that wasn’t gripping the phone. “You’re sure?”

“Mmm. Yes. She finished a call in her room then waved at me with the hand holding it when she left.”

Adding a conversation away from Edith’s ears, on top of Justine not answering her phone, and what did I get?

Shame. On. Me.

My heart nearly tore out of my chest. Once more, I wasn't good enough for her.

“Thank you, Edith.”

She rambled quickly, “You know how young ladies lose track of time when they're in these flashy stores. All the colors and textures and...”

“Thank you.” I hung up.

In. Out. In. Out. In. Motherfucking out.

I thrust my fingers through my hair, the strands straining as I pulled it using every ounce of strength in me.

In. Out.

I went back to work. And I breathed. Until the minute I left for home, I did a lot of choked-up breathing.



“Roman!” Justine called my name as she did yesterday as soon as I entered the house. It wasn't a *stop, wait*. It had a happy ring to it.

Fuck her, and fuck the bags she left at the door. The fake display of her so-called not-cheating on me made my stomach churn and my ruptured heart to slow its beating close to a stop.

Refusing her the slightest opportunity to catch up with me, I paced to the right, the opposite direction of her room, then took the turn that led to mine.

Her bare feet padded in hurried steps on the floor, confusion infiltrating her delighted tone at seeing me. The faux delight. “Roman? Roman!”

I acted as if she didn't exist, when in truth she existed every-fucking-where.

Her existence surrounded me when we were apart, claiming my bones and consuming my soul. She existed right inside the remains of my crumpled heart, and for a brief

moment, her living there made me forget about statistics and risks and hedged my sanity. For a short duration of time, it caused me to be reckless, to act on an impulse and choose hope in place of austerity.

What a colossal fuckup.

“Quit. Walking. Away from me.” Her hand landed on my shoulder. The audacity of that girl to demand anything from me after what she did curdled my blood.

And yet I said nothing. I continued to walk, not held back by her as her strength was no match to mine. She sunk her fingers deeper, dragging behind me. I let her. Fuck her. “Roman, please don’t be that way.”

There were too many replies to that, none of which would repair the damage she’d done to us. I pushed past the door to my room open, throwing my briefcase on the floor. On the coffee table I noticed a larger than usual number of pancakes, covered by a Nutella spread and chopped nuts—the one I liked the most—and two sets of fork and knife.

I faltered, coming to an abrupt halt at the ridiculous attempt to mask her deceit. What an intriguing concept, to have dinner with her husband after she’d fucked her lover. Was it a punishment for my lingering silence, going to someone else? To a man who wasn’t unbearably ruined by her, that he could manage looking at her face while shoving his dick up her cunt?

All the time I stared at the offending dinner for two, Justine rushed from behind me to my front, her hands on her hips, her eyes pleading. Hearing her beyond my pain and rage was a tall fucking order.

In, out.

“...and FYI, if you’re having a hard day at the office, you can talk to me about it. Keeping quiet will eat you from the inside.”

A hard day. Huh. A giant understatement.

I shrugged off my black striped suit jacket and draped it over my shoulder, removing my gray tie and chucking my shoes off as I rounded her and entered my en-suite bathroom. The dim vanity lights were all I needed to navigate around the room. I left them that way, protected from encountering her lying face straight on.

“Was it Stuart?” she persisted, putting on a show for her gullible husband. “What did he do?”

Turning the hot water in the shower on, I resumed stripping from my work clothes. The jacket went in the laundry basket, the tie, belt, and watch placed neatly on the vanity. I exhibited my usual composure as if Justine wasn't in my face, as if her betrayal hadn't crushed me. Whatever inner turmoil I'd experienced, I suffocated the life out of it, at least to the extent that my mental capabilities would allow.

Justine folded her arms across her chest, her head tilted, her gaze compassionate. “Did he use me as ammunition? He can be a creative sonofabitch when it comes to insult. You know that.”

I pulled my dress shirt out of my slacks and unbuttoned it. Into the basket.

“You can talk to me.”

Socks off along where the shirt went.

Her small palm reached out to me. I didn't flinch, proceeding to ignore her. “You don't have to suffer by yourself. I'm here for you just like you were here for me all those years ago.”

I itched to say that no, she was how she acted the same way *she* did all those years ago. Not me. But I didn't. Waste of breath. As long as I could help it, I'd keep my guards up, care for her as best I could, and stay the fuck away.

“It's the phone calls and texts, right?” She started getting the hang of it, so I made a point to listen, stopping and glaring down at her. “The music in the store was obscenely loud and

then the traffic, car horns, and what not. I walked in here an hour before you did. I figured we'd talk once you were home."

Wrong answer.

As I unzipped my pants, I contemplated whether whipping my cock out mid-speech would offend her. Then thought again. She didn't regard my feelings or my screwed-up heart, so I returned the favor. Pulling my pants and boxers to the floor, I stood bare before her.

She hadn't removed her eyes from mine, hadn't flinched at the vulgar man who hadn't asked if she was okay with him stripping. "Why won't you talk to me?"

My tongue slipped to swipe my upper lip. Waiting. Giving her one last chance to fess up. It had to come from her. I wouldn't forgive, but it sure as shit would assuage the wound I was nursing. Again. From her.

Not like she'd done anything explicit as fucking someone else thirteen years ago, not even a kiss, but she chose someone else, she hadn't waited for me, and it hurt like a motherfucker to experience it all over thirteen years later, only tenfold the pain. If I could've forgiven her for the past, since we weren't officially a couple, this time I wouldn't be able to. She was my wife, and there was no ambiguity of who she could or could not screw.

None.

Justine flung her arms in the air, angling her head up to the heavens. Evidently, she held me responsible for wrecking our relationship, the creator of the shitstorm that eviscerated the concept of *us*. *I* crashed what we had, twice, because... because...for the love of Wall Street, I was out of my depths as to why the fuck I wasn't enough for her.

Why did she choose other men over me?

From my endless talks into the night with her, I heard her articulate a million times how she believed in one true, forever love. She could recite Princess Buttercup and Westley's lines of bonds and love after death in her sleep. I wouldn't have

been so presumptuous to assume I would be the one for her, regardless of how much I'd auditioned and longed for that part more than anything. More than being a son, more than being a brother, I drew my life force from the craving to be hers.

But my desires aside, I pictured her as a person who *chose*. The girl who stood in my bathroom chose, and disillusioned one poor guy, then chose and disillusioned another. And I couldn't fathom it. Couldn't deal with the fucking chaos that descended upon me courtesy of my wife.

"I miss you, Roman."

Oh, fuck no. Justine did not get to say that, to have these four words pouring out from her lips. She certainly didn't get to stare at me through these hazel irises, pretending they possessed equal amounts of desolation as mine held.

My soul and my heart that were entirely reserved to her, were wretched from the insult to my intelligence and yet I still loved her. That love resembled the sun. The fiercer it was, the more light it shone on my moon of grief and anger.

And while my body froze from the clashing emotions, Justine's body had the complete opposite reaction. She clung on to me, arms circling my neck, hands clasping at the back of my skull, legs wrapping around my waist.

"Can you hear me?" Her strong fingers pushed at my nape to bring my face to hers, ignoring my attempts to pull from her. When she was determined, she stopped at nothing, and when she moved to kiss me, all I could do was suck in my lips and close my eyes.

"You can, Roman, in that obstinate head of yours, you can hear me."

Her short camisole rode high up her thighs, her thin underwear hot against me. My dick began hardening, the one part of my body that couldn't hide my mounting and never-ending want of her. Through betrayal, fury, and heart-wrenching pain, I couldn't not want her. Couldn't not love her.

I grabbed her thighs, boring my fingers into her soft skin, bruising her, hurting her. Needing to peel her off me and be inside her all at the same time.

“I. Missed. You,” she said in a harsh whisper.

Her naked, soft legs fastened harder to my body, her heels digging into my skin. Unrelenting. Torturous.

But not as tormenting as her words.

“I love you, Ro.”

My eyes shot open. They catapulted into hers.

Lost into oblivion, I snapped.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Justine

ROMAN HURLED me into the shower as I gasped in surprise, slamming me into the cream and gold marble slabs. Water beat on his back from above us, the spray reaching me too and soaking me through my camisole, getting strands of hair to stick to my face.

“I love you, you idiot! I love you!” I shouted. The stream from the rainfall showerhead drowned out half my words, but Roman heard me all right.

The unhinged look in his eyes, that of a wounded animal who still had a fight in it, reverberated the truth. His ears registered what I’d said, his eyes witnessed the sincerity in mine. He knew I told the truth, that I’d meant it. Didn’t want to believe it, but that didn’t matter. I was up for the challenge of breaking down that barrier, plowing my way through it at one hundred miles an hour.

“I love you, I love you, I. Love. You.” I kissed wherever my lips landed, his nose, his stubbled cheeks, again and again.

He tried to wrench himself from my hold, swerving his head to the opposite side of where my mouth brushed his face, yet my will of iron and grip won over, as well as Roman’s innermost need to be one with me. Because if he truly, genuinely would’ve wanted to part from me, I’d be lying on the floor by now. And I wasn’t. I was still in his arms, pressed to a wall, each of us fighting our inner demons while fighting for each other.

It was crazy, but it was us. We were flanked by our history—an ugly, beautiful, heartbreaking one—as it drained into one inevitable end, of us being together. We were soul mates, that

much was clear to me. This absolute knowledge brought me peace, a tranquility it would undoubtedly give my husband once he stopped denying it. I yearned for it to rise to the surface, for him to confess to himself that he loved me as profoundly as I loved him.

The other option, after the years we'd wasted on senseless hatred I didn't know the source of—was unacceptable. And even as he ignored me in every single gesture he'd done since he stepped foot inside our home tonight, the abrupt regression to where we stood two weeks ago, I resolved to heal him. To fight for him. Something had to give.

“Tell me why you're like this,” I demanded of him.

“That's sweet,” he growled. “You, pretending to care. Like I was ever on your fucking radar.”

Finally, words. Fueled by rage, but words nonetheless.

“You were. You are.”

Roman snarled, his gaze transfixed on mine. He grinded into me at a slow, controlled pace, an expression of what transpired within him pounding me into the wall. My underwear separated us, the fabric so fucking wet from the shower and myself alike. I felt him, felt the ridges of his cock as he pressed it to me time and again as if nothing stood between us, and I wanted more, wanted to be consumed inside out by Roman.

Touching him, being in his arms, having his black-as-night eyes scorch me with their ferocity, it burst forth all of my emotions at once. Love, hate, sorrow, nurturing, and lust not only rose to the surface; they serenaded in my ears, transformed into an entity that motivated me to push harder.

My fingers grasped at his thick hair, my lips coming as close to his as he permitted.

“Tell me you don't love me.”

“I don't,” he breathed. So meek, so unlike him, so unbelievable.

“Don’t lie.” I fastened my legs in a death-lock when he tried to pry me off him again, pinning him closer to me. His manhood slid against my clit, but he wasn’t rocking into me anymore. He didn’t shut his eyes either, a glimmer of hope. Through the heavy mist of arousal, I took the anguish in his eyes, soaked myself in it, used it as fuel to make it better. Make him better.

Roman kept giving me nothing. “Let go.”

“No.”

Since he wouldn’t give me his lips, I dipped my head to meet his neck, sucking on the droplets of water and on his skin. My hands caressed his nape and up to the top of his head, my tongue swirling over his skin from his shoulder to his jaw. He tasted good, familiar. He tasted like what I imagined home would be like. My true home.

Roman’s head bent low, forehead banging on the wall, his palm hitting the space next to my head. “Fuck.” His low, deep voice reverberated next to my ear, asking himself more than me, “Why can’t I get over you?”

He banned me from explaining to him that we were bound to be together, that our love carried on from past lifetimes, that the pain he inflicted on me had been forgiven as soon as it happened. That the wrongs he held against me could be rectified, had he just let me in on what they were.

By resuming his pummeling into me against the wall, he forbade me from doing it, stealing my breath with each sway of his honed body into me. Roman drove himself onto me harder each time, a man on a mission to rip my underwear in half. He was about to, too.

I maneuvered myself up on the wall, using it as leverage to hike up a little higher. My hands rummaged his nape and up to the top of his head, my tongue swirling over his skin from his shoulder to his jaw, while he chased my body with furious thrusts. I tugged his hair to the side to bring my mouth to the shell of his ear, and even as the force of impending orgasm

burned my chest, I voiced what needed to be said, “Stop lying to me, stop lying to yourself.”

Roman moved his palm from the wall, winding it around the waistband of my panties. “I’m not. I”—pound—“don’t”—thrust—“love”—motherfucker, he bit my neck and I saw stars from the delicious pain—“you.”

My emotion-filled throat let out an abundance of moans I couldn’t help when Roman sucked on my shoulder and pushed my panties to the side, his movement callous, ruthless, yet by no means intimidating. During that lapse in time where I hung between heaven and earth, where my limbs went limp from the onslaught of desire, Roman found an opening and released himself from my hold.

He lowered me gently to the floor, a stark contrast to the bluntness with which he turned his back from me and left. Too shellshocked from the humiliation and the sense of failure to track him down, I watched him march out the shower doors, a tear rolling down my cheek.

“I’m not done.” His concise tone surely was meant to reassure me. It didn’t.

Apprehension grappled at me, that considering his current mood and our rotten history, he might as well have been lying to hurt me further. Suddenly, I felt exposed, my top and the steam that bellowed around me to fog up the glass providing me no sense of security.

With one arm plastered on my chest and the other on my lower region, I careened toward the rug when Roman emerged in the doorway.

Wearing a condom.

The entire ugly, distorted puzzle fell into place. Roman had no other motive to use protection other than if he thought I did something deplorable as cheating. He saw the missed call as an excuse for the lie it was, and his first and only explanation his mind provided for him was the absolute worst and what I’d have never done to him.

It hurt like a motherfucker, to have him made this of me, but my hurt would have to wait. Roman came first. I flattened my palms on his chest, blinking at the water from my eyes and gazing up at him. “Roman, I didn’t—”

He stayed far away, saying, “Turn around.”

“No.” I shook my head, rejecting his demand and my personal sense of misery alike.

Looking at Roman, I read from his eyes that he’d lost the capacity to hear me out, even if I’d brought him solid proof that I’d been with no other man. And I couldn’t tell him what I did in my free mornings and afternoons. I loved him, but I wouldn’t give him the keys to steal my kids from me. Not even for his inner peace. I guessed among other things, we also shared the sad quality of mistrusting one another.

Words were meaningless, but other ways to get close to him were still available to me. Seeing how hard Roman was, I resorted to what he wanted, what we both wanted.

The pink camisole clung to my skin, and I wiggled out of it, ridding myself of the crumpled fabric. Roman devoured me with his stare, his darkness an intoxicating blend of anger and need that pounded into me. I let him walk me back to the wall, to have his palms cornering either side of my head.

His strong legs took a wide stance, his erection straining against my navel. My husband cupped my breast in his palm, pinching it, twisting my soft flesh. It didn’t hurt, it burned. Heat, ten times hotter than that of the shower, spread from where he molded my breast whichever way he liked, and down to my center. My pussy clenched around nothing, wishing to have him deep inside.

I snaked my hand between us, reaching for his erection blindly, refusing to look away from anywhere but his face, to sever the eye contact we’d made. Faster than I could’ve reached him, Roman curled his fingers around my wrist, lifting it up and over my head. When I outstretched the other one to

his cock, he repeated the motion, capturing them together with one hand.

We glared at one another, a nonverbal communication passing between us.

What I conveyed with the sincerest intentions was *I love you*. And since I'd been reading Roman's soul for forever, I could tell he wanted to say something along the lines of *Me too, even though I'll probably never give you my heart*.

The need to soothe him overcame me, to prove to him I never did and never would hurt him intentionally. I fought against his hold, yet this time he overcame me. Hovering over me, Roman quenched my attempts at moving, not twitching a muscle, his pressure on my palms binding me down like cement.

Roman's smirk from my movements held no mirth in it. It also turned me the fuck on.

"I'll release you, if you turn around." He emphasized each syllable, his voice a rich wine, an enticing venom running through my pores.

But it didn't get me that drunk that I lost sight of my goal. I juttied my head off the wall, my nostrils flaring. "No."

He hadn't so much as grimaced at the stern tone. My breath hitched when he jabbed me under my ribs, his forefinger running up my stomach, below my breast and to my nipple. It hardened from the circles he drew around it, then my whole body quavered when he added his thumb to flick it.

A sob escaped me, a cry for more. He resumed the slow circles, rocking his protected cock over me, then flicked my sensitive nub again. The gesture made a drop of water change its direction and land at the corner of my open mouth as I gasped for air. The innocuous sensation combined with the sharp pang from my breast would've made me fall to my knees and put him in my mouth had my hands not been bound.

My raging hormones and untethered hunger for him were a show I didn't bother hiding. They weren't the part of our sex

that I wanted to keep from him. What I yearned to be over was the emotionless sex. A short release of pressure wouldn't cut it anymore, not for a volcano of a relationship like Roman and I had.

With his lips to my ear, he whispered, "You can bet your ass I'm not going to fuck you like this."

Two could play this game. I cocked my head and open-kissed his neck, then his ear. "Why? If you don't care about me, you shouldn't mind looking at me."

He lied again, mumbling, "I don't care."

His eyes were cast to mine when he gripped me beneath my thigh, raised my leg to his hip, and burrowed all of his length into me. His eyebrows furrowed, the pain on his features obliterated, reverting to pure, dripping sensuality laced with another powerful emotion, neither of the two spiteful.

Everything in me implored him to see the truth, the part where I didn't, would never dream of being with another man when I had him. My hands were still bound, but when my honesty spoke through my body, Roman listened. His thrusts were no longer an attempt to crush me. They were demanding, claiming rather than punishing me, connecting us as one alternatively than seeking a momentary source of release.

I arched my back as far as I could, desperate to have his lips on me, to be devoured by him. By my love.

"You think you deserve to have your needs met?" He guided my foot to clasp behind his thigh while his thumb moved to rub my clit.

I nodded, once more using my body language to talk to him, to tell him I never cheated. The more Roman rocked in and out of me, the more he seemed to believe it. He continued fucking me, bowing his head to my chest, kissing and sucking on my nipple.

My sex clenched as the heat pooled and coiled inside it. Having his faith in me, a part of it at least, along with the

tantalizing sensation of his tongue and attention, culminated into one mind-blowing orgasm that tore me from within. I pulsed on Roman as the fire burst and illuminated my entire body, its white light striking me from behind my eyes.

The world appeared clearer, better, and so did Roman.

He searched for my gaze without me asking him to look at me, gliding his length inside and out of me, helping me wind down from my life-altering orgasm. Slow, caring, hitting me to the hilt with every roll of his hips. My fingers flexed to lock on his and the grip he had on me marginally softened by this other layer of our connection.

My quavering simmered down, and Roman's eyes blazed when he picked up the pace, pounding into me so hard he glued me to the wall. A feral grunt emanated from him, an echo of release that I felt reverberating within me, strong and profound as though he was coming with no condom between us.

I regained control of my ragged inhales and exhales, and asked, "Got that out of your system?"

His disposition veered from sated to the sharp around the edges I had grown accustomed to seeing on him. "Not even close. And I'm telling you this for the first and last time." Large drops fell from his long lashes, his short hair covering his forehead. "I am not sharing you. You're *my* wife. Once you said your I do, you became mine."

He released my hands and I came for his cheeks like I'd intended initially. "If you'd let me explain..."

"Don't want to hear it. Last fucking time, Justine."

I looked at him, making my ears and eyes open and receptive. Gone was the sharp edge marring his tone, in its place a hint of softness, of doubt. Roman's words were intense, yet the stare he gave me, along with the slight shift in his voice, were not. He didn't wholeheartedly believe in them.

So, as he pushed from the wall and turned his back to me to walk to the trash, I opted for the best solution for the both of

us and strode right past him, head held high even in my very naked disposition. From the corner of my eye, I noticed him turning toward me, but I didn't stop.

He needed time to ruminate on this, on his own for once, to comprehend from the most profound place and be absolutely sure that I was on his side. That I was his.

If it meant I had to wait a bit longer, to have my heart clenching for a day or two more, so be it.

I was sure, as skies were blue, that my ongoing patience would be rewarded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Justine

JUSTINE,

Here are your dress and shoes for the immigrants' aid fundraiser charity tonight.

Stylists for your hair and makeup will be here at 4 PM.

I'll come with a limo to pick you up at 6. Can't make it before that due to a meeting.

Roman

I woke up sore yet brimming with hope that saved me from being dissuaded at Roman's impersonal note, or the reminder of my so-called infidelity. I could tell from the way he studied me through new eyes last night that doubt had begun to gnaw at him, and rested in the knowledge that he'd eventually figure out how wrong he'd been about me.

When dealing with Roman, as I learned from my new living situation, these processes took time, but he eventually got there. After all, the note came from him. He could've sent Edith to deliver the news and outfit, but he chose to write to me.

And there was no mentioning of STD tests. Could that actually mean he believed me?

Itsy bitsy steps, I reminded myself as I pulled the garment bag from my door handle, and proceeded to retrieve the ivory-colored shoebox.

Placing both articles on my bed, I checked my phone for the time. It showed five minutes past eight, an hour later than

my regular start of the morning, and twenty-five minutes on the dot after Roman left for work. Having no reason to rush, I reveled in a long shower, put on a pair of black jeans and a white blouse, then walked out to the kitchen.

As I entered the great room, the aroma from Edith's baking greeted my senses, the intoxicating chocolate scent wafting so strong you could practically taste it on your tongue. Upon seeing me, she wiped her hands from clearing the bowls and the rest of the dishes into the dishwasher as I strolled toward her, smiling.

"Morning." I rubbed her back gently and proceeded to switch on the coffee maker. It brewed the beans while I fixed myself a cup from the cabinet, a routine I began getting accustomed to in my home. It still amazed me how the daily routine contributed to morphing cold walls into an environment you belonged in, to transforming strangers—or practically strangers—into a family.

"You woke up late," she hummed, glancing at me sideways. Her eyes gleamed, a match to the grin that hadn't deserted her lips.

At her hint that something happened—which did, and I guessed she suspected it as well—a flash of heat shot from my neck and spread a tingling sensation up my cheeks. I swiveled to the refrigerator, removing the almond milk and pouring it into the coffee with my chin bowed to my chest, watching raptly as it colored the dark liquid into creamy hues after I'd stirred it, its remnants on the spoon tasting delicious.

"My favorite movie, *The Princess Bride*, was on TV; it would've been a crime to miss it," I sorta lied. Roman's and my encounter wasn't as poetic, but the one person who could correct me on my inaccuracy was at work, and besides, I didn't think he'd appreciate the analogy.

"Ah, Cary Elwes. If any man is worthy to steal minutes of your sleep, that's the guy." The way she said it compelled me to glance in her direction.

“Would you look at that,” I cooed, chuckling at her blushing face. “Who knew, a fellow Westley fan.”

Edith quickly changed the subject. “The timer for the chocolate pie I baked for the weekend says we have about hmm”—she glanced at the oven—“forty minutes, give or take. It’ll be ready for when we’ve finished our conversation.”

She turned to me, her stern expression reminding me of those of my mother’s when she wanted to have a serious conversation, the scary combo of a stern gaze and wrinkled brow. Roman and her shared a close bond, so it sort of made sense for him to confide in her.

Though how I wished he hadn’t.

I put the cup aside to turn my attention fully to her, my heart lurching to my throat. The fear she thought less of me too drowned me in sorrow, the inability to explain myself further suffocating me.

“I know you’re not having an affair,” she stated bluntly.

My head reared back, feeling like I’d been knocked on my ass. “What? How? And you don’t?”

“No, I do not. I assumed you weren’t cheating”—her cheeks somehow got redder—“even before I inspected your laundry. It smells of the city, of smoke and of you, not of some hotel room, or of a man who doesn’t wear Roman’s cologne.”

“Edith!” I barked a laugh. This new piece of information, the invasion of privacy, should’ve infuriated me. Yet it didn’t, because I understood her need to protect him.

“You can’t be certain. Maybe I wash my own clothes?” After my morbid evening and Roman’s hurtful assumptions yesterday, Edith’s and mine did the exact opposite. It sparked a tinge of humor into my life. We were both convinced I didn’t betray Roman, so that back and forth felt safe. Entertaining kind of safe. “Maybe...I changed out of them?”

“Give me a break, this isn’t you.” She put her hand on my shoulder, explaining to me what I figured out by myself, “I’m

sorry I snooped. I care for Roman, and I felt obliged to check when you were going out for long hours. Then to double-check after yesterday's phone call when he inquired why you weren't answering his calls."

A sigh left her, as she observed me through her warm and kind eyes and relayed their conversation. "But only as a final approval. Like I mentioned, I had a feeling you were up to something, on these absurdly long shopping sprees, but my gut told me it had nothing to do with cheating."

The daily bags I left at the front door, the garments that never made it to the washing machine... I swallowed around the lump in my throat. How long had she known and let me keep up the charade? "Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

"You're a good kid, and life here isn't always easy for you. I didn't want you feeling like there's no one in your corner without any real proof."

Finally, someone in this house believed me. It truly intrigued me to see it from her point of view, to understand what Roman's anger caused him to miss, what clarifications I could offer him without jeopardizing my dream, so I asked, "How do you see it?"

She rolled her eyes, pinching her nose in exasperation. "Roman might be oblivious to it, but behind your jokes I can see very well how much you adore him. You adore him when you look at him straight in the face; you adore him when he turns his back to you." The blush on her cheeks shone brighter. "It puzzles me as to how he doesn't burn with these stares."

"It's just the back I'm looking at. The man has an alluring back."

"You're a terrible liar." Edith laughed, partly amused, a lot of it relieved. "I hope one day, soon, you'll trust him enough to tell him what that is. He might not be that great at showing he loves you, but he does."

He really wasn't, yet I ignored it, knowing with every fiber of my being that Roman loved me. I didn't need the

persuasion; my husband on the other hand could've used the help.

I shrugged, pouring myself another coffee while Edith excused herself to go to the restroom.

Me: *Guess what today is?*

Elsie: *Friday, July 18, why?*

Me: *Ha-ha, great sense of humor.*

Elsie: *I would've said I got it from my mama, but she died before I would've known.*

Me: *OMG stop. Too early in the morning for dark humor.*

Elsie: *It's five o'clock somewhere. Anyhoo, what day is it?*

Me: *National Bring Your Best Friend to Work Day, obvs.*

Elsie: *That, right. You're late, the seat's taken. I already invited Alda.*

Me: *Justine has left the conversation.*

Me: *Seriously, if Roman asks, I was with you all day.*

Normally, I wouldn't have entertained the thought he'd go out of his way to question my friends. These, however, weren't normal times, and regardless of the need to cut my Max session short, I intended to be there. Come rain, come shine.

Elsie: *Ran out of "shopping" to do?*

Elsie and Kyle were next in line after Chloe to find out about me volunteering, then Alda and Noah. Withholding truths from my best friends didn't happen often. The rare occasions I did were to save them from worrying about me, or to be the treasurer of a secret massive surprise their boyfriends planned for them.

Me: *Kind of. Fundraiser tonight and Roman bought me an Oscar de la Renta gown that must have cost a fortune. Feels kinda stupid to "shop" again.*

Not to mention he didn't fall for it anymore, a fight and a truth I preferred to not concern her with.

Elsie: *I hear ya. Bring Your Best Friend to Work Day it is. When is it Bring Your Best Friend to Elsie Day?*

Me: *This Saturday? Afternoon though, I'm already nursing an I-hate-it-here hangover from this event.*

Elsie: *LOL. You'll survive. Send me a picture of your beautiful face in that dress later. Xoxo.*

Me: *Will do.*

Edith returned at that moment, and I tucked the phone away as she acted like our previous conversation didn't exist, talking about all the wonderful things she planned on baking us for weeks to come.



There was no denying it, the dress that Roman, or his assistant, purchased for me had not only an exquisite appearance to it, but it hugged every curve of my body as though created just for me. The strapless baby-blue gown had regal qualities to it, and very Disney-princess-like, too—from the sweetheart neckline to the built-in corset, ending with the dramatic tulle floor-length skirt.

I looked gorgeous, yet my nerves kept eating and gnawing at me. The anxiety at the idea of sitting next to Stuart who I hadn't seen since the wedding made my skin crawl. I'd avoided these events in particular and thus him and his snide remarks for years, so it didn't take a genius to figure out why my teeth were in a constant state of sinking into my bottom lip.

The nagging sensation peaked earlier, when the hair and makeup ladies, Amina and Darija, arrived. Despite my best intentions to please Roman, I couldn't stand the thought of strangers poking and touching me when for years I've been doing it on my own. After a few minutes of trying to push through, I asked the kind professionals to leave.

Edith, though, I didn't mind one bit. I accepted happily her offer to help, to be enveloped in her warmth and decent skills with the curling iron and eyeshadows. Her kind attitude on top of our previous bonding partially unwound the knot in my stomach, soothing me from the first stroke of mascara on my eyelashes to the final brush of my hair.

However, when she finished and went to attend to the kitchen at ten minutes to six, I still didn't feel right. So, I did the one thing I knew would cheer me up in an instant—texting my girlfriends the selfie Elsie asked for and waiting for their uplifting messages.

Elsie: *Who is this?*

Alda: *Doesn't look familiar to me, but then again, I'm jet-lagged AF from Paris.*

Elsie: *Justine, what are you doing sending us photos from the Oscar Delurante fashion show?*

Alda: *I swear I've seen her somewhere... What's it called, Vugoue?*

Me: *Your delusions on my nonexistent modeling career along with your spelling errors are a major turn-on ;) Any chance one of you hotties are single?*

Yup, that totally did it. After that, I locked the phone's screen, the first signs of giddiness for the day simmering under my skin. Surrounded by their love, I glided outside the room, ushered outside the penthouse with a soft rub on my back from Edith at the doorstep.

I rode down the elevator by myself, and when the doors slid open, Bill rushed to my side to offer me his arm. "Good evening, Mrs. Gallagher," he said while escorting me to the building's main entrance.

"Good evening, Bill. And it's Justine," I answered.

The genuine smile adorning my face, powered by my support system from home and sweet Edith, hadn't wavered,

not even when confronted by the somber expression on Roman's face.

A mild inconvenience, I deemed his sullen mood, one I avoided dwelling on. It'd pass, I hoped, and in the meanwhile, I focused on the positive. On how my husband held the door to the car for me, not the driver. At how irresistible he looked, his hair styled in that muffled-on-purpose way, wearing an all-black tux that wouldn't fit anyone else besides him.

And while clinging to the good, my grin widened even more.

"Evening," Roman said.

How I missed that distant voice of his. Not.

Fortunately, our shared mornings equipped me to handle exactly these situations with grace. I continued as though he'd told me *Hello, my beautiful wife and the joy of my existence*, leaned on to his strong shoulders, rose on the tiptoes of my champagne-colored, five-inch stilettos and left a pale pink lips mark on the shaved part of his cheek.

He blinked, a fracture in his façade giving in.

I folded myself into the vehicle, telling him from my place on the leather seats, "Evening, hubs."

He gave me a curt nod as a replacement, taking his place in front of me. This exchange summed up the talking we did for the majority of the ride. A slow, traffic-laden drive where Roman and I stared at the outside, eyes glued to the windows as we drove by herds of pedestrians, some in suits, some in shorts, tourists and locals and people who commuted into Manhattan from nearby suburbs and boroughs, even from Brooklyn.

My old home. At my lowest point, in which I agreed to marry Roman as to not get kicked out into the street, I imagined the longing to return to my past life there would haunt me, that every mention of it would serve as a fist tightened around my chest. But now, as I contemplated it, I noticed it hadn't.

Maybe, I mused, life steered toward the direction it should have in the first place. Ending up being married to a broody Roman far outweighed living solo and working for nasty or plainly corrupt bosses. Having him as my partner, distanced and sometimes cold as he was, surpassed any on-a-surface-level dates I'd gone to. No man had ever given me the butterflies Roman did. And I'd scoured for them plenty.

"You look...nice." Roman's baritone pulled me from my somber reminiscing after long minutes of silence in the car.

My attention shifted from the outside world to Roman, my lips curving up. The olive branch he'd extended to me felt like a result of the time he had to process what I begged him to realize, that I'd been loyal to him, that I loved him.

I surmised that from these three simple words, because when you spoke Roman language, you saw behind the shallow compliment. See, whenever Roman used to catch me in a bad mood, he'd loom over me, lower his chin, and state in a deep, dead-serious voice *You look nice*. That translated to *How are you?* in an attempt to make me laugh, to approach whatever was bothering me while refraining from showing pity.

I rested my cheek on the window, sighing with a measure of contentment, "I'm well, thanks."

Before he got to respond, the limo stopped in front of the museum hosting the event. Roman cleared his throat, buttoned his tux jacket and tugged at his sleeves, exiting the limo when the driver opened the door.

My husband held out his hand for me. His fingers interlaced with mine, squeezing me once, the gesture sending shivers from where he'd touched to the innermost areas of my soul. My heart responded to him, clamoring against its cage. He blindsided me without even meaning to do it, and judging by the sudden widening of his eyes, I wasn't the only one affected by it.

We were captive in this silent standoff, him on the pavement, me in the car. Neither of us moved for what felt like

a full year.

“Ready?” he asked eventually.

I shook my head. “Not ever.”

“Too bad, you’ve got no choice.” His smirk at my reply, a non-hateful and maybe even joking one, placated some of my worries, almost as much as having him recite a quote from our movie did, “Life is pain, Highness.”

Pleased as I hadn’t felt in a long time, I squeezed his hand back. “You’re not very convincing.”

“Not a liar, either. We need to be here.” When I lowered my chin, the silent request for an explanation as to why our presence was necessary, Roman evaded my request, providing me with a snarky retort. “Besides, I’m sure you can’t wait to drown in one of Stuart’s famous hugs.”

Ladylike to the extreme, I bared my teeth to him and stepped out of the vehicle. Roman motioned for me to link my arm in his, and I did. We, sorry, mostly me, smiled, and posed for pictures. After that, Roman showed our invitations at the door and we were directed into the ballroom.

It took my eyes a minute to adjust to the bright light of the four massive wheel-shaped chandeliers hanging down from the high ceiling. I paused, bringing Roman to a halt with me in the midst of crowds of attendants who’d flanked us from either side, people who’d witnessed one too many events as this one to appreciate the impressive gallery.

“And here I thought you didn’t want to be here,” Roman referred to my gawking stare and parted lips, at awe of the gold, beige, and cream ornaments that were beautifully illuminated by the chandelier.

“The place in itself is fabulous. It’s the need to make a spectacle about your donation where you lost me.” I bit my bottom lip, lest I spill my endless adoration of the other hardworking volunteers at my center who’d contributed in humility. Contrary to Stuart.

He nodded at an older couple that greeted us, gesturing to me with his head that we move along, and guided us to the direction of our table when I nodded. “We raise a lot of money to help those in need in these gatherings, it’s not just buying bragging rights.”

“Nothing a couple of field agents or dinner parties couldn’t do.”

“Couple of agents were sent to a specific house on the Upper East Side.” He glanced down at me, the gleam in his eyes alluding to his reference to my parents’ apartment. Once again, same as we were lightyears ago, by just picking up on my tone and observing my eyes, he understood where my mind ventured. If Stuart did it, I resented it.

I returned the smile. “Yup.”

“The rest of the benefactors can have their grand celebrations.”

“Very true.”

The chuckle that fell from his lips lit his face brighter than a thousand chandeliers, and for a moment my old Ro was resurrected from beneath the layers he’d buried himself under. At that moment I had no doubts he believed me about staying faithful, my whole body soaring from the ground.

Until the voice I least wanted to hear cut through what should’ve been a happy moment. Stuart. “Hello, Justine, and my dear son-in-law.”

Roman stood up straighter, his protective palm clasp at my forearm. “Hello.”

His tranquility, the inner peace he exuded at Stuart’s patronizing tone, it captivated me. Roman’s jaw didn’t tick, the corners of his eyes remained smooth, a picture of serenity. I could’ve ogled at him for an eternity.

“Justine, my love.” Mom snatched me from Roman’s defensive hold, clutching me into a tight embrace.

I allowed myself to be comforted by her loving touch, to inhale her familiar scent of her shampoo. When she pulled away eventually, she blinked, rolling her eyes up to curb the tears from overflowing. Tears meant a scene, and a scene was a big no-no in our family.

Roman touched the small of my back, forcing Mom's attention to him.

"Hi, Roman."

"Hi, Pauline, always a pleasure." Roman's icy expression melted by a tinge for my mom. He'd admired her for standing by my side when she could, he'd told me as much during our teenage years, often reminding me we couldn't blame her. "Justine, I'll be waiting for you in our seats."

Once he was out of earshot, Mom grasped me by the shoulders, drawing me close. "You haven't called or answered in days, barely texted. If not for today, I would've marched in your home"—she scanned me from head to toe, exhaling silently—"but you're fine. Better than fine."

"I am. And so are you." I signaled at her floor-length gown, marveling at how beautifully she pulled off the snug, peach-colored sequin dress. My mom, elegant, beautiful, and timeless, could wear anything at any age.

"Don't change the subject. What aren't you telling me? Are you pregnant?" Another fun fact about Mom, she had a sixth sense for knowing something was off, moreover when it related to me.

"No!" I cast a glance around, desperate for a distraction. Her line of questioning would've led to a confession I was reluctant to give.

I caught a glimpse of Roman, perched on his elbows that rested on top of the table while he tilted his head at me, attuned to our conversation. I raised my eyebrows, he raised his. Out of all the hours he spent ignoring or scowling at me, he chose the instance where I needed rescuing from a visibly awkward position to amuse himself.

Being as he was of no help, I seized the first opportunity to avoid her when a young server holding a tray of champagne passed by.

“Drinks!” I patted Mom’s hand, then ducked and shuffled on my dress, taking two flutes and making my way to Roman.

Shoving the chair back, he stood up to hold out the chair I was supposed to occupy. His lips twitched at my squinted eyes, his misplaced delight at my predicament looking all sorts of cute. *Oh, hell.*

He motioned with his head subtly in the direction of the drinks. “Thank you.”

“Welcome.” I kissed his cheek despite myself. It was inevitable.

A cynical laugh from Roman’s left tore me from the moment we were having. I lowered my bum to the chair, getting comfortable as Roman pushed me in. “Everything okay, Dad?”

I knew better than to disrespect him by calling him by his first name in public—he did not like that one bit. Just like Mom refusing to let a tear slide, I had to watch what came out of my mouth around other people. A family name like ours meant everyone was watching, and under such scrutiny from a young age, I learned to bottle up my resentment, an essential precaution to be taken given that not everyone at our table was related to us by blood or close family ties.

Stuart, who’d brought me up on these rules, stuck to them, treading carefully while he tinted the innocuous speech, staining it with his venom. “Not at all. Married life suits you. You conduct yourself in a manner that’s far more... compliant.”

Roman’s warm, strict hand clasped over my thigh from under the tablecloth, hidden from everyone’s view. He flexed his fingers, instructing me to stay calm, not let Stuart get to me. I inhaled, relaxing further as I heard his calm voice.

“Being kind is an honorable trait, Stuart. Pauline taught her well.”

My stomach spun and twirled, a storm of emotions fluttering inside it. Maybe it was the sip of alcohol I drank on an empty stomach. Maybe it was the solace from the apologetic stare Mom sent me from across the table.

Or maybe, just maybe, it was wishful thinking on my behalf, praying that a handful of cells in my husband’s body colluded against his will to hate me. That he stood up for me from a place of affection, care, fueled by trust, even.

I decided the final reason had to be it. I felt it in my bones. A decade and a half swept by since I last saw his dome of protectiveness cast around me so potently, since my old Roman did whatever in his powers to spare me from getting hurt instead of inflicting pain. He did more than just comfort me with a secretive touch; he flat out gave the man who tried to belittle me in public a big, beautiful, even if polite, fuck you.

I slowed down my breath, allowing some of my trust that Roman was on my side, that this time he wouldn’t hurt me, to trickle back in. He twisted his head to look at me, talking to me through the softness in his eyes and the soothing repetitive strokes what I already suspected. When he wouldn’t retreat, I comprehended something else—he asked me to cool down, to mimic his behavior and find my center.

May I be safe and protected.

May I be free of mental suffering or distress.

May I be happy.

May I be free of physical pain and suffering.

May I be able to live in this world happily, peacefully, joyfully, with ease.

These words, as always, cleared the cloud hovering above my soul, washed the dirt tainting my eyes; I understood the reality as it was, as Roman wanted me to see it.

Stuart's attempts to dismiss me weren't due to his historical dislike of me. The spasm of his jaw and the slight wrinkles on his forehead were those of resentment. An ancient dislike to a connection he hoped had been buried six feet under by now. Stuart Sutton, the man who did everything in his power to marry me off to Roman, was enraged I showed kindness to Roman, that Roman held my chair, jumped to my defense, didn't hate me.

My father could not stand the fact that we were on good terms again.

Fuck me up the fucking wall.

Who knew the event I was so reluctant to attend would turn out to be one of the best evenings of my life?

My lips quirked to the side, as my brain plotted to milk this evening for all its worth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Roman

JUSTINE PRESSED her lips to my jaw, making her kiss linger. Her hot breath tingled my skin when she answered her father out loud, “What can I say? I love my husband.”

Staying composed, attentive to Stuart’s every possibly incriminating word when Justine fixated her hazel eyes at me wasn’t an easy task on its own, given it was her. I had it easier in the limo, when we were apart and I could crawl into myself in silence.

But here, having her lips on me, as feeling her breasts brush against my arm, while her love declaration from yesterday still echoed in the chambers of my heart, it rattled me to my core. I clasped my fingers harder on her thigh, the only response I allowed my body in this public scenario.

In, out. In, out.

Clearing my head was a necessity as I needed to both stay focused on her dad and protect myself against the ticking time bomb named Justine Gallagher. She’d done sufficient damage yesterday too, insisting on infiltrating the dead part of me and breathing life into it.

I wanted to keep that side buried. Would’ve too. If she’d have said *have sex with me*, if it was as simple and carnal as that, I would’ve given it to her and wouldn’t be so inherently fucked today. God knows I was ready, the sight of her in my bathroom obliterating the hurt, the thought of being between her legs the biggest turn-on of my life. I would’ve fucked the pain and hurt out of my system while I was at it, and we’d both end up satisfied, in our own sick ways.

She didn't though. She told me she loved me, deepening the fissure in my soul to the point of no return. Because I knew she meant it, knew she had no reason to say it otherwise. Her eyes wouldn't have forced me to listen and believe her like they did that night.

She hadn't explained where she'd disappeared to, that was still a big question, but at least it wasn't to another man's bed. My gut told me as much, the small bits of faith eating at my anger, letting Justine in. Explanations would have to be delivered, in due time. Until then, and I hated admitting it to myself more than anything—I'd have to trust her.

I'd also have to keep my guard up to protect her.

Especially from her dad. And even at the cost of eavesdropping on him, waiting for a slipup. I resigned to the fact that Lennon and Faye would be able to take care of that aspect on their own.

Not without effort, I detached myself from Justine's warmth and the disturbing places my mind went, perking my ears to hear what he felt obligated to tell her this time.

"I guess you're so in love you never bothered noticing your new husband doesn't drink." Stuart, being Stuart, never disappointed.

Thing was, Justine wasn't alone anymore. She was my wife, and I always protected what was mine. "Actually, since Justine moved in, she's taught me how to appreciate wine drinking." I glanced from him to her so as to not talk over her head. "Everything is enjoyable when you're around."

She pulled her lips in, gazing at me with a twinkle in her eyes, unable to speak while I shut down Stuart's open contempt of her. As if I needed further proof of her suppressed laughter, a light blush climbed from her slender neck to her rosy cheeks, a darker shade of pink overriding her makeup.

I raised my glass, clinking to her. "To you, my love."

What I'd noticed earlier, and what I'd attempted to get Justine to pay attention to as well, was Stuart's annoyance

from the two of us getting along. My mouth curved to the side as I eyed him while sipping from the bubbly drink, thoroughly satisfied as his face morphed in unease. Then, for the heck of it and because I fucking wanted to taste her, I bent to place a kiss on Justine's lips. A short, curt, yet swarming in emotions kind of kiss.

Our kiss ended, our hands though finding their way toward each other as we returned our attention to the other guests at the table. I observed my annoyed father-in-law twist his mouth in disgust, then turning to the CEO of Parskaine Bank, Harry Cortez, and his wife, Mary. They held a conversation which I would've usually partook in, maintaining an agreeable, fake as fuck pretense of interest in their chitchats about golf and their jets and whatever the fuck else. With this man you could never be too careful. No matter what he blabbered, I was there to keep tabs on him whenever possible.

That evening though, another pressing issue demanded my focus. An issue that nuzzled my neck, burned my arm by leaning her pliant body on it again, scorching my skin through my clothes by running her fingers along my pants' waistband. *Thank God for the tablecloth.* "Why aren't Michael and Judith here?"

I inclined my chin toward her, my voice gruff. "You asking about my parents is terribly unsexy, considering."

"Considering what?" She sucked my jaw lightly. I fastened my fingers tighter on her thigh.

Whispering so no one save her heard me, I said, "Considering you touch me like you want me to bend you over the table in front of everyone, lift your dress, and fuck your brains out."

"That's not why I do it." Justine drew her head back, leaning into my crotch, feeling me straining in my pants. "I saw what you were trying to tell me, about getting out of my head and seeing Stuart losing it when we don't come at each other's throats. I'm just following your lead."

“Glad the message got through.” Pride swelled in my chest at her fire, at her quick comeback. The faithful and turned-on husband I was, I decided to help her smear our so-called successful marriage in her father’s face. Mimicking her movements, I grazed my hand higher, stroking her through the layers of her skirt. “But can you honestly tell me you’re doing this out of sheer spite for him?” I cupped her through the skirt, massaging her slowly. “Nothing more?”

Her thighs clenching around my hand were in stark contrast to her reply. “Nah.”

“Okay.” My thumb ceased its caress. “This isn’t working for us, anyway.”

Her brows furrowed, her beautiful lips pouting at me. “How come?”

“Your dad”—I cast my eyes to my left—“is busy schmoozing, and this”—I shifted my gaze to my lap, where she hadn’t stopped stroking me—“isn’t what’ll grab his attention.”

She finally halted, glancing up and searching my eyes. “You sound like you have a better way to tackle it.”

“I do.” I inched closer until my lips brushed the shell of her ear. “Three, actually. None of them appropriate.”

“Tell me,” she said adamantly.

Truth be told, I knew two of them were completely out of the question, and so fucking what? I made her smile. Hell, I made myself smile. The semblance of fun from the hint of familiarity, from reverting to the people we once were minus the new sexual angle, they were fun and I didn’t deny myself of it. We were treading unsteady grounds, no doubt about that, but it far outweighed the hating sensation I’d been grappling with since I was seventeen.

Worth it.

The sudden sentimentalism pulled at me to look at Justine’s expression as I detailed them to her. I craned my head

back, capturing her gaze with a faux-serious expression on my face. “One, is the bent over the table option. That’d be impossible to ignore.”

“Tempting. Very fucking tempting.” Her tongue swiped her bottom lip, her eyes reflecting the flooding in her head. “However, I’ll have to pass.”

“All right, option two.” Removing my hand from her center, I tucked a curl behind her ear. “Option two is you straddle me on the chair.”

Justine stroked me, twice. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I bit the inside of my cheek hard to shove the groan back. Never, not ever, had I demonstrated this low level of restraint in public. “I’d like to do a lot of things to you,” I said when she gave me a chance to breathe.

“Option three?”

Right, that. “Option three. You talk.”

“What would I say?” The attitude vanished from her tone, her eyes twinkling at the question, at the abundance of opportunities springing behind those hazel irises.

“The marriage shit worked earlier.” She wagged her eyebrows. “Have you seen his jaw?”

Her unshakeable confidence and humor were not what I expected. I witnessed it at home, when it was just the two of us, but to have her do a complete one-eighty toward him, from the girl who’d scowled to herself or been reduced to tears from his mistreatment of her. She’d evolved, this butterfly woman who flapped her wings in all her glory.

“Fuck yeah. Looked like he broke a tooth or two in the process.” I removed her hand from my pants, clutching her soft palm once before releasing it. “Maybe skip the my-husband-thought-I’m-cheating part, though.”

“Thought, in past tense.”

I nodded once, acknowledging the truth. I believed her.

She sighed, her eyelids giving a light flutter. She shook her head, clearing her throat to say, “Positive, happy, *Brady Bunch*-style, then?”

“Exactly that. Anything you have in mind, filter nothing.” The closeness nearly made me call her Tina, my tongue saving me from the slipup. I cupped her cheeks instead, meaning every word, wanting her to come on top of even the smallest altercation. “He didn’t anticipate you to be content, doesn’t want you to. Add me being pleased with our marriage to the equation? They’ll have to drag him out of here in a hearse.”

She needed no more encouragement, pulling from my hold and interrupting their discussion so everyone at the table heard her. “Hey, Mom, guess what?”

Pauline paused, as she tended to do when Justine called out to her. I wondered, not for the millionth time, what drew her to her husband since it was never the money, nor did she seem intimidated by him either. *I guess I’ll never know.*

My wife pressed her hand to my thigh, rousing me from my nonconsequential thoughts. She mattered, no one else. “Roman built me a private movie room in our home.”

“That’s wonderful, honey.” Her mom’s lips parted, brow furrowing in confusion. The announcement did appear out of nowhere, but unlike Pauline, I was eager to hear where Justine would take it.

“It’s the room next to his office.” As the end to Justine’s vehement and love-filled declarations didn’t come, Stuart, as did the two other couples at our table, turned to us. “He wanted to feel me near him even when he works on weekends, didn’t you, Ro?”

Her dad despised that affectionate nickname while we were kids, and despite the hurt hearing it instilled in me, it pleased me tenfold to witness his eye roll. Pauline, Mary, and the three other women around the table aww-ed.

“Yes, I did. I love having you there.” I kissed her forehead gently, not overdoing any of it by sticking to my character. It

needed to look legit or he'd catch on.

Which seemed to do the job, judging by Stuart's grumbling accompanied by the slipup from his carefully built veneer he put out into the world. "On the weekends, yeah, but you still stay in the office every day well past nine. I assume every fascination has its limits."

His low blow didn't deter Justine, and my soul drank up the spectacle of her grin widening, planning her comeback. I allowed myself to step through the strict barriers I'd put between us, to marvel at my wife's fire, and ignore the rest of the world, including the waiters as they served the hors d'oeuvre.

"Oh, Daddy, you're so funny. It's not that." She flapped her palm in the air, shrugging off his statement. "Roman wants to be at home, but someone has to set an example for the employees who stay late every day."

Good fucking thing I didn't eat, or I'd have been the one to be sent to the morgue, cause of death—choking on whatever it was they'd had on the small plates.

"Roman isn't the only one dedicated to his job." Stuart tried to save face, grinning uncomfortably at the guests.

They returned the smile, oblivious to the light cracks in Stuart's pretense.

I, who tore myself from my wife to view the results of her work, wasn't.

"Yes, of course, Dad," she elaborated. "Everyone contributes as much as within their capabilities."

Justine's mother, who hadn't foreseen Justine's sort of reply like I knew was coming, brought a fork to what looked like salmon to her mouth and started chewing. Then she choked. Stuart forgot about us for a second, twisted to her, clasping her back and rubbing it, a kindness he's never outstretched to his daughter. So, maybe there was more to it than what he had packing that drew her to him.

Despite her mom's inconvenience, Justine hadn't finished her performance for the evening. "And besides, Roman makes up for it by sending me my favorite flowers."

"My precious deserves the best in life." So, maybe I did overdo it, but at that point, as Stuart's embarrassment and diverted attention toward the coughing Pauline, I believed the subtleties of what I said or how I acted were past him.

Mary, who sat next to me at my left, hadn't minded the commotion either. "Oh, I do love when Harry gets me flowers."

Justine turned her shining smile toward Mary, a grin whose fake sincerity could've fooled anyone. "I know, me too! He buys me the most delightful orchids, in every color. By now, our home is decorated in a gorgeous fusion of pinks, whites, yellows, oranges, and purples."

"It must be quite the sight." Mary nodded, casting her glance to Pauline who'd managed to recover. "We'll have to have coffee one day, the three of us. I'm dying to see how a movie room can be incorporated into an apartment. Now that the last of our teenagers left for college, we've been discussing renovating their rooms."

Justine raised her hand to her lips, tilting her head toward me and batting her eyelashes, conveying shame or modesty. But then her eyes twinkled, and it didn't take a PhD in Human Behavior to figure out shame or modesty were miles away from her vocabulary.

A proven conclusion, once Justine spoke. Her voice was conspiratorial, supposedly for my ears alone, yet she ensured the entire table heard her. "We'll have to prepare for that. Tell Edith to fix the mess we made the other day."

"Don't worry about it all," Harry's wife continued. "You should've seen our house when the kids were young, a popcorn kernel here and there sure won't bother me."

Justine turned to her, dropping her palm to her lap and saying what no one, myself included, could've predicted her

articulating in public, “I’m not talking about solids. Roman takes a ton of breaks to visit me there, and he’s so insatiable I don’t even bother with getting dressed around the house anymore.”

My hand clasped on her beautiful, obscene mouth, while I snapped my lips into a tight line to drown the mounting burst of laughter threatening to rip right out. Out of all the shit she could’ve come up with to embarrass her dad, Justine went for discussing sex in front of other people.

Go big or go home, I guess.

I loved it.

“Justine!” Stuart and Pauline yelled in unison.

Mary fanned her face and chuckled. At least someone at the table had a sense of humor. “Ooh la-la. Well then, we’ll have to wait for it to be cleaned.”

As for me, for a further response, I should’ve played by the social rules that applied to people in my line of work and status. I should’ve offered a polite expression, apologize for my wife’s drinking a little too much—even if she didn’t—and steer the conversation in another direction. I absolutely needed to be representable.

And I couldn’t. Not when I had my best friend back in full force. Not when the girl I remembered lived however she saw fit, flipping the metaphorical finger with pride. Not even at the price of my business associates thinking less of me for these public expressions of lust.

Fuck everybody.

“Justine Sutton, you can’t talk like that,” Stuart raged. “Ever.”

She pried my fingers off her lips, standing up and sending a death glare in his direction. “It’s Gallagher. I’m Justine Gallagher.”

I stood up, crushing my mouth to hers in a kiss that had tasted sweeter than all the other ones I gave her before,

breaking it only to whisper against her smile, “Let’s get out of here.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Roman

THOUGH I'D been the one who made the call to leave the benefit, Justine ended up taking the lead for the both of us. She flipped the roles, leading me by the hand toward the exit of the museum.

It must've been around eight in the evening, the summer sun hanging low in the sky above us. Boxed in between people and enormous skyscrapers, I felt small, meaningless, content. On any other day, I didn't much appreciate the sense of insignificance, of being one of many, but as the two of us rushed through the crowds, with Justine laughing so hard she had to grab her stomach, I wanted for nothing.

I regarded Justine as she guided me away further into the streets of Manhattan. "We passed the valet, and we're going in the opposite direction of the apartment."

"We're not...going...home," she proclaimed, the remnants of her laughter coming between words.

"We're not?" I asked, not surprised and in no way annoyed.

"No." She shook her head, the vehement movements tossing her long locks from side to side.

Her exuberant face met mine, her grin lingered even as her chuckles subsided. She looked nothing short of beautiful, and I wanted that. So, I just fucking took her, freeing myself of barricades and hate and negativity. I tugged her to my chest, wrapping an arm around her waist, and bringing our held hands to her cheek.

My knuckles grazed the softness of her skin, coaxing her to lean in to me as she sighed softly. We stood as an island in the midst of the noise and commotion, only us. I dipped my head toward her lips, stopping at an inch from her mouth. The aromas of champagne carried from her to me, spicy and intoxicating, just like her.

“In that case, where are we headed, Justine Gallagher?”

I saw her lips curve up first, felt her quick kiss a second later. “Out.”

“We are out.” I traced my palm down to her neck, smoothing the back of my hand over her collarbone, down to her shoulder.

“Hell no, this horrible variation of out?” Her whole face contorted in disgust. “It wasn’t going out. What we endured a second ago felt more like a sleeping pill, save-your-souls kind of night out.”

She even made her criticism funny, and I couldn’t curb down the huff of a laugh she’d drawn out of me. “I told you, we had to be there.”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard. Trust me, no one likes seeing Stuart pissed as much as I do, with his veins popping out of his head and whatnot.” I hadn’t resisted when she pulled me to keep walking. I hadn’t corrected her either, on my reason to be there. “Now it’s time to have some fun.”

We ventured straight ahead, then stopped at a red light. A string of yellow taxis and other vehicles drove by, some guy blared his horn, another cursed. The woman waiting at the sidewalk to our right gave the guy over the phone a piece of her mind, her speech heavy on the *I hate you*.

Which reminded me of my own lady, and of days not too far behind us. I glimpsed down at her, starting to say, “About that fun...”

“No paps will catch the almighty Roman and his wife tonight, not that I’d noticed any following us anyway.”

Justine was right, the paparazzi's shouts, blaring flashes, or obvious hideouts were nowhere in our vicinity. However, PIs, that was another story. When these people wanted to catch you in an embarrassing moment, no one was as discreet as they were. Us wearing these ostentatious clothes only served to make us more of a living target.

But seeing the enthusiasm in her eyes piqued my curiosity enough to ask, "What makes you so sure no one would identify us?"

"Because we're not going to be *us*, husband." Justine winked before pulling me to cross the road once it emptied of traffic. "There's an H&M store less than a block away. We'll shop for comfortable clothes and baseball caps and ta-dah! An anonymous, unrecognizable pair will emerge on the other end."

It didn't escape me that as she spoke, we passed a Nordstrom store that had clothes that better suited her taste, if the bags that awaited me daily were of any indication. It hadn't escaped me either that she'd chosen one of the least expensive places to shop at.

None of it evaded me, and still I let it go. Justine gave me a reason to trust her, and as long as she hadn't cheated, hadn't concocted anything that might hurt me, I let the sliver of trust remain this time.

We strode into the store, welcomed by high ceilings and racks on racks of clothes and shoppers. "And the clothes we're wearing now? What do you suggest we do with them?"

"Aren't you full of questions today?" Her smile hadn't left her lips, blissfully ignorant of the heads we turned as we advanced farther inside. "We'll change here and leave it in the dressing room. Someone else would be thrilled to have them, so they're not wasted standing in our closets."

My eyebrows lowered on my forehead. I studied the back of her head as she plucked a ribbed rosy jersey dress and checked the label for the size, again curious as to why the

reason behind the extravagant shopping, and again shaking it off. We finally had an evening where we enjoyed each other's company, and I'd hate myself for dropping one ounce of venom to poison it. It didn't fucking matter.

The trust concept started growing on me in a way that acquired taste did—bitter and uncomfortable at the beginning, its taste changing the more you experienced it. And I enjoyed experiencing her.

“Great.” I nodded, following her in her search for new shoes—pink sandals for her, khaki-green T-shirt, black jeans, and boots for me. She claimed they were *absolute perfection* and I went with it.

After ringing up our items, plus matching gray baseball caps, we returned inside to change in one of the dressing rooms. The clothes and boots she picked for me fit as though I tried them on, but honestly, after tonight, it didn't strike me as odd. I accepted that she knew me, accepted her being a part of my life, was done fighting so hard to accept us.

And sappy sentimentalism wasn't all I felt. Justine's scent, her beauty, the longing I'd harbored since my teenage days—they drew me to her, made me want to rip her clothes off and have them stay off. But her kindness, the sweetness of her, woke an insatiable need to fuck her like I meant it. With my heart. And I wanted to do it now.

“Ti—” I bit my tongue, rolling my eyes. *Not that comfortable, not yet.* “Justine, I'm gonna need a bigger size for my jeans.”

“Crap, I thought I nailed it.” Her feet appeared in the space between the door and the floor. “Come out, let me see.”

I opened the door, fully clothed in the outfit she did, in fact, nail, and grabbed her arm, throwing her inside. Her gasp was swallowed by my lips smashing into hers, her back pinned to the wall with my hips. I kissed her and moved to make love to her, and I wasn't afraid. She held my heart and I knew with absolute certainty that she wouldn't break it.

And I gave her all of me. Every last bit in that kiss.

Justine did too. The surprise that grasped her wavered fast as she responded to me, running her hands from my shoulders up my neck and pressing me closer to her with a raised leg to sink into my hip.

Even over her dress, I felt her as if she were naked in my palm when I cupped her breast, massaging it, tweaking the hardened nipple through the fabric. She had no bra on and I nearly lost myself with lust, almost ripped that dress off her.

In an attempt to send me deeper over the edge, she sank her teeth into my bottom lip, sucking it harder the more I played with the aroused nub. The heat from her crotch burned me, pulling on my desire to touch her, every single part of her. I slithered two fingers under her dress, sliding her panties to the side and plunging them into her greedy pussy.

She tightened around me, her wetness coating my fingers. I wanted to tell her what it did to me, having her ready and wanting, having her writhing on me waiting for me to be on her, but I couldn't say a word.

I spoke using my body instead, thrusting my fingers harder into her, with every shove hitting her walls at a new angle to heighten her pleasure. Justine clawed at me as I ravaged her, scratching my nape, each abrasion sending a shock of heat down my spine.

We were mad from need, panting, sweating, ravenous for one another. My cock strained against the zipper of my jeans. My soul, it fucking swelled from the feelings only one person in this whole entire universe revived in me.

Understanding that regardless of the bustle of shoppers in the store, we were bound to be walked in on at some point, I moved to cut our encounter shorter than I would've liked. I detached myself from mauling Justine's lips and tongue, from drinking the air she breathed, and brought a finger to my lips as in *Be quiet*.

“You kissed me,” she mouthed, stopping me from advancing on her.

Her wide eyes glimmered, lust and love brimming behind them. The message from her words came through as intended—I didn’t run away anymore from the girl I’d set my eyes on from the day she was born. I answered her with a kiss, hoping it relayed what I couldn’t articulate. Some things, those buried under six feet of mud in an iron coffin, weren’t that easy to resuscitate.

But difficult didn’t mean impossible. Through the intimate way my lips slanted across hers, the strong and caring kiss I swallowed her with, I communicated my own version of how much I craved her, how much I loved her. Probably like she did, if not more.

With no more talking and distractions, I unzipped my pants, discarding them and my boxers. Reading my intentions, Justine released the grip she had around my hip with her leg, letting me push her underwear lower on her thighs, then to her feet.

I faced her, my dark eyes locking onto her light ones. Big, hazel, scorching suns that were drinking me in, and I couldn’t imagine shutting them from her again. I looked at her like I was going to make love to her. Like I was supposed to look at her the first time we did it. Without a shred of hate, from a place of distilled love. Like I would forever from this point forward. I would redeem myself too, grovel for assuming the worst, treasure and adore my wife, savor her like she deserved.

At home. For now, the quick, physical part of it, was what we could afford. I kissed her lips tenderly as I sunk into Justine in one shove. Her folds enveloped me and her moans echoed in my mouth, down my throat, simmering into my lungs, making me whole.

I plummeted into her, spreading her wider apart, enveloping myself with her, not moving my gaze from her, devouring the connection we had instead of shutting from it. I held her tight, pulling back from our kiss to watch her full lips

waiting for me, her artfully styled locks getting mussed up from the friction.

She looked as glorious as she did wearing the gown, as wonderful as I remembered her with sand between her toes and tears staining her cheeks. Her beauty was incandescent.

Her thighs squeezed tighter the closer she inched toward her orgasm, her nails digging into me, about to tear off my shirt.

“I’ll kiss you always, Justine. I’ll never stop kissing you, from now to the end of time,” I whispered in earnest.

Hearing me say it pushed a button in her, triggering wave after wave of her orgasm as she came around me. I held her tight in my arms, kept fucking her as I absorbed her quivers, slid in and out of her while assuaging her undulating body. When I came, every nerve ending in my body lit up, the pores covering my skin set alight from the force of my climax. I gazed at Justine while my heart slowed, through the quieting of the last tremors.

She leveled her eyes with me, dazed and smiling. “I’m starting to like this married life.”

After kissing her nose, just because I could, I helped her to the floor, settled her garments in place, smoothing out her dress. Silently, we strolled out, flushed but acting like nothing happened.

At the exit, Justine handed the fitting room attendant our clothes. “We’d like to leave those here, please.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s a store policy not to hold on to clothes,” she replied to her with a smile.

“We won’t be needing them anymore,” Justine offered, adding, “please give them to someone who looks like they’re going through a rough day for whatever reason. I trust you to make someone happy.”

The young woman, Abbie, looked at her a bit puzzled, then at me. I nodded, since my suit compiled a part of this clothes

batch. “Please, I’m sure you can find someone.”

“You know what? I think I actually have a couple people in mind.” She accepted the clothes from Justine, placing them in a corner as we thanked her one final time and left.

We walked hand in hand, standing in the street, the light breeze caressing our faces. I put a finger under Justine’s chin, needing to see this wonderful woman that hid under the baseball cap when I said what I could no longer contain, “Me too, Justine. I’m loving this married life, too.”



At the fourth bar for the evening, Justine placed a glass of water in front of me, officially cutting me off from alcohol. She guided me throughout the night into multiple underground bars, crossing alleys and streets I’d never set foot in on my own.

We’d kissed on the subway rides as we traveled downtown then back up, and I’d given her piggyback rides up the streets to the last station. Her eyelids were droopy, yet she kept insisting we couldn’t not visit this bar. It wasn’t an easy task, carrying someone up tens of stairs when one’s drunk, but I managed. For her.

And she wasn’t wrong, about the bar. The interior design differed from the others’ plain walls and dark atmosphere. The walls from either side of the narrow space were one big mural, abstract, colorful painting of neon pink and cobalt blue splotches of paint that in their weird way made sense. Or so my drunk mind told me.

It also told me the place was beautiful, but not nearly as beautiful as Justine.

Somehow, through the veil of drunkenness and her near exhaustion, I could still make out the glitter in her eyes, the long lashes bordering them, the lines and curves of her face, how unique everything about her was.

The soft light fell on Justine like a blanket of gold and pinks and blues, an aura that emphasized the angelic quality of her smile, even if it was a tired one.

She lowered her bum to the chair next to me, fiddling with the glass of red wine she ordered for herself. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“And I’m the one with all the questions.” At that stage, it became increasingly hard to hold myself upright.

I leaned on my elbow, chin in my palm, and though my limbs were heavy, my heart demanded I touch my wife. Acting on impulse, I reached for the thin strap of her dress, wrapping it around my forefinger, stroking her shoulder idly with my thumb.

“That’s nice.” She bent her head, her cheek grazing the back of my hand. “But returning to my question—your parents, they used to like these events, the dancing, in particular.”

Before she finished the last word, her eyes squeezed shut, her whole face scrunching. She pried them open eventually; remorse and heartache overran the hazel pools that stared at me.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit, I’m so sorry. I’m such an asshole to mention Michael’s dancing when he...” She paused, not breathing it seemed like.

When he could barely raise a toast at our wedding, he was so ill, she likely wanted to add.

“You’re not as asshole.” I tugged on her dress, conveying seriousness despite my weak voice drowned out by the music.

“Closer,” a Kings of Leon song, drifted from the speakers of the crowded bar. I’d have recognized it anywhere, even if the wine I drank would’ve knocked me unconscious. Weeks and months after I’d cut ties from Justine, that song played as one of the soundtracks of my life, painting my pain in words, a depiction of the abandonment I experienced.

I drew my attention from the lyrics, witnessing Justine's hurt permeating despite my attempt to calm her. "Listen, I'd rather you preserve the memory of him twirling Mom in ballrooms, than thinking of him plugged into tubes or just not feeling well. I appreciate it even." I huffed, dropping lower in my seat, my hand falling from her shoulder to my lap.

My water glass came into view, between me and Justine. Condensation formed on the crystal glass, sliding farther and farther to the scratched and disturbed table. Had I drunk from it, I would've ruined the water's life cycle. I couldn't.

What a weird fucking thought to have.

"Roman." The sweet calling of my name brought Tina's beautiful face into focus again. "What do you mean preserve the memory? Is he...is he okay?"

"Meh." My hand did this *it doesn't matter* swing. "He's not doing great. That's where I was today, between work and picking you up. I wanted you there and then, poof, I thought you cheated on me, and...I didn't."

"I'm sorry." Her warm palm covered mine, a duvet of compassion to console me.

Justine had nothing, absolutely nothing to be sorry for. I flipped my hand, entrapping hers, locking her to me. "It is what it is. Fever and arthritis and a history of heart attacks don't bind well. But he's strong-willed, my old man."

She pinched her lips, nodding slowly.

"He has more years in him." In callous movements, the ones I was capable of, I swiped the tears from her cheeks. I refrained from pulling her into my arms, vaguely aware that doing so would result in us collapsing to the slate floor, and what remained of my sobriety cautioned me it might end with her getting hurt.

"He's not dying, and you know what?" I plucked her wineglass, holding the stem. The liquid slushed around, tipped out, a crimson drop staining the table.

Justine outstretched her hand to take the glass from me, but I was faster, taking a long sip. “Roman, hand over me the glass. You’ve had enough for today.”

“I didn’t want to kill the water.”

“What the...? Oh, you’re done, mister.” Justine’s eyes narrowed, sparkling with remnants of tears.

For the hundredth time today, I marveled at her, black smudges and all. My fixation with her consumed me so profoundly that I hadn’t seen her coming. She managed to grip my wrist, prying the wine from my fingers.

“I shouldn’t have let you drink this much,” she muttered mostly to herself. But we were inches apart, and I heard the voice I loved still tainted by repentance.

It didn’t suit her. I had to fight to wipe out her sadness.

“You didn’t *let me* anything, I’m a gro-ooown man.” Why were my words echoing like a sonar? I cleared my throat, tugging the hand she held toward my chest.

We were nose to nose when I whispered, “You still don’t know *what*.”

“Come on, let’s go home, Ro.”

My whole soul elevated from hearing her call the apartment home. “You do know then! This is the *what*. Us. We fit well together, much better than Bharadvajasana after Kapotasana.”

Her brow furrowed, deepening the wrinkles in her forehead. “Okay, now I’m officially confused.”

I was too, from being able to speak Sanskrit when I’d been struggling with simple English. Giving my jumbled speech another go, I said, “It’s yoga. Forget it. Better than...better than your dad and a slap to his face.”

Her soft chuckle shook her body, infusing a beacon of light back to her eyes. “Okay, okay. I’m starting to get it. I’m going to pick up the tab and we’ll talk at home.”

“Why did you do it?” The years-long anguish plus the liquid courage questioned Justine as my control and consciousness had gone MIA. “I stayed right next door to you, I thought sleeping as close as we always did would somehow make me forget, like it’d make sense.”

I breathed, trying to ignore the spinning room. “I hoped it’d push me into ignoring what I heard and come in the middle of the night and talk and laugh together like we always did, but it didn’t. I couldn’t, even when you called for me, I couldn’t, and to this day I don’t know why.”

She sat down again, tilting her head, talking slowly like you would a child. Or maybe she was just overwhelmed as I was. “What is it that you think I did, Roman?”

I didn’t want to articulate it. I would’ve sounded weak and pathetic, and I decided to forgive her so there was no use of it at all. But I was in a miserable state, which allowed the glum memories to come out whether I allowed them or not.

“You didn’t wait for me.” A tear, a fucking wet drop slashed down my cheekbone, travelling carelessly on my cheek and paving her way between the maze of my stubble and below my jaw.

Justine’s chin wobbled. Maintaining her composure, she barely breathed out, “When?”

“Years. Many, many years ago. You didn’t wait for me to ask you out.”

“Ro, I—”

“You went with Emmet.” I cupped my love’s neck, running my palm to circle her cheek. “On one hand it’s good, right, that I didn’t embarrass myself, since you obviously liked him —”

“Emmet Conaway?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter anymore, I just—”

“It does matter.” Her harsh whisper hadn’t hindered my speech.

The past was in the past. “I understand why he wanted to date you.” A lump formed in my throat at the memory. While the world around me spun, that one fucked-up day I saw with absolute clarity.

“Who wouldn’t, right?” A sad laugh escaped from me, at how blind I’d been not to have realized it any sooner. “You were, still are, always will be gorgeous and smart and funny and your heart, Jesus, your fucking huge, kind, and beautiful heart.”

“Roman, he didn’t—”

“But what I couldn’t get over was why—why did you agree?” My eyes roamed over Justine’s face, watching tears stream from her eyes, coating her lips in waterfalls of salt and water.

“Were you tired of waiting for me, Tina?” I fondled her other cheek, kissing her damp lips.

“Never.”

Another kiss, my fingertips sunk into her hair. “I understand that I was wrong to blame you for everything. I’m sorry.”

Shudders and sniffles and oceans of tears flowed from her.

“Please don’t cry”—I kissed her lips—“you’re”—her nose—“breaking”—right cheek—“my”—left—“heart.”

She couldn’t stop, and neither could I, but I needed this burden off my chest for us to move forward. My head pounded, my stomach churned, and I could tell that neither the contents of our drinking binge nor my surge of honesty would last me very long.

“I was so sure you loved me. And I was wrecked that you didn’t.” I sighed. “My ego, I’m so sorry for my fucking big ego that made me act like that.”

“Roman, I loved you, and—”

I sprang up, darted to where the bartender, who'd noticed the hue of my face matching my shirt, signaled, and threw up.

The rest of the night passed in a blur.

There were flashbacks of Justine putting my arm over her shoulder, of her escorting me to the street, of us climbing in a yellow taxi, and of her tucking me into bed. Darkness absorbed the rest of the ride, then I had a wet towel pressed to my forehead, substituted by Justine's lips every few seconds, by the locks of her hair brushing either side of my neck.

And as I swayed between being awake and passing out, my final recollection was of me mumbling, "I love you, Tina," and hearing in return, "I love you, Ro."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Justine

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

ROMAN,

Not Ro, not Ro-bster, and sure as shit not Roomie like Kennedy calls you.

There'll be no hint of friendliness in this letter. No best friend vibes, no sibling-like familiarity.

I'm done with this shit.

After today, after you held me close and promised me adamantly that Stuart won't ship me away like he'd discard of trash, after my heart beat so fast for you it almost erupted... After all of that, I'm fucking done with being your friend.

There, I said it.

I tried holding on to you, to the best part of my life, the best I could, I swear I did. But I can't keep faking our friendship.

My heart doesn't have the capacity to accommodate two types of love.

Not anymore.

Not when every cell of my body loves you as passionately as my soul does.

Because I yearn for you, Roman, so much that it hurts, so much that the feelings claw out of me. It drives me crazy with desperation, the need to grab your lovely face, pull on your longish hair until your forehead presses to mine, and scream, "I love you, Roman Irving Gallagher! Be my fucking boyfriend!"

I imagine it sometimes, me doing it, tear-free and raging, erupting as I'd spill out emotions rampantly. A human Coke bottle after a Mentos candy had been popped inside. A volcano.

I'd let it out, and then you'll know.

Even as I daydream about it, I sigh in relief. Relief of you opening up your eyes to what I feel, to what loving you means to me. How it's everything, my entire world. There wasn't, and never will be any other, no one I'd want to be my first date, no one to be my first boyfriend, and certainly not a damn soul to be my first and only kiss from now to eternity.

Loving you means that you're the one singular man to ever exist for me.

That's how I'd sum up my love.

And I see there isn't anyone who catches your eye either. From the throng of beautiful girls who loiter around your locker, or your car, or call at all odd hours of the night during the summers that belong to us, you never dated, never flirted, don't even bother with answering the phone.

Then why the fuck not, right?

We can grow old and gray side by side; I'll be your Bonnie, you'll be my Clyde.

Ha, it even rhymes.

Must be true then.

Anyway.

It'll be us. Forever us.

I want you. I'll do everything to have you. I even vowed to myself to get my shit together, study harder, get better grades, join the debate team for extracurricular reasons (maybe it'll teach me how to kick Stuart's ass while I'm at it—totally a win-win).

I'll do all of it so I can enroll in Harvard and study at the same campus as you.

Sunrises and sunsets, school games and library sessions together, me learning to cook your favorite meals and you giving me foot rubs while we watch Netflix late at night.

Doing all the things we planned, not as friends—as boyfriend and girlfriend.

I can't fucking wait.

Courage will come, today, tomorrow, definitely sometime this week, and I'll tell you.

I hope you say it back.

I hope it'll be as epic as I dream it to be.

I hope... I just hope.

I love you. Now and always, out and free, leaving the shadows behind.

Your future first,

Tina



“Roman?”

Careful as to not wake him in case he was asleep, I rapped on his bedroom door the following morning. Just in case he woke up, I wanted to check on him. Yesterday, despite my instincts pleading for me to spend the night in his bed to look after him, I'd stepped outside to give him some privacy.

Roman had spilled his guts out, literally and figuratively, and taking things slow seemed like the safer option, for his sake mainly. He looked tough, my husband, a powerful man to handle whatever life threw in his path. On the inside, though? Yesterday proved to me that under that hard shell, the boy I remembered had never left.

A boy that needed taking care of. So, while I didn't exactly hover, I slept in the adjacent room, tiptoeing into his in the dark twice. A compromise for my worried heart, instead of a

total invasion of his privacy. In each of those visits, Roman was alive and well, and after the second one, at around five AM, my eyelids closed on me and I dozed off.

But now, five hours later, the morning had come, and his room was still eerily quiet.

My two knocks were accompanied by a louder calling, “Roman? You up?”

Usually, by ten in the morning, Roman was already showered, post breakfast and either reading financial magazines or working on his laptop. Even on weekends. Now, he could’ve been too weak to talk, lying there by himself while needing a huge glass of water and aspirin. Or a hug.

Or to say he loved me again.

For the last option, for the slightest chance of hearing him say it again sober, I definitely wanted to be there for him. I pressed the door handle lightly, peeking inside. The room was as dark as I’d left it, curtains drawn, lights out. The air smelled like Roman, fresh and clean even after a night out in the humid weather and a hot date with a public restroom’s toilet.

Yet I didn’t sense him. I didn’t have to switch on the lights to know he was no longer there. What I did discover was a made bed, and a floor clear of the clothes I tossed haphazardly in a pile last night when I helped him undress.

A smile rose on my lips, content that he’d pulled through by himself, physically and mentally. Being clean and tidy was a part of his routine, and following his routine meant things in Roman-ville were at least okay-ish.

With this one less worry on my mind, I headed to my room to wash myself and freshen up before walking out toward his library where he’d spent his Saturday mornings. I snuck around, the knots in my hair and mascara smudged on my face, not to mention the delectable morning breath, weren’t my idea of representable when he’d already showered.

At the bottom of the door to my closed bedroom a note waited for me, slid halfway under the gap. *Roman*. I plucked it

from the floor, excitement swimming inside me. That was, until I started to read.

Morning,

Sorry about last night. Thank you for helping me.

Went out for business and didn't want to wake you.

Will be back later.

Call me for anything.

Roman

The emotionless note puzzled me. I scratched my head, trying to decode the message. The cold, impersonal tone from yesterday's note had diminished, by a teeny tiny bit. But still, nothing, absolutely nothing in it spelled *I love you*. I searched between and over and down the uber short lines for something resembling the sentiment, a hint of *I care*, coming up blank.

Sigh.

Refusing to let it get to me, I clung on to what he'd said last night like a child would their favorite doll, securing it to my chest to chase away any crappy feeling that might creep up on me from his note. I relived his care, the reason he ran from me, the sincere tears he'd shed for us while I showered and got dressed. I cherished his love as I picked up my eReader, prepared to pass the time reading a soon-to-be-released book from Elsie.

And...oh, fuck my life. I forgot Elsie.

Between sticking it to Stuart, to the high Roman's confession gave, the afternoon date I'd planned with my friend was nearly forgotten. Nearly. Roman hadn't mentioned when he'd finish his work, but however long it took, I wanted to be here when he stepped foot in our home. To squeeze him in a huge hug, to have that serious, long overdue talk we were owed.

After throwing on a pink T-shirt and cutoff jeans, I went to retrieve my cell phone. It waited for me on my bed where I'd tossed it, next to *the* note. I rolled my eyes, dialing Elsie's number. The line rang a few times when she picked up.

"How's the Dad-hangover going?"

"That too, but also, I'm having a real, alcohol-induced one. Nothing I can't handle, though." The bastard had lurked behind the scenes, got the reassurance Roman hadn't suffered any damage, and at the mention of its name decided his presence was welcomed.

It was not.

I treaded toward the kitchen, blinking at the assault of light on my eyes. The sun beamed from the skylight above and from the floor-to-ceiling French doors to my left. "Aspirin, water, in less than an hour I'll be as good as new."

"Yup, that should do it." She chuckled. "Anyway, once you're better, you're coming, right? The book I sent you releases on Tuesday and I'd thought we'd take advantage of you not, ahem, *shopping*"—she enunciated the word, then launched into the excited plans she had for us—"to have our Skittles ritual for good luck. Kyle's here, so the three of us channeling our positive vibes toward the release would do wonders. And of course, we'll grab lunch and dinner and hang out however you like. By the end of the day, you'll be all smiles and your narcissistic father or weird-ass husband will be all but forgotten."

Heaviness weighed my heart down for disappointing her, the uncomfortable feeling sinking lower to the pit of my stomach the more she spoke, knowing I wouldn't be able to make it. Elsie's and my Skittles ritual was practically sacred to us. What began as a pre-exams tradition during our undergrad days, turned into what Elsie believed helped the authors she did the marketing campaigns for, gain success. They were important to her and she rooted for them however she could.

Which was all the more reason why I hated disappointing her. “Sorry, Elster. I can’t today.”

No sound came from either her or me besides the woosh of the fridge opening as I pulled out a water bottle.

“Is there something we should talk about?” she asked, suspicion infiltrating her previously cheery voice.

“Yes, well—”

“I knew it.” First Roman, now her. Why did no one have an interest in hearing me complete a full sentence? “Is this another one of his prohibitions? What’s next? Lock you in your room? Tell you what to eat? Are you seriously okay with it? Because if it’s your lifestyle choice, tell me right this minute and I’ll shut up. I’ll support you. If not, if he’s locking you inside the house without your consent, we’re coming over and getting you the fuck out.”

Excitement made her speak fast, but the concern for me, that lit a fire up my friend’s ass. She spoke at a terrifying speed, blocking any prospect of me butting in. I’d waited a beat when the string of panic withered into silence, downing the aspirin I’d retrieved from the cupboard in the meantime.

“It’s not that. He’s fine”—*I think*—“and we had a nice night, outside the fundraiser. I can go wherever I want.”

She blew out a long exhale, like she’d been holding her breath. “Okay. That makes me feel a little better. So why can’t you come? Wait a second. What, Kyle?”

I couldn’t hear them very well, though whatever they murmured sounded sweet. Less than a minute passed when I heard Elsie loud and clear again, “Do you mind if I put you on speaker? Kyle’s begging to be allowed in.”

“You don’t even have to ask.”

“Hey, Justine, what’s going on?” His self-assured voice boomed into my ear.

“I’m good,” I answered, and proceeded to spill every single detail about yesterday—except the ins and outs of what

happened in the dressing room—while I strolled from the kitchen back into my room.

Talking and sharing Roman's and my heartache helped a ton. By carrying the burden of estrangement for years, I'd considered myself a strong, resilient woman. I held my ground, got over torture after torture from the man I loved, and even though I had friends, I never let anyone in as close as I let Roman, until I met Elsie.

From the day we became roommates we were joined at the hip. I trusted her, and through our relationship I realized that being strong didn't mean being alone. Structures remained steady for centuries by leaning on multiple pillars and bricks, trees couldn't grow without water, soil, and sun, and even kings had an army of advisors. Admitting you were out of your depths, that you needed your people? Elsie proved me there wasn't anything more powerful than that.

When I finished my story, the part where I tucked Roman in, I was already in bed myself, sliding deeper under the covers, sighing with a sense of relief.

"Let me get this straight," Elsie said. "Roman, the man of steel who twisted your arm into marrying you, *he* cried?"

"One tear, maybe two, tops." I yawned, the effects of the previous night and the lack of sleep clawing at my attempts to stay awake. "These were two tears too many for me. In the years I've known the man, he only ever cried when his dad suffered a heart attack that almost cost him his life. And then this morning, these emotions just disappeared? What's this noncommittal note about? And why?"

"I'll tell you why." A smile permeated Elsie's response. "He loves you, still, and way too much."

"And men who love too much fuck up," Kyle added.

"They do," she said in fake seriousness, which quickly morphed into laughter. "Ouch! Stop tickling me; I'm trying to make a point here. What I was saying is that Roman's confused. He fed himself this lie for so long, carrying this pain

by himself while being convinced you were evil and that he'd never love you again. Now he sees you're not it, that you're this amazing, wonderful, trustworthy person and it eats at him. He just needs some time to get his shit together, and trust me, men who love? Once they figure out what's what, they're the best sort of men."

"Thank you, Ms. Jenkins." Kyle spoke in such an adoring voice, using the term of endearment that would change in the near future. What a wonderful surprise that would be.

"Yeah," I sighed, agreeing with Elsie's previous statement. "He's a proud man. Always have been. Most likely he kept to himself and would've stayed that way if he hadn't drunk too much, because it would've made him come off as weak."

"So, yeah, makes sense he's shaken. Maybe he's locked up in his office, regretting his vulnerability or he's clueless as to how to take it from here." Elsie paused, then added, "Do you love him?"

"Very much."

"Want my suggestion?"

"When have I not?"

Kyle outdid my compliment, "Who doesn't?"

Her sweet laugh rang through the phone, music to my ears. "Oh my God, Kyle, I love you, but can you please lower the cheese?"

I aww-ed internally, knowing he damn well couldn't. He—like he said—loved her too much.

"Anyhoo, don't judge Roman too harshly, not this minute. I'm actually kind of happy you're waiting for him. Order in lunch or supper and have a grown-up discussion by that marble-clad fireplace I saw on the second floor."

"Do you want me to buy an apartment with one of those for us?" Kyle's suggestion held not an ounce of cynicism.

Elsie gasped. “No, I only said it’s pretty and romantic and will suit this type of conversation fine. Again, I love you, but lately you’ve been so extra. Our life is perfect; I don’t need anything else.”

Or so she thought. My lips quirked up, my closing eyes a sign for me to take my leave. “All right, sweetness, will do. I’m headed for a nap. Talk later.”

“Just remember it’s not a magic solution,” Elsie rushed to add when hearing another one of my yawns. “It could drag on for weeks. Hang in there.”

“I hung in there for thirteen years. A few more weeks ain’t got nothing on me.”

“That’s my girl. Sweet dreams,” she said to me in her motherly tone, a split second before sleep claimed me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Roman

“THANK YOU, Mr. Gallagher, for the candid and enlightening interview to Truth to the People,” Lennon summarized. He continued to recite the generic line about subscribing and leaving comments.

Whatever he said, in that self-assured tone that had attracted viewers to his site since its very premiere, was lost on me. The red dot in the camera died off, and air filtered into my clogged lungs, stretching them to accommodate the breaths I’d withheld from them during the two-hour interview we recorded in Lennon’s apartment.

We finally did it.

Countless hours, months, and years of meticulous planning, evidence collection, lawyer consultations. Of utilizing my meditation and yoga practice all wrong, as a tool to control any unheeded reaction toward Stuart instead of a path to peace and detachment of the ego. I used it poorly, and I didn’t care.

Driven by revenge, fueled by hate, we put the damning evidence on tape.

“And it’s a wrap.” Layla, his production manager, clapped the slate board between us.

I shot up out of the sofa as soon as the snapping roused me from my dazed state, standing still long enough to allow Layla to disconnect the small microphone clasped to my shirt.

Two short coffee breaks were what we were able to squeeze into today’s grueling schedule, and after hours of this, I felt like my body had turned into a state of decay. At the

office I'd have meetings, lunches, walking the floor apart from sitting down and analyzing data on screens. Today I had nowhere to run; my attention, input, and being present for the preparations were required.

“You okay, man?” Lennon patted his dog, Argo, who strayed away when the hours dragged on end, then unfolded his limbs from the armchair he'd occupied during our recorded conversation.

Which was what we'd designed it to look like, a talk amongst friends. We strategically avoided any of us wearing a suit and hair gel, opting for plain blue jeans and earth-toned T-shirts, our hair styled casually as though we'd bumped into each other on the street. A studio's bright LED lights were replaced by the warm, low glow of floor lamps, arranged by Layla to tone down the sharp edges of our shrewd faces.

To give us an approachable appearance, to shave off my Wall Street, unrelatable veneer, and present me as the kid I once was.

We exited from his living room to the terrace, leaving behind the crew of three people Lennon trusted with his life and with their signatures on strict NDAs to box up their equipment.

“Yeah,” I told him as I leaned across the brick railing. “Can't believe this lifelong mission is nearing its end. That it'll be out soon.”

Lennon lunged by my side, observing the city. The breeze felt refreshing, caressing my cheeks. I closed my eyes briefly to experience the sensation to its fullest. The freedom of it.

“Excuse me.” I opened my eyes. My friend studied me, his eyebrows drawn together, his lips parted in mild surprise. “I was under the impression that we taped this as a backup plan?”

I scratched my scruff, contemplating how to lay it out to him. “My priorities changed.”

“I bet they did. You don't hate Justine anymore,” he scoffed, eyes narrowing. “You know what? Up until the

second you stepped foot inside this house this morning, I thought you'd call and cancel the whole thing. To protect her from going through it."

On the top floor of the building where Lennon lived, the thirty-third floor, you had the view of Central Park and further up north. A live metropolis sprawled in front of him, and in one of those buildings, somewhere to our left, was the penthouse my wife had spent the day. Or didn't.

She hadn't left my mind the whole day, not for a second, but calling her meant losing focus and I couldn't afford it. As the day ended, though, my longing for her grew, forcing me to ignore my friend and pluck my phone from my back pocket. Scrolling through my phone, I saw there was a mass of financial news notifications, and one missed call from Mom, followed by a text saying *Dad's okay, just wanted to say we love you. Call when you're available.*

Justine hadn't reached out. Disappointment and relief washed over me simultaneously, from both missing her while grateful to not have screened her calls. Besides, I'd convinced myself nothing good would've come out of exchanging messages after yesterday. We needed a face-to-face talk, and that was also why, despite my wishes to write her a flowery note—as much as I knew how, with *I love you's* and *you're unequivocally the one for me*—I decided a short and ambivalent letter worked best until I returned home.

"I've always loved her, Lennon. None of this was ever revenge on her." I tucked the phone inside my pocket, staring straight at my friend. "Always. Whatever I do, or did, even at my angriest, was always for her and for my family alike, because she was, she is, and she always will be my family."

Lennon raised his hands defensively. "Won't hurt to ask her if that's what she wants, that's all I'm saying."

"She'll be better for it, trust me. I've planned this with her in the forefront of my mind, and in the long run she'll see it too. Even if it means she'll hate me. Even if it means..." I grinded my teeth, the sting of that possible conclusion

spreading across my skin. It fucking burned, and it burned worse when I finished my sentence. "...that she'll file for divorce. Given that'd be what she wanted. I'll give her everything."

"Just...think about it, okay?" He tilted his head at me like you would a lost puppy. "There's time and a large arsenal to draw from before we go live."

"Whatever."

"Aren't you cute, giving me the teenager treatment." His sarcasm veered me off the depressing path I'd taken. "Now get the fuck out of here, tell your wife you love her while you're actually sober, and work out your issues. While you're thinking about what you're doing. Please."

Talk to her.

By the time I crossed Lennon's house toward the exit, I wanted to do nothing else. I realized, as I marched forward, entering the elevators, how my whole body pulsed with need to hear the sweet cadence of Justine's voice, to listen to her about anything while holding her in my arms.

I ached for it, for her, but I was also scared. The effects of the interview hadn't diminished yet, running in my veins and undoubtedly reflecting in my eyes. I couldn't face Justine, not like that, when the secrecy I required a while longer couldn't be hidden. I needed to walk it out until the day flushed itself out of my system, slip into the house late, and play a conversation tomorrow by ear.

My sneakers hit the pavement, my hands stuffed deep in my pockets. I paced the streets for twenty minutes, almost an hour, the fuck I knew. The seconds flew by or trudged past me slowly—I couldn't tell which way they went to save my life, the energy that buzzed from my head to my toes making it impossible to concentrate on anything.

Desperate to slow the onslaught of random thoughts that didn't sum up to anything, I chose repetitiveness as a way to clear them out of my head, rounding the same two blocks over

and over, the baseball cap from yesterday cast low down on my face.

Green awning, another one, then a red one, followed by a striped one. A Starbucks branch. A designer handbags store. A crossing. More shops. A corner to turn, then more black awnings until the next turn.

The moving meditation would've worked, should've done the trick, except today, it didn't.

No sense of peace magically descended on me from repeating my route, and on the millionth round or so, my head clamored louder than before, a lot of it thanks to my best friends. Lennon's reprimand was like a sliver of self-doubt slithering into my resolve, growing and taking shape, causing me—for the second time that month—to question myself.

The doorman strolling outside the red awning building gave me the stink eye after passing him once again, taking a menacing step toward the guy who stalked the building he guarded.

Fuck him. Fuck everybody.

I closed my eyes momentarily, realizing I was directing my frustration with myself at the wrong person. I had to focus.

My job consisted of determining a course of action relying on past events and a risk analysis that'd predicted the future. If I looked solely at our past, Lennon's advice was on point, considering how things turned out between Justine and me when I acted on my own without talking to her.

Looking at the future though... Telling her was a big-ass risk. She'd stop me, my hurricane of a wife, like I knew she would've thirteen years ago. Her power, now more than ever, was undeniable. Visible, breathtaking, even. A force of nature laced with kindness, that would veer her decision-making path toward the smart, sensible resolution for this mess.

And I didn't want peaceful for her. I wanted us to land the final blow, the ultimate knock-out to ensure her security whether she was married or divorced, by my side or not. I

intended to tear down her remaining layer of insecurities, to smash the source that stood in her path for far too long. And I would.

With my mind cleared of the excessive noise, I cut a corner through a dark alleyway, heading in the direction of home. I practically jogged the entire way, arriving there at around midnight to be greeted by Bill before the elevators ascended toward Justine's and my apartment.

I unlocked the door, kicking off my white Chucks at the foyer, and searched for a sign of my wife in the great room, then the kitchen, then the halls.

Nothing.

As much as I got used to living on my own, I resented the silence that evening, was disheartened by the lack of music on the terrace, my wife's closed door, the absence of dinner in the form of pancakes on the nightstand in my room. Not like I felt entitled to have her prepare it for me after not checking in on her the whole day. Shit, I knew I didn't deserve it.

It was just... I guess I just missed her even more than I thought.

Resigned to wait to see her tomorrow, I ambled to the bathroom so I could take a shower. And then I stopped, backtracking toward the flash of pink on my white mattress bed, my sneakers dropping to the rug as I rushed to pick the piece of paper from Justine.

Roman,

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry you've had to endure years of being on your own.

Marred in pain, bathing in hurt.

I'm sorry you haven't come to me sooner.

We used to be so good at this thing, remember? Days and nights of conversations, the materials best friends were made

of.

I'm sorry you felt the need to collude with Stuart.

You hate him, for all the right reasons, and you two are angry at me for all the wrong ones.

I'm sorry you were driven by vengeance to hurt the both of us.

Revenge is like venom, and you, my love, my soul mate, are poisoned with it.

I'm sorry, oh God how incredibly sorry I am that you didn't think I loved you.

Maybe you still don't. But I do.

I've always loved you. I do love you. Until my dying breath I will love only you.

Even if you can't find it in you to show me that you love me back.

It might shred me to pieces, but I don't care.

I'll wait.

You run through my veins. You're my forever person.

And I'll always be yours.

I love you.

Tina

P.S. I'm willing to forgive you for whatever you did today, out of anger or frustration or whatever. I'll forgive you, but it'll be, like you said, the last time, and it'll have to be tomorrow. Today's been a lot. I'll be better when the morning comes.

On three occasions in my thirty years of existence did I experience a pain so sharp, so acute as this—first two were my dad's first and second heart attacks, and when I overheard

what I wasn't so sure anymore was Justine agreeing to go on a date with Emmet Conaway.

Each of these points in my life had gripped the pain in my heart, morphing it into a living, breathing entity. A python snake looping itself around my knees and forcing them to buckle, slithering upward to my gut and cinching my organs into one big pile of nothing, crawling up to my lungs and throat and clogging my airways.

That night, alone in my room, it struck me for the fourth time. I hurt, but only mildly for myself. The true desolation I felt was reserved for my precious wife. Her evident pain was demonstrated by her rushed handwriting, by the words she bled onto the paper. The agony in it, the product of years of unrequited love, of the fear I'd gone to another woman, had been mine as well.

Yet unlike me, throughout her pain, she wasn't afraid to admit she loved me. Whatever man I became, whatever I did to her, or she thought I did to her while I left her alone today, was a man she loved with uncanny compassion.

I didn't deserve her, didn't earn her kindness, not in a way she could see, but I loved her all the same. And that love, that irrefutable devotion for Justine, pushed me out of my room to stride into hers.

I clasped the paper to my chest, resolute to eviscerate the pain and doubts from her. No speech formed while I marched down the hall, no truths available for my whereabouts today, no apology to take it all away, not yet. My love and instincts were my ammunition, and for now, they'd have to suffice.

Three knocks.

Silence.

"Tina?" Her old name slipped easily past my lips. The need to make her better surpassed my self-preservation.

Silence. I applied pressure on the handle, the door cracking by an inch.

“Go away.” Her lackluster voice did me in, and I let myself into her room despite what she’d said. “I’m serious, Roman. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Justine had her back to me, covered by blankets up to her head. Moonbeams filtered from the window, sketching a line of silver light across her hair to the rest of her body like a halo. I held my breath, stilling my pace. I studied her for quivering shoulders or silent sobs, yet there were none.

With a partially relieved sigh, I closed the space from where I stood to loom over her at the edge of her bed, speaking softly to her, “You wanted us to talk.”

“Not now.” She pulled the blanket on top of her head, and fuck me if that wasn’t the cutest thing I ever saw.

Gently, I sat on the white sheets. The tight rope around my heart loosened by an inch at the sight of her never-ending fight. “I’m here to tell you you’re right. We should talk. I don’t want you to go to sleep angry.”

She mumbled a string of letters that was probably *Not fucking now* but sounded more like, “nofugignow.”

“Come again?” I curled my fingers on the top of the blanket, meeting some resistance when I pulled it a little lower. A smile snuck into my tone in my sad attempt at humor, “Would you rather I went to my accomplice, Stuart?”

Her whole body twisted, her eyes glaring at me, blazing with fire. “Not funny.”

“Of course, it isn’t.” I wiped out any hint of amusement from my face, holding her letter between us. “I’d like to have a mature discussion. Or to hug you. Or I could sit here all night and watch you sleep, if that’d make you happy.”

Her eyes narrowed into slits, not choosing any of the options. “Where were you?”

The dilemma I had during my walk resurfaced, and I shut it down quickly, supplying Justine with a simple, “Out.”

“Hmm.”

My response hadn't satisfied her, and she started turning away from me again. I grabbed her shoulder gently, keeping her soulful eyes on me as I stayed at her side.

"Hmm what? Have you told me where you go during the day?"

She looked everywhere except at me. "Shopping."

"You're lying," I stated, matter of fact. I wasn't upset. Didn't mean I wasn't curious.

"If you weren't in bed with another woman"—she blatantly chose to ignore my question again—"why didn't you answer your phone?"

"You called?"

"Hmm." She raised an eyebrow, pursing her lips.

Removing the phone I left on silent from my pocket, I noticed the time, the missed call and text from over an hour ago. "You called."

"No shit, Sherlock."

Once more, my secrets kept me from confiding in her with what disturbed me to my core, what propelled me to walk outside for over two hours, what distracted me so much that I forgot to unmute my phone. I stroked her arm above the blankets, smiling in an attempt to placate her. "You didn't exactly pick up the phone when I called you."

She huffed. "Do I really need to remind you *your* reaction to it? How can I not suspect you when this is the sort of behavior that led you to this conclusion?"

"I overreacted, coming from my own insecurities. I thought I wasn't good for you, and it fucking terrified me. But then you looked at me. Your earnestness, I saw it." I locked my gaze to hers, relaying my truth through my own set of eyes. "I believed you."

"It doesn't change the fact that you chose to think the worst of me before that, and not for the first time. Like you expect

me to fuck up, to be this screwed-up person who hurts you.”

Her chin jutted out, unshed tears glazing her eyes, as she brought up the painful subject again. She was strong and vulnerable, my wife, a rare and beautiful combination.

“And just like you can’t help yourself from seeing life through your pitch-dark glasses, despite the clean, bright house you set up for yourself, I can’t stop myself from caring for you, from forgiving you. You want to love me, you want to be happy, and you can’t. Not yet.”

She outstretched her arm, aiming to touch my face, her lips twisted in pity. I lost any trace of amusement, gripping her wrist, not interested in being treated as a weak person. I loved her, I could love her, and was ready to face anything she had to tell me. “Where am I wrong, then? How have I misjudged you?”

“You and Stuart, with your smart suits and your big corporate jobs, you look at me like I’m a moron. Like I’m shallow. A frivolous, spoiled, unwilling-to-commit woman-child.”

My chest constricted from hearing her say it, from knowing I encouraged those beliefs in her. I allowed my immature indignation to run loose when it came to Justine, speaking lies as an instrument to retaliate against her for something I should’ve forgiven long ago. Or, as she wrote, at least had the guts to talk to her about it.

Her teeth indented her bottom lip to stop it from quavering. “Here’s a fucking truth for you, to clear up any misunderstanding. Wanna know why I was let go?”

In my shame and regret, all I could do was swallow.

“My boss and I disagreed a lot, professionally, which is okay—I respect everyone who has a way of doing things. After a while we got along when the small projects she let me lead without interrupting brought results. I made the marketing department look better than ever with sales going up, so she shut up. After a while she trusted me enough on bigger

projects, then promoted me to be her assistant and work on the department's budgetary reports, and what I found there, what she unveiled to me, she left me no choice but threaten to expose her."

As she talked, I already concluded the ending so many whistleblowers had gone through before her. I read my fair share of fraud, and other money-related crimes to put two and two together. I quirked my lips up in a placating smile that had stayed there. On my lips. My insides, they were burning, and my eyes, I was sure they were the exact reflection of my inner turmoil.

"What happened?" I asked after a long pause.

"That bitch stole from the company." She stared at me, infuriated, as if the lady stole from her, as if she was telling me a story about something she went through yesterday.

"She and a couple of suppliers struck this shitty deal where she'd sign off on their ludicrous invoices, and they'd split the profits between them. I saw it for the fraud it was, the fucking disproportionate yearly raise in their rates compared to the rate of inflation. It didn't make sense, and it'd been going on for over four years."

Justine shook her head in disgust, her rising fury unstoppable at that point. Inching closer so our thighs touched, I slid my hand down her arm, intertwining our fingers, reminding her I was on her side and no one could hurt her now. She wasn't alone anymore.

"The owner of the company, August, she's an artist. She trusted Stella, my old boss. So, when Stella told her to raise the products' prices so the profits wouldn't suffer, August listened, no questions asked."

I tugged on her hand, needing to show her the depth of my loyalty to her, that I believed her. In my attempted embrace, I sought to soothe her, more than affirming how right she was ever would.

She didn't have it, releasing her hand from mine, then placing it on my chest. "Stay there. We're not done."

I stayed. I would've done whatever she asked of me.

"Worst thing? She offered me percentages in return for my corporation. I lost it, got up, slammed my hand on the table, called her a disgrace. Of course, that's the clip she showed August from the CCTV, and of course there wasn't a soul to corroborate my version of events, and that was that, August fired me. Any of this aligning with what you and Stuart had in mind?"

She loved me, found a place in her heart for me despite the years of shit I gave her, showed me compassion most times I didn't deserve. But she was no doormat. And me? I was pissed beyond belief—at her boss, at her dad, at my endless contribution to the false narrative of how the world had deceived her.

"Justine, I—" I reached for her hair.

She slapped me away. "Don't. Shut up. You'll get to apologize when I'm done and I am still. Not. Done." And like that revelation hadn't sufficed to show me what a dick I'd been, Justine landed the final blow to shine a light on my ignorance. "I'm sick of lying, sick of hiding, of you thinking less of me..."

"I don't." I gave a desperate attempt to start my apology after all.

"...What I'm doing when you're at the office, what I'm protecting and hiding behind useless pretend shopping sprees, is my volunteering gig. I fucking love it, and you can't take it from me."

My jaw hung low as my brain pieced the new information together. "You what?"

"I'm volunteering. Here." Justine grabbed her phone from the nightstand, she unlocked it, tapped the screen, and tilted it so it faced me. "Here are my class assignments and ideas." Her

gaze was locked on mine while her finger swiped slowly across the files.

I winced in pain, in a vehement regret. All this time, all those years...

Her gaze softened at my pain. She turned the screen toward her, tapped it again, and handed me to see a gallery of colorful photos and smiling faces. "These are my kids. The ones I teach creative writing. One for every day of the week. You..."

Justine moved the phone to the nightstand as I sat there speechless. When I said nothing, she whispered, repeating herself, "I won't let you take it from me, Ro. I love them. I love this."

"Is that why you bought half the clothes on Fifth Avenue?" My curiosity overpowered me, causing my question to come out as though I evaded her declaration, just to swipe it under her feet later, like I wasn't giving her a *yes* or a *no*.

She sucked her lips in, which was the only response I needed. I understood her actions, same as when we were kids, when I'd been receptive to seeing her, not this closed-off man I'd become.

"I won't stop you." At this promise, she hadn't fought me when I tugged on her hand, bringing her knuckles to my cheek, basking in the closeness to my wonderful wife who never ceased to surprise me with the goodness of her heart. The one I'd forced myself to forget.

"Whatever happens from now on, I'll always back you up."

The warmth of her palm wasn't enough anymore, not by a long shot. Consumed by the need to have her anywhere and everywhere, I straddled Justine, hovering above her, bracketing her beautiful face, a hand on each side.

"Get off me." She slapped my chest, pushing against my unyielding resistance.

I fucked up by not being available even though I'd promised her in my note that I would, by being a part of the mechanism that'd rejected her for years, by wasting so many minutes where I hadn't told her I loved her.

"I won't. You had your chance to speak, and you'll allow me the same courtesy," I said, my tone stern, my eyes locked on hers.

She shook her head, thrashing it from left to right in adamant movements. The serenity with which she gave me a healthy dose of reality vanished in one blow, panic substituting it. "No. No. All I'm asking is a day to get over you having angry sex with someone else. I've been closed off to you, offering you half-truths... I understand how they'd make you do... things. I just need one more day."

A tear traveled from the corner of her eye down her soft cheek, her chest heaving with labored breaths of anger and humiliation she shouldn't have experienced. She shouldn't have agreed to it for no reason whatsoever, and it ate at me. I couldn't have it a freaking second longer.

From the headrest, I moved one palm, placing it flat on her chest where her heart beat wildly. The heel of my palm drew slow, soothing circles on the area until the violent thumps subsided.

I cupped her jaw, making sure her eyes darted nowhere. "I didn't revenge-fuck any other woman. I don't ever want to be with another woman. There's no one for me except you. I. Love. You."

"Don't lie to me," she rasped, looking to the right against my efforts to keep her focused on me.

"I'm not lying." The despair to have her believe me elevated to new heights, but I wasn't about to let it show.

There had to be a way to prove it to her, because the type of accusations she made, I didn't deserve her forgiveness.

"Smell me."

Her gaze bounced back to me in a reflex. “What did you just say?”

“Smell me.” In movies and books, the scent of the other person served as the final evidence of one of the spouse’s infidelity, and in my case, the proof of my unyielding fidelity to her. “I’ll smell of coffee, of my cologne, of the long day and possibly of Lennon and his dog, because that’s who I spent the day with. For business. So, here, smell me.”

Looking at a fifty-fifty chance of her leaving the door cracked open for me, for us, I conveyed my hope with a smile. She eyed me warily, partly convinced. I took a leap of faith, leaned on the bed, bent my elbows by a fraction, and angled my head to give her access to my throat.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Sniff, sniff.

“Okay, nothing.”

I twisted my head. “Hold on, you haven’t sampled my whole neck.”

She giggled, her soft lips tickling my Adam’s apple. I laughed with her. “You’re clear.”

“No, hardly.” At this point we were both shaking, grappled by laughter. I’d have paid anything to bottle this moment, and though I couldn’t, I did my best to prolong it. I turned my head to the other direction. “What if she kissed me here?”

“She did?!” Justine yelped, still laughing as she sniffed from under me. “Roman, you smell of you. We can call it a day.”

“Not quite yet.” Centering my head, I rested my chin on her nose. “What about here?”

“You still can’t eat sushi without spilling soy sauce down your chin, can you?”

“Guilty as charged.” My smirk grew, tearing at my cheeks. I lowered my head until my lips brushed her nose. “And here?”

Before the last syllable was spoken, Justine cradled my cheeks from either side, dragging my mouth to hers. We kissed slowly, lips slanting to fit one with the other, tongues swiping, tasting. Seeking the intimacy, the nearness.

More than a race, more than lust, more than any strong sentiment.

We had love.

I rolled us to the side, drawing the blanket over myself without cutting off our kiss. Air or sex was unnecessary when we were so full in a moment like that, of having all of her, her legs entwined between mine, my fingers digging into her scalp to draw her infinitesimally closer.

Our pulses were one, our breaths were one, our hearts were one as they should’ve always been, had I loved her like she deserved as soon as I realized I’d burned for no one else.

Only ever her.

We kissed, just kissed, until our throats went dry and our mouths numb, and I savored every bit of it as we fell asleep with our foreheads pressing together and our bodies wrapped in a hug.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Justine

THE RAYS of the early Sunday morning sifted through the blinds of my bedroom, their warmth tingling my eyelids. I squeezed my eyes shut and scrunched my nose, refusing to let reality bulldoze all over the wonderful dream I'd had. In the dream, Roman had come for me, he'd listened, he'd taken me in his arms, and he...

I sniffed the sheets, inhaling his clean and now familiar scent of cologne. I pressed my fingers flat on my curved-up lips, feeling them swollen and puffy from kissing for hours. From kissing him.

He *was* here.

Reality rushed in, engulfing me with sweet and happy memories from last night. I opened my eyes to experience every bit of my new existence, and though my husband was away, something had waited for me on the side of the bed where Roman had laid up until a few hours ago. A note.

Given the not one but two he'd written me over the past two days, on top of his constant inner turmoil that had him tossing from scorching hot to ice cold in a blink of an eye, my hesitation in reading it was understandable. Logical, even.

So, in place of facing another potentially impersonal note right away, I divulged in Roman's *I love you*, hanging on to the lingering sweetness.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and...one.

Time's up.

I seized the rich, white paper between my fingers, one prayer running through my head as I raised it slowly to my

eyes—*let it be tender, let my Roman be tender.*

Highness,

Life isn't always fair, but it's fairer when you're around.

*The world can feel like a lonely place, but with you in it
I'm never alone.*

*And while every person I see is in black and of fucking
boring white, you're the stark pink to my life.*

It doesn't rhyme and I don't care.

*Come have breakfast with your husband when you wake up
(promise it's not lobster).*

I love you.

Farm Boy

No way could I have read what I just read. I scrubbed my eyes twice, reluctant to admit that this was his handwriting, his words, his newfound tenderness, because I knew, come scrub number three and the rug would be pulled out from under me. I scrubbed my eyes again and...still there.

I laughed. A buoyant, joyous laughter upon realizing this was my life.

The short yet utterly swoony trip down memory lane that Roman peppered with a delicious, yet funny, breakfast invitation, unlatched the lock on a cage of butterflies I forgot even existed. They unfurled in my stomach, a tornado of bliss and excitement that cast tingles along my skin, and holy shit did it feel good. Better than good. Better than anything I'd felt in a long while. I couldn't be with him fast enough.

Hopping out of bed, the paper clutched to my chest like a second heart, and rushed to the bathroom. Reluctantly, in order to brush my teeth and hair, I put it down, sped through basic hygiene necessary rituals, then strolled to the kitchen.

My nose picked up on the faint scent of chocolate from the hallway, expecting to find that Roman had reheated Edith's pie. Which wouldn't have been a bad thing, considering the woman's skills in the baking department were on a whole other level. But Roman had other plans.

And when I saw what those plans were, when I ventured further into the great room to witness, albeit from afar, what this incredible man prepared for me, I stopped in my tracks, gasping loudly. Unabashedly. Inevitably so. There was no avoiding it, seeing how the scenario unfolding in front of my eyes didn't constitute what you'd call *just breakfast*.

Leaning against the kitchen island as though he'd expected me to show up at that exact moment, and eyeing me as if I were the one too hot to handle, stood a very sexy, very shirtless Roman. His black sweatpants hung low on his hips, the light dusting of hair leading from his accentuated abs to below the waistband doing unholy things to my body. And that smirk, God, it traveled from his full lips to his gaze, taunting and endearing in tandem. *Breakfast who?*

My lips, however, weren't as hypnotized as my brain was by Roman's intimate, looking-into-my-soul-and-eating-me-alive gaze, speaking without my permission, "Have you been watching me?"

Roman quirked an eyebrow, the smirk never leaving his lips. "Watched as in...?"

A thought crossed my mind, of backing down. I dismissed it on the spot, the possibilities of having playful banter with him too enticing to pass up. Pointing my finger around the entire open space, I said, "You look prepared like you knew I was coming, so, watched as in *Big Brother* cameras. Which is kind of creepy, especially since you could've stayed in bed to see the live version. And have breakfast before breakfast."

He lowered his chin, beckoning me to him. "Come here."

What started as a joke, turned serious in a matter of seconds, when he wouldn't give me a definite no. Doubts

filtered in, staining my amused state. CCTV was a synonym of mistrust, and in Roman's case, another silent accusation of me cheating on him. I could understand why he'd have had them installed in the past, when I just got here, I did. His misconstrued set of beliefs were prone to make him do that.

Now, though? After giving him every reason to trust me, after him claiming he did, having them here and being followed stung. I lingered in place, keeping a few feet between us, and asking before raising any more unsubstantiated assumptions, "Did you? I mean, are you spying on me?"

"Justine." The subtle shake of his head was accompanied by the softening of his composure. "You're an unexpected, intriguing riddle to me, except when it comes to your sleeping hours. And I won't lie to you, the house does have a network of hidden cameras, which... Hold on."

He raised a hand when my expression reflected my disappointment. "They were installed when I moved in, for insurance purposes. I never used them to monitor you."

When I placed a hand on the cushion, dallying in place, he elaborated, "I had no clue whatsoever where you were going the past few weeks, did I?"

"No." My slightly deflated heart blossomed again once Roman elaborated his plain *Come here*. His smirk widened when I ambled toward him, morphing into a genuine smile when I rested my elbows on the kitchen counter and started toying with the stem of one of two goblets he'd had ready for us.

"That's right." He moved closer, standing at the vertical side of the island, imitating my posture, his eyes leveled with mine. "I didn't."

"You did suspect me, though, so, in all seriousness, why didn't you?"

The noncommittal nature of his shrug communicated the exact opposite of the intensity I'd seen in his expression. Roman's scorching gaze moved from my eyes to my lips,

traveling to my fingers as they swiveled the globe with our breakfast from left to right before landing back on my eyes.

“I needed to trust you,” he stated, not a muscle flinching on his beautiful face. “To feel it for myself. For the slightest chance we’d ever reconcile, get over our differences, and you’d want me by your side, I needed to believe in you with my own heart. Trusting...it’s an issue for me, in case you haven’t noticed, and I preferred tackling it head-on, without any outside help.”

Even as he admitted to an insecurity of his, which had probably cost him more than he let on, Roman seemed as self-possessed as ever. His vehement, somber tone mesmerized me, drew me to him, my body moving on its own accord. I bent at my waist on the counter, my chest grazing the marble, my hair cascading on either side of my face.

Roman continued to mirror my gestures, leaning his long torso forward, his large palm covering my smaller hand. “I coerced you into this marriage, but I would much rather you stayed of your own free will. Because of me.”

I pursed my lips, wanting to say, *I do* and mumbling instead, “A knock-off of our favorite dessert from Serendipity 3 is cute, Roman, but it won’t make me stay.”

The playfulness I attempted to infuse into my voice hadn’t sounded convincing in the slightest, most likely due to my husband’s proximity, the waves of heat flowing from him and crashing against me one after the other. To regain some of my composure, I cast my attention to the breakfast-dessert, my spoon shoving around cake, chocolate ice cream, fudge, and a whipped cream swirl.

“Won’t it?” he asked, his words a rope pulling me up to look at him.

His pitch-black irises nearly knocked the air out of me, dark caverns that somehow turned darker the longer he looked at me. I had to remind myself to breathe and how to stay upright as my knees buckled from under me. Goosebumps

prickled my skin when he bit his bottom lip; a pang of electricity coursed through me from where his thumb stroked my finger.

“Open up.” Roman’s rugged command awakened me from my dream-like state, in his hand a spoonful he had stealthily prepared for me.

My lips parted at his request. I sealed them over the silver spoon he placed on my tongue, a cold and sugary bite submerging in my mouth. It melted upon contacting my palate—cake and ice cream and fudge a mixture of pure delight for my taste buds. I closed my eyes because it tasted so fucking good, I couldn’t handle it, chewing the nostalgic dessert, then letting it slide down my throat.

I sensed Roman’s attention on me the entire time, so fierce it might as well have been his palms. “Change your mind about the reason you’re staying?”

“No. You’ll have to try harder.” I peeked at him through one eye, stealing a glimpse at him. Then my other eye opened almost immediately, drinking in the man in front of me.

While doing my best not to die. Because then and there, under the ardent observation of my husband, the saying *looks could kill* just got a whole new meaning. His ferociousness exceeded any intensity he might’ve directed at me earlier, setting fire to my skin, making me forget I just had anything cold in my mouth. My thighs squeezed and my center boiled with desire. I acted on it, inching my lips closer to his, desperate to relieve a fragment of the tormenting pressure between my legs.

And the bastard pulled away. He pushed from the counter altogether, taking a step back.

“I have every intention to. I was just getting warmed up with the food.” He rounded the counter, his gait measured, taking the two steps needed to stand in front of his prey, hovering over me and swiping my bottom lip with his thumb.

“Which, for your information, was indeed from Serendipity 3, not a knock-off. You’re forgiven.”

He had my back to the island, barricaded by his strong and athletic frame. The daylight simmering brightly from the arched window behind me highlighted the artful way his veins crossed his biceps, how they pumped as blood rushed through them.

Slowly, I angled my chin lower to inspect him from under my lashes, barely breathing when I asked, “It was?”

“Yes, I bought a container of their stuff. For you.” Roman swayed forward, his electrifying energy assuming control of my body without even touching me. He reached behind me, his neck an inch from my lips and returned holding another spoon of everything chocolate.

“I remember how you loved it, how you giggled like you couldn’t help yourself.” He brought the spoon to my mouth. I opened wider than necessary, pinching my lips in a sucking motion. He moved toward me, his erection stroking me through my jeans. At the friction, both of us let out moans we could no longer contain.

He retracted the spoon slowly, licking the residue from its base up. The sight of his tongue, the way he used it to swipe off the ice cream, tore at my sanity, at my ability to do anything but stare and try not to melt to the floor.

The loud clinking of the spoon on the counter alerted me he’d set it down, the gentle caress of his knuckles on my cheek confirming it. “I loved it when you laughed. I’d have done anything to stay in that moment.”

It was all too much, and yet not enough of the newly ignited need in me. My wish from when I woke up, for him to be gentle, disappeared, poof, vanished into thin air, giving the spotlight to an immense, searing desire of having Roman take me apart right there in the kitchen, loving me and fucking me senseless until I felt him on and in every inch of my body.

I would've said or expressed it, too, except I couldn't. Roman's presence dominated me, rendering me silent, enamored, consumed by him and the sweet breaths we were exchanging.

He bent to meet me at eye level, seductive and alluring, talking to me in reverent whispers. "Know what else I remember?"

A lump formed in my throat. I swallowed around it, raising my eyebrows in a question I was unable to form on my tongue. My arms were useless limbs at my sides, the knot in my stomach winding tighter in anticipation to hear what else Roman would say.

"I remember"—he nuzzled my nose, his fingers tracing a line from behind my ear, along my jawline and beneath my chin—"how those luscious lips of yours always had traces of chocolate on them. And how I've always, always fantasized about kissing it off."

I sighed, or moaned, or levitated from the ground at his words. Whatever happened didn't matter, when the end result, having Roman's mouth dive straight into mine, was the most delicious of all the desserts I'd ever tasted.

He held on to my chin, probing my lips further apart and darting the tongue that gave me spoon-envy out to caress mine. He lapped it over mine, savored my lips with it, then returned to my tongue leisurely, sampling me while my craving to devour him ate me alive.

As he deepened his kiss, a thousand bursts of light exploded inside me. My awakened and wanting hands clawing at the hard planes of his chest, down the sinewy abs, eventually grasping the waistband of his sweats, and drawing him to me to eliminate any distance between us.

Roman groaned, pressing his cock against my jeans again, one slow grind after the other. He was maddeningly composed, his unrushed pace heightening the simplest of sensations like the scruff of his beard grazing my cheek.

I ached for him, from the area behind my eyes to my throbbing clit; I yearned for this man to ravage me now. Losing all patience, I slid my hand beneath his boxers, palming his hard cock, rolling my eyes with each stroke from the base to the head.

“Hold on.” I heard him as he curled his fingers around my wrist.

Still incapable of any coherent words, I stared at him, failing to comprehend why we were talking instead of getting naked.

“I said I wanted to do it right, our marriage.” Roman placed a short peck on my cheek, kissing me softly on the corner of my lips. “To give you a reason to stay.”

“Mm-hmm,” was all I articulated.

“And as we discussed, ice cream, or love-making, isn’t going to cut it.” He lowered himself to his knees, mischief mingling with the yearning in his eyes.

I breathed a laugh despite myself. The wonderful boy I had a crush on, who grew to the man I loved, hadn’t forgotten how to bring out that reaction in me even in the most inappropriate moments. “Of course.”

Until he spoke. “Justine Noelle S—”

“Don’t you dare say it.” He could pretend propose to me however he pleased, but not with my old name. Not even in make-believe. I didn’t want to be just Justine, didn’t want to be my father’s daughter. I wanted to be a Gallagher, my husband’s wife.

“Sut—” he started again, and I slapped my palm over his mouth before he’d completed the sentence. He peeled it off, his tone a pleading one. “Tina, part of doing it right is pretending I didn’t coerce you into this.”

My nickname from his mouth and the earnestness in his expression were hard to refuse. I still did, though. “I am not a Sutton.”

“You’re an obstinate woman.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“Tina—”

“You’re the reason we’re in this mess to begin with, Ro.” A bit of my confidence reemerged while we bantered and I was making my point. My body followed suit, reacting with a raised eyebrow, hands on hips that jutted to the side in a challenge.

A challenge that my kneeling, shirtless husband accepted in an instant, erasing any remnants of humor from him. I hadn’t even finished my strut when he grasped me from either side of my waist, manhandling me back to center, right in front of this ravenous man’s face. I gasped as pleasure coursed through me, powered by the surprise and smoldering glare Roman stunned me with.

“Doesn’t look like a mess to me.” His expert fingers skimmed along my belly, his fingertips sliding into the waistband of my cutoff jeans as he drew them to the center just below my belly button.

“What it looks like”—he averted his gaze to my belly, undoing the top button, and dragging my zipper slowly down to unveil my damp, white cotton panties—“is the hottest, sexiest, tightest hole.”

Shoving my jeans and underwear to the floor, he brushed his thumb along my folds, his tongue emulating the movement. “It’s fucking perfect, and it’s mine.”

I flattened my hand on the island, alternating between panting and short, helpless cries. “So, that’s a no on the proposal?”

Roman nudged my feet to yank my restricting garments, gripping my left ankle and raising it to rest on his shoulder, baring me to him. “Does it look like we’re in any position for a proposal?”

With whatever sass I had left in me, considering how I teetered on the verge of succumbing to the ecstasy Roman spurred to life from my core up to my racing heart, I answered him, “Oh, we’re in a position all right.”

“That mouth,” he growled, before cutting off my chance to reply altogether.

My legs turned to jelly and my insides to a hot lava when Roman flexed his fingers on my thighs and buried his mouth in my pussy. His dark gaze focused on mine, binding me to him in an endless ocean of pleasure as he ate me out.

Roman tended to me in that powerful, poised attitude he carried into every aspect of his life, digging his fingertips into my skin and changing the rhythm of his strokes to keep me teetering on a delicate edge between pain and pleasure. He knew what would bring me closer to oblivion, and whenever I tightened around him, he took it from me, caressing me in tender flicks of his tongue and nothing more.

I didn’t fight him. Didn’t try to thrust into him, either, despite my desperate cries of his name, because I trusted him. His absolute sense of assuredness reflected onto me, and I felt just as strong, just as hot, just as in control as he was.

“I would’ve said yes,” I moaned in a moment of respite when he withdrew his mouth from me and had his fingers hovering above my swollen nub.

Pausing, and making it nearly impossible to concentrate with his hot breaths on me that had my skin breaking out in tremors, he asked, “Yes to what?”

“If you’d have proposed to me right now, using my name, I wouldn’t care, I—Oh. My. Fucking. God.” My head fell forward from the shock of near euphoria from having Roman’s fingers massaging me down there. “I would’ve said yes.”

The immense beauty of his genuine smile melted me even more for him than I imagined possible. “I’ll ask you again, I swear I will. An adequate proposal, when you’re not seconds from coming all over my face.”

At the last word, Roman planted his lips on my clit at the exact spot where his fingers pressed me from the inside. He swirled his tongue from one side, rubbing me with his fingers from the other, exposing every nerve cell and lighting it up as the two opposing sensations pushed me higher and higher.

I soared to the heavens, and unlike before, he didn't back down, driving me further to that sweet point where the universe imploded in a white, fiery flash that blinded me to anything except Roman. I shuddered at the rippling effect my orgasm claimed on my body, losing the grip on the island and holding on to the stable and secure shoulders of my husband who'd never let me go again, who fastened his grips on my hips to show me he was there, to cherish me to the very last quiver.

I had to *feel* him, my hands raking his hair, his cheeks, his eyebrows. I was also desperate to hear him, and when he said nothing, I called him, "Ro."

"I love you, too." He winked from below me, giving my inner thigh another quick kiss.

My heart bloomed, seeing the playfulness trickling into Roman, if only in little bits. I smiled uncontrollably from ear to ear when he got up and urged me to lift my arms. He smiled back, pulling my T-shirt over my head, then cupped my cheeks and spread kisses over my forehead when I discarded his pants and boxers.

We stood in the sunny kitchen naked, breathless, and kissing like we were making up for thirteen years' worth of buried desires. Roman's sculpted body was flush against mine, his lips searching, coaxing, demanding to have me time and again. As I gave myself to him fully, the knot of desire began to slowly warp and evolve. Then, in what seemed out of nowhere since my awareness for my environment had seemingly dissolved, Roman pulled away, bent down, slipped an arm beneath my legs, and carried me from the kitchen.

"Hold that thought." I saw him smiling in my peripheral vision while I nibbled on his neck. "There's one thing I want

to do first.”

When we neared the hallway and he hadn't elaborated, I reared my head to eye him questioningly.

“I owe you a proposal, that's a given, and I'll do it at the right moment like you deserved all along.” We passed the sofas, walking out into the hallways and stopping at the foyer. “Carrying you over the threshold, I think there's no better time to do it than now.”

“The threshold of the apartment?” I lowered my eyebrows, freeing one hand from Roman's neck to signal to our naked bodies. “This is another level of living on the edge.”

“We have the entire floor, remember? It's ours.”

I wanted to reply, to say something sassy along the lines of *You might not watch the CCTV cameras but Bill sure as shit does*, but I couldn't. The natural way Roman said the word *ours*, articulating it so casually as though he'd been doing it for forever, threw my world in a spin. It sucked the retort out of me, turning me into a starry-eyed, very much in love woman who ogled her husband with an abundance of adoration.

“But no, not from there.” He nodded at the door, then brushed his lips on the top of my head, my nose, ending with my mouth. “This morning, I'm carrying you through the threshold to our room.”

“Our?” Having him acknowledge this was our home, that I could wrap my mind around, but this?

“Where you'll be moving all your stuff.” The glint in his eyes matched his bossy speech. “After we consummate our marriage.”

“Oh, really?” My tone, the half attempt to sound funny, fell flat.

He answered, treating the question in all seriousness, “We're about to make love, and fuck, and seal our marriage like I wish we would've done almost a decade and a half ago.”

My nipples hardened and my thighs pulled together to ease the growing heat at the mention of his cock filling me. I became greedy for him and wasn't the least bit apologetic about it.

We reached his—sorry—*our* room, coming to a standstill at the doorway. “Do you know the meaning behind the tradition of carrying the new wife into the new home?”

“I read about it somewhere, yeah, how once, in ancient times, when voluntary marriage wasn't a thing...” I cleared my throat, teasing him by wagging my eyebrows. “The men carried their brides to their new home. By hook or by crook.”

“Very clever.” He pinched my thigh, bracing me tighter when I chuckled. “But no, I'm referring to another one, the one that says it's supposed to protect the bride against bad luck, or spirits”—he lowered his voice, ensuring I knew how serious he was—“and I promise you, Tina, I will always do whatever it takes to protect you. Even when you thought I hated you, even when I thought I hated you, I always watched over you.”

An underlying message hid beneath the obvious, I wasn't that spaced out to have it pass by me. The thing was, we shared a moment, a beautiful one, one I'd dreamed of and life forced me to forfeit. Having to ruin it with questions I could postpone to another day didn't sit right with me. So, I stored them in my *another day* box, and for the moment basked in my butterflies and in Roman.

“We're each other's good-luck charms now, Ro, we don't need anything else. Although it is kind of nice. And sweet.”

An emotion passed over his face, before the fire in them returned. He took a step into the bedroom, the right foot first. “I'm glad you like it. I'm going to give you every bit of gentle and sweet today, Justine.”

We made it to the edge of our bed, where he laid me down, covering my body and pinning my hands above my head. He assaulted me with kisses on my wrists, my arms, my face,

lowering his body while I raised my hips to meet him, to be one with him this morning and in every morning after.

Before we could do that, though, Roman had another unfinished part of our ceremony to correct. It was far from the right order of things, but so fucking what? It was so right in every other way, that I just soaked up his words, his pure and kind-hearted intentions, all of him.

“Tina, simply Tina, *my* Tina. I love you so fucking much. I am now taking you to be my lawfully wedded wife, to live together in matrimony, to never stop showing you how much I love you, to not miss a moment of comforting you, to forever honor and keep you, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward. For eternity.”

Tears poured from eyes, flowing like rivers as they descended from my cheeks into my hair and our bed sheets. Through them and the huge grin on my face, I managed to say, “Ro, perfectly you, my Ro. I adore you, I love you, for every single piece of the wonderful human you are. I am taking you to be my lawfully wedded husband, to live together in matrimony”—I sobbed, swallowed, continued—“to prove to you every single day that I’m no one else’s but yours, to smother you endlessly so you’ll never doubt my love, to see through your pride and know when to comfort you, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward. For eternity.”

“For eternity,” he repeated.

He claimed me on that bed, each thrust deeper, every kiss holding more meaning than the previous one. His lips trailed from my lips to my jaw, sucking on my neck and rising again to press against mine.

Roman explored my body like he’d never seen it before, fulfilling my dreams without even being aware he was doing it. And true to his word, he made love to me, fucked me, adored and loved me, and when we came together, the light I’d seen earlier transformed into one singular beam that speared me in half and mended me back together into something better.

I was now, more than I'd ever been, one with Roman.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Justine

ROMAN COVERED my left hand with his right one, his thumb grazing the engagement ring and wedding band in soothing motions. “Excited?”

I glanced at the outside from the window of Roman’s private jet—ours, as he’d repeatedly insisted I’d call it—scoping out the airport I hadn’t visited in a while. The red and yellow lights of the LAX tarmac, the baggage handlers and airport workers hustling outside in the humid August air—I took it all in before reverting toward my husband, a slow smile creeping on my face.

Freshly showered, his hair damp and brushed back, and wearing a casual black T-shirt and jeans, you never would’ve guessed this man just finished a six-hour flight, one he’d hopped on after a twelve-hour workday. And while his question implied he wasn’t sure whether I was excited or not, his expression told me exactly what I needed to know about his current mood.

It didn’t take a genius to decipher, really, given he had the same grin, same glimmer in his eyes, and same gentle tone throughout the entire week. After the renewed vows, each minute we’d passed together had been swathed in bliss.

We shared breakfasts and dinners, stayed up late talking about the years we’d spent apart, exchanged sexy texts in the middle of the day, and one time he even surprised me by taking me in the middle of the night to watch the sunrise in his parents’ Hamptons home instead of working that weekend.

Imagine that.

Us being *us*. A new, modified version, but us nonetheless. Which was what we wanted from the start, and when you get what you'd dreamed of, what you thought you'd lost for good, you grasped it with both hands, you were fucking happy about it.

“You bet your sweet ass I’m excited. My two best friends getting engaged one day after the other? It can only be topped by a Britney Spears concert.” I shifted in my seat, anxious to leave the plane and begin the eight-day LA vacation. Elsie and Kyle already arrived that morning, since they booked their flight in advance, while I refused to go without Roman or give up the last day with my students. A week away from them felt like a loss on its own, but I wouldn’t have missed the proposals or the following celebrations for the world.

Roman tilted his head, taunting me, “You say that like you’re assuming they’ll say yes.”

“Pfft, of course that’s going to happen.” I snorted, flipping my hand to grip his tighter. “What I find surprising in this story is you agreeing to tag along.”

“And I was surprised to be invited.”

“Shut up.” I slapped his arm, and he, in a sweet retribution, grasped my wrist, kissing my knuckles one by one. “You’re good to me; that’s all it takes for my friends to like you.”

And they did, once I told them everything. It meant the world to me, for the six of us to be a family, to have him by my side. For better or worse.

A moment passed where we’d stared at each other and I let him leave his lips pressed to my hand when Emily, our flight attendant, signaled we were cleared to descend from the plane. Roman tugged me up, not releasing his hold on me until we reached the limo that’d waited for us outside, our suitcases right beside it.

The big one belonged to me and the small carry-on, that was Roman’s. I frowned, upset at myself for being so caught up in the excitement and secret planning, that it hadn’t dawned

on me how Roman's suitcase would never fit a week's worth of clothes.

He hadn't noticed my confusion, caressing the top of my palm as we drove toward the hotel in silence. Contrary to our situation from months ago, this silence felt companionable, like our connection outweighed words and actions, but I still had questions.

"Ro?" He twisted his head, raising his eyebrows in a gesture that said *Go ahead*. "You're leaving soon, aren't you?"

"Not now."

I crossed my arms over my pink summer dress, and raised my eyebrows in a less patient gesture than his, edging him to *the whole story, please*.

"On Monday, for work." His lips quirked to the side as he scooted closer to me so our arms brushed.

Sighing, I leaned into him. His warmth enveloped me, his shampoo and cologne surrounding me in the feeling of home. My life carried on just fine during the years we'd wasted on either hating each other or pretending the other ceased to exist, and now, the mere idea of five days apart gave me major withdrawal vibes.

"What do you think about working from here?" I suggested, hoping he'd say yes. "It won't be as intense as it would be at the office, but what's a week, in the grand scheme of things?"

"I'm grateful for you. For caring we spend this week together." He tucked a wayward strand of my hair behind my ear, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I can't, though—stay away from the office."

Comprehension dawned on me little by little, scissors ripping through the curtain that blocked me from seeing the motives for Roman's actions. The insistence to be at the fundraiser, the long hours at the office. The pull to be wherever my father was.

“Stuart.”

The press of Roman’s lips to the top of my head granted me the answer I’d been unknowingly craving. It tore another piece of fabric that covered my eyes, revealing more while leaving plenty hidden. “You have to watch what he does.”

“I do.”

“You weren’t pissed off that some newspaper would take photos of me drunk the night Chloe and I partied.” Although the window that separated us from the driver was closed since the beginning of the ride, I spoke in hushed tones. It didn’t help that the realization shook me to my core. “You thought he might hurt me. Is that it?”

Roman turned fully in his seat, applying the tiniest pressure under my chin to angle me up for a short, reassuring kiss. When he ended it, his furious eyes seared me. “He wouldn’t stoop to that level. Had he given me a reason to even think he’d cause you any harm, anything at all, I’d have finished him. I’ll be sorry for your mom, but I would’ve made him disappear without hesitation.”

My eyes studied his, gauging the seriousness of his declaration. They were cold, concise, and the epitome of cutthroat. In short, very fucking serious. “So, what is it?”

“Tina,” he said my name and stroked my cheek with equal reverence and care. “Above anything, that night, I worried for your safety. You’re a big girl, I’m aware of that, but you’re my girl. While we weren’t talking, Pauline kept telling me what a good, caring friend Elsie is to you, and I knew you were safe in NYU and then in Brooklyn. I had no idea who you ran off with that day, no idea where. You were under my care. If someone would’ve jumped you, spiked your drink...” He groaned in pain, running a hand across his face. “Don’t wanna go there. I’m sorry for losing my shit over this, but I would’ve been destroyed if any of this would’ve happened to you.”

I offered him a smile, my forgiveness.

“You didn’t get it wrong, that Stuart played a part in why I was concerned, too.”

“Go on.”

“He might have people following you and me. Expecting either of us to fuck up, or gathering information. I can’t rule it out.”

Stuart had mastered the ability and had the abundance of patience it took in order to mess with a person’s mind. And although he practically shackled me to Roman, I remembered all too well Stuart’s dislike of the Gallaghers. I didn’t put it past him to force me into this marriage just so he could have another angle on Roman. On my husband.

Fury sizzled in my bones, so much so that I was unable to tell where we were, whether we were still on the highway or veering out toward Beverly Hills. Roman saw through my indignation, my pinched lips and grinding teeth. He wrapped both arms around me, pinning me to his chest and my head to his shoulder.

“I don’t worry anymore.” His lips were on my head when he whispered, “I’ve got you. There’s nothing to worry about, not anymore.”

With his assertive hug and assuring words, one breath after the other, I began calming down. The street returned to view, streetlamps and buildings casting light on the palm trees that decorated the sidewalk and led to our hotel.

Eventually, the limo parked at the entrance to the Waldorf Astoria in Beverly Hills. The driver opened the door for Roman, and he in turn helped me out, draping an arm around me as soon as I was out. The doorman ushered us in, guiding us to the check-in counter where a friendly woman greeted us.

“Welcome to the Waldorf Astoria, Mr. and Mrs. Gallagher. We have the presidential suite ready for you with all the amenities you may require.”

“Thank you,” Roman said. I noticed he hadn’t corrected her to call us by our first names, suspecting he liked hearing

the term Mrs. Gallagher a little too much. I did too.

She smiled at us, handing us our keycards. “My name is Melissa. If there’s anything you need, call and we’ll take care of it.”

We both thanked her again, and went up the elevators to our room. While the cart climbed to our floor, I glimpsed Roman from my place under his arm. He seemed less somber than usual, yet his gaze looked like he’d traveled miles away.

I comprehended that night the toll he’d taken upon himself to shield and protect me, to carry the burden of worrying my name wouldn’t be tarnished all by himself. However, now that he let me in on it, that he had me, the time had finally come to support him back.

And for starters, I’d give us the second-best thing to a honeymoon we’d have. Later, I had no doubt that with the power of my love and the strength of being a team, we’d pull ourselves from whatever sick situation we were stuck in.

After the bellboy left, I laced my fingers behind Roman’s neck and kissed his stubbled chin. “I have a question, Roomie.”

His least favorite nickname by his sister made him laugh-groan as he slipped his arms around my waist. “Shoot.”

“About the investigator’s suspicions.” I stepped out of my sandals, pressing myself closer to Roman, then wiggling my toes on the chilled black and gold marble floor. “You weren’t worried when I went out shopping.”

Roman slipped off his Chucks, which by some miracle, were always stark white like the day they’d left the store. He rested his chin on top my head, one of his hands coursing up and down the curve of my spine. “Shopping in broad daylight, no one would give a shit. I worried when you didn’t ask Larry to drive you, but I figured nothing could go wrong there.” He pulled back, his hold on me unrelenting as he leveled his gaze to mine. “Look, I truly am sorry for jumping at you like I did, for making you feel like a prisoner, like you had to sneak

around. Being mad, holding on to yearslong resentment, it isn't an excuse for my behavior. And I'll make up for it, I swear I'll atone for how I mistreated you, for each and every second."

Holding on to my tears became a necessity the day Roman had walked out of my life. I passed school breaks and afternoons joking and listening to music with my friends, strong on the outside while keeping everyone at a safe distance. It felt wrong to just find a replacement of Roman to fill the huge chunk he'd removed from my heart when he'd walked away, as did handing Stuart the joy of seeing me cry. Elsie broke down my walls and took Roman's spot; crying, however? It took having Roman back in my life for that to happen.

I surrendered myself once more to my happy tears, to the slew of emotions erupting from me. With Roman, fear and pain were gone; in their stead came acceptance, forgiveness, a willingness to purge the ugliness of his actions. To move the fuck on.

He kissed my cheeks from left to right, repeating the compassionate action until my last tear had dropped. I swallowed around the lump in my throat, staring at him behind heavy eyelashes. "You still withhold some things."

"I do." He nodded, pulling me closer. "For a little while longer."

I blinked once, trusting him. My beating heart believed blindly in the man I loved.

He sucked in a breath, relieved that I hadn't asked for explanations. "And Justine?"

"Yes?"

"It might hurt, what I'm temporarily hiding. It might anger you. Fuck, it probably will. But I beg you"—he raised his palms to cradle my jaw, sliding his fingers into my scalp, black eyes plastering themselves into my soul in desperation—"you have to remember my intention isn't to harm you in any way.

From the moment you were born, I did everything for *you*. You're all that matters to me."

My palms searched for him, gripping him. "I trust you, Roman. Please, don't disappoint me."

He shook his head. His hair tossed to either side, a childlike, innocent, and vehement gesture. "I would never. If it ever seems otherwise, and you wouldn't be able to see my face a second longer, know that you'll be free to do it. Half of what I own, of all of it, down to the firm, is yours. You'll be free to lead your life as you please. No one would hold a shred of power over you ever again."

"The money's sole purpose was for me to volunteer, and the firm..." I huffed, jutting my chin higher. "I don't mean to disrespect the place that bound our destinies together. I'm grateful for it, for connecting Grandpa to your dad and for providing our families for as long as it did. But I don't want any part of it. I don't need *more* money and not in a million years will I be interested in working in an office tainted by Stuart."

Through the pointed gaze I'd received from my husband, I surmised his plan didn't involve Stuart there.

Okay, I could get behind that, no big deal. Mom's trust fund was plenty enough to last her a lifetime. "His presence or the lack of it doesn't matter. I don't want a seat there. I want to give back, personally, in my own time. That. Is. It."

"All I'm saying is that you have your options wide open, regardless of your choice."

"And you, Roman." I ignored his speech, twisting my lips to kiss the inside of his palm. "I want you. Don't fuck it up."

"I won't."

I squinted my eyes, reproaching him playfully, "Don't forget I know where you live."

In a matter of seconds, my back hit the wide mattress behind me. My husband spread my legs wide with his knee,

kissing the hollow of my neck.

“Where *we* live,” he groaned into my skin, his warm breath coaxing my back to arch for him. “*Our* home, *our* family, *us*.”

As he teased the straps of my dress, and right before I drowned in him, I had to ask between panting, “What changed?”

He lifted his face, a haze of lust coating his features. “What? When?”

“You don’t mind me partying here...” His fingers snaked up my thigh. I moaned. “...while you’re in New York for the week?”

He bit my bottom lip, his mouth curling in a wicked smirk. “Do whatever you like, dress however you like, drink or don’t. Whatever makes you happy. Anyone who has a problem with that can go fuck himself.”

I grasped his cheeks and kissed him like I’d die without doing so.

“Any more questions?” he asked when I finally let go.

“No,” I mouthed, raising my hips to meet his.

“Good.” He glided his fingers higher up my thigh, while trailing his kiss-swollen lips from my jaw to my shoulder. “Because I really, truly, wholeheartedly am dying to make love to my wife.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Justine

“YOU TELL me, Noah, where else am I going to be if not by your side?”

To everyone’s surprise—not—Alda told Noah yes on the spot when he proposed to her on the set of his last movie.

I mean, there was a surprise, when the four of us—Kyle, Elsie, Roman, and myself—appeared out of nowhere beside Noah’s parents and sister Evelyn who flew in from North Carolina, and Alda’s sister, Lia, and brother-in-law, Armand, who flew out of France without telling her they were coming.

And what a sweet proposal that had been.

“My beautiful Alda. I love you. I’ll keep saying it night and day, day and night, whenever you want me to. I’ll never get tired of saying it, just as I won’t get tired of loving you. Of caring for you, of shielding you from whatever life throws your way. I love you because of the goodness of your heart and your perpetual compulsion to put the needs of those you love ahead of yours. I love you because of the beauty radiating from each and every particle of your body, from your soul to the tips of your fingers.

I love you, Alda, just because. The good, the bad, the wonderful and ugly. I, Noah Lear, love you and nothing in this entire universe is worth a damn if I don’t have you. Alda Ricci, would you spend an eternity with me and be my wife?”

But other than that, telling him there’s nowhere she’d rather be except with him was the obvious and only reply to be given. The distance, the pain, the hurt—they were lessons, a bump in the road.

Nothing can sever the ties of true love, this much I knew.

A huge group hug followed the proposal, tears and laughter, sunshine and butterflies. Even Roman shook Noah's hand, the two men leaving the remnants of the past behind them. An early dinner ensued, after which we returned to our homes and hotels, promising to reconvene again tomorrow.

What looked like an impromptu dinner, was anything but. Basically, everyone but Elsie was in on the true purpose of said dinner at that point. Lia and Armand and Noah's family decided to allow Elsie to have her moment with the people closest to her while bonding over dinner at one of the restaurants Alda had recommended to them.

"Noah's parents wanted a night out before they return home, and it's a great chance to spend some alone time with my sister and Armand, so, you know, they went," Alda offered Elsie an excuse for their absence the evening later in her backyard where the six of us gathered.

At four months and on her first pregnancy, Lia didn't show and had time for a second and third baby-moon before her due date, but it sounded like a rather solid excuse, and Elsie believed it. She had no reason not to.

She also had no way to foresee the evening that had awaited her. Or the people who'd been given a spare key to Noah and Alda's home and were sneaking in while we ate outside in the dusk of that Sunday afternoon.

It'd been the perfect weekend and perfect surroundings to celebrate love and family. The lanterns cast a soft light in the backyard where we sat around a medium-sized oak wood table, mellow acoustic covers in the background, the temperatures finally dropping as the sun left the sky.

"How's your pizza?" Roman asked, a question which translated to *Give me a bite*.

I folded the slice for my New Yorker, putting it in his mouth without staining his loose, white T-shirt. Elsie aww-ed at the gesture, a sound that got her a view of my middle finger

as an appropriate response. We both laughed, Roman cracking a smile around chewing the yummy dough.

It felt surreal, how not too long ago at our wedding we were five against one, and how today they truly welcomed him as a part of our group. Life was funny and twisted and fucking wonderful.

“Not so bad, this pizza,” he commented, eyeing the half unfinished tray of my pie.

“Gotcha, Mr. I’m Trying to Stay Healthy on Vacation.” I held the tray up for Roman, stopping before he could take it from me. Not because I played games, not today. Kyle, who hadn’t specified the exact moment of his proposal, handed Elsie the letter he’d written for her eyes only as a prelude.

My eyes widened, and my mouth hung open.

Roman, whose sole focus lay on me, had missed out on the historic moment to our left. “Tina, you okay?”

“Shh.” I lowered the pie, pointing to where Kyle and Elsie sat.

Elsie, ever beautiful in her short plaid skirt and white tank top, unfolded the two hand-written pages and began crying. So did I, at the love Kyle unquestionably poured for my friend through his words. When she finished reading, tears still rolling down her cheeks, she’d turned slowly to a kneeling Kyle who held out a black velvet box wide open for her.

She gazed at him, unable to speak, the hands holding the letter slightly trembling. I gripped Roman’s palm instead of shrieking and ruining the moment, feeling his forefinger stroking my own engagement ring.

“Elsie Jenkins.” Her name got caught in Kyle’s throat, along with an abundance of emotion. He gulped, then went ahead to melt all of our hearts, “As soon as I saw you in Ridge’s bookstore, my mind and soul shut down irrevocably. They knew in a heartbeat that from here on out, there’ll be only you. I didn’t fight it, didn’t try to make sense of it, didn’t care for the hows and whys. I just let affection then love wash

over me. I loved how easy and wonderful it felt to simply be around you, I loved spotting you in a room full of people. Still do, only you. I welcomed the challenges we faced, was fucking over the moon when we managed to work through them. I'll walk through hell's fire for you, will be your sideline cheerleader, and the lover who'll remind you repeatedly of how special and cherished you are for the rest of your life. I love you on a colossal scale, Elsie Jenkins. I love you, and I'll be the luckiest man to have ever lived to have you as my wife."

Sobs, crickets, and an errant car driving outside the soon-to-be Lears' house were the sounds that filled the excruciating seconds it took Elsie to say yes.

In her defense though, the woman was crying.

Hayley, however, one third of the triplets that were her younger siblings, didn't care for her sister's emotional weeping. She waltzed into the backyard from where she and the two other brothers, Floyd and Alexander, perched at the doorway so as not to ruin the surprise.

"Would you please say yes; you're killing the poor man."

Behind them, chuckles that were attached to Elsie's Dad and Kyle's parents echoed in the small garden. Elsie's head whipped toward them, her fluster showing by the way she opened and closed her mouth. "What...what's everyone doing here?"

"Waiting for you to say yes," Alexander answered. He tried acting like this was just another day, though the smirk that simmered on his lips gave away how thrilled he'd been for the two of them.

Floyd nodded in agreement, his warm and gentle eyes focused on Elsie. "Even Dad signed off on it."

"I approved of him the minute he entered our home—what do you mean *even*?"

"We approve, too," Lois, Kyle's mom, chirped.

“Gee, thanks, Ma.” Kyle sighed a laugh, not taking his eyes off Elsie. “Els?”

She tapped a finger on her chin. “Let me think about it, Mr. Turner.”

“Seriously?”

“No! Of course, I’ll marry you.” She leaped on him and as always, Kyle caught her. “Only you. Forever you, my love,” she mumbled between kisses.

And my dearest Elster from the giver of awws became the receiver of it from everyone.

“I have an idea.” Everyone turned to Noah, who stood up. He interlaced his fingers with Alda’s in the affectionate way Roman held mine, a small smile creeping on his face. “Since every person who truly matters is in LA, why don’t we get married tomorrow? I’m sure my family wouldn’t mind delaying their return for another day.”

“I agree. The second time this weekend.” Short, warm, family-like laughter filled the air at Alda’s sweet voice.

Elsie kissed Kyle’s cheek, still gripping him for all she was worth. “I’m on board. I have everything I need right here.”

When everyone replied with equal enthusiasm, Noah headed inside the house to make the necessary arrangements, leaving the rest of us to thrive in our joint excitement.

Except... I turned to Roman, whose flight was scheduled to leave soon, sighing. “You have to go, right?”

Roman wrapped an arm around my shoulder, leaning his cheek on the top of my head. “I do, and I’m so sorry for it. I’ll make it up to you at home, whichever way you want and for however long you’ll allow me to.”

I ignored the ominous tone, the *for however long you’ll allow me to* he seemed to be dreading. “I’m banking on an insurmountable amount of compensation, until we’re old and gray, Roman.”

“Me, too.” He brushed his lips on my forehead. I reveled in their softness, letting my eyes flutter shut. “I have to go; my flight’s in an hour.”

“Okay,” I spoke to his neck, breathing in his cologne. “I have something to give you. I’ll walk you out.”

He drew back, cocking an eyebrow. “Didn’t we say I was the one who is supposed to be on the giving end?”

“At home, yes, you’ll be the king of grovel-ville,” I replied, though my voice hadn’t matched the sass of my words.

I picked up my messenger bag while Roman said his goodbyes, following him outside. His carry-on thumped on the pebble stones leading from the door to the gate of the house, crickets chirped in a random rhythm, the engine of the limo that had idled outside hummed. I, on the other hand, remained quiet, growing tenser the more we approached the car.

The stack of papers I carried in my bag weighed heavily on my shoulder, in my gut, on my heart, the tension its contents caused straining my muscles.

We reached the pavement, a mere two steps from an expecting driver who greeted us, “Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Gallagher.”

“It’s Roman. And we’ll need a minute.”

The driver understood Roman’s insinuation to give us privacy, collected the suitcase from Roman, and after storing it in the trunk of the car, slipped into the driver’s seat wordlessly.

Cradling my cheek, Roman, who sensed my agitation, said nothing. I looked to the floor, shifting from one foot to the other, sucking in a deep breath. He’d waited, my husband, for me to repeat what soothed me all those years, but this time I had no need for them. I gathered my thoughts, and other than that, with him near me, I had all the peace I needed.

I unlatched the hook of my bag, extracting a thick folder and holding it between us. The colored pages stuck out in odd

sizes, crumpled despite the effort I put into straightening them out.

But it didn't matter. Because they, like us, were worn out by the years, yet still alive, still there.

"It's for you."

He eyed it, then me, then the stack of papers again. "I have a feeling..."

"Just take it, Roman." My nerves, not entirely alleviated, made me snap at him. I regretted the words the second they left my mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

Roman gave me a closed-lipped kiss, a comforting one. "I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean for it to seem like I'm not willing to take it. Or that I'm not interested." He sighed, bowed down his head before raising his tortured eyes to me. "I was going to say that I have a feeling that it'll break my heart."

Despite his seriousness and mine, I placed a hand flat on his chest, and whispered, "It's there? Are you sure?"

Roman's lips quirked up. He placed a hand over mine, enclosing his fingers right around me. "It beats sporadically, for a limited number of people, but yeah, pretty sure I got it."

Thump, thump, thump. I was lost to the slow thuds, their vibrations, how they matched mine.

"You want to tell me what you have there, or you prefer me to go in blind?"

My letters, right.

"I wrote these." He bobbed his head once. "They weren't meant for you to read."

He cocked an eyebrow, pulling me close. "Because I was a shit husband?"

A short laugh burst from me, as did the thoughts I'd been struggling to express. "I wish I'd have carried them for such a

short time. Nope, it dates back from when we were kids. I kept it private because...because the timing was always off. Because my emotions scared me, their magnitude and the damage they could've created. Because..."

Roman swiped away a tear, his thumb stroking the wetness I hadn't even felt as it slid down my cheek.

"...Because you might not have loved me the way I loved you. You were the one constant, the one sun, the one person I could always count on. This"—I shook the stack that contained the grim letters I'd written him throughout the years, up until my last year of living with Elsie—"had the potential to ruin us, while we were friends. Then, and you'll see what *then* I'm referring to, it was too late. You wouldn't have read it if I'd have forced you into a bed *Misery*-style, you hated me so much. But I kept writing, even after that, on days I missed you the most. It was my sanctuary. Some people have Dear Diary, I've forever had Dear Roman."

He sighed. A simple, real sound. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We were young and then we were angry and during that time we took a break from being us. This stack though, it'll clear up some of the past, so we can move on." I stroked his stubbled cheek, gazing at the boy who peeked at me these days more than he had for too long. "There are so many good and great and sad memories in there. You'll see. It'll tell my side of the story better than I ever could, and that's why I'd rather you read it instead of me telling it and fucking it up."

Taking a step back, I extended my hand and thrust the folder into his chest. "Here. It's yours now."

"Thank you for trusting me with it." Roman gripped my hand and under the Los Angeles sky, he pulled me to him again in an intense, soulful kiss before walking away from me and into the limo.

"I love you." He rolled down the window, our written past clutched in his fingers. "I always will."

I waved, missing him already. “I love you, too. Always.”

He smiled, and as the car began pulling from the curve, he said, “See you at home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Roman

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO

ROMAN,

In the past six days, the last week of our summer here in the Hamptons, my soul has been crushed into tiny, almost invisible shreds.

I could be fucking poetic and say things like I feel like my heart's been run over by a D9, smothered to the ground and battered into a thin layer of nothing. Or if that analogy doesn't get my point across, I could say I was caught by the Hulk, twisted like caramel from my head to my feet until my insides exploded, then had my remains thrown into a fire so high, just in case something in me survived, the flames would destroy it.

I could say all of these things, and they'd be true, but would they matter?

Most of all, would they matter to you?

You, who sleeps next door, in our house still. For some sadistic reason you don't move to your parents'. I know for a fact that you have heard me crying into the pillow every night from your room next door for the past five nights. You've heard me for years, and each time you ran to me.

You've closed your heart, but your ears hear just fine.

Yet you don't come for me.

A week ago, I made an excuse for your behavior, when you kicked me out of your room without even looking my way. I thought you were going through something. Your dismissal

was directed toward me, though the fury couldn't have been. At least that's what I had convinced myself.

He can't be mad at you, Justine, *I thought*, Roman loves you.

It made sense, having you upset over something other than me, especially since everything was perfect less than twelve hours earlier. Only half a day passed since we sat with our clothes on the sand at sunrise, watching the salt water wash our feet, wondering whether we'd ever meet our lobster again. You rested your head on your knees, your long hair draping over your suddenly-so-long legs, and you smiled.

At me.

Life was good.

Is it space? Sometimes people need it. Never us, but also never say never, right? I wanted to give you that, retreating to my room, absolutely positive that tomorrow you'd be your old self. You'd have smiled again, and we'd have been friends. More than that, if you'd have let me tell you my plan.

But the next day left no doubt of who was the source of your anger.

It was me.

When you slammed the door to your room in my face where you've locked yourself up ever since, when you blocked my number—no one else's—from your phone, you erected a wall to keep me at bay. You prevented me from asking what happened, let alone relaying my plan of helping him and helping myself, and goddammit, us, at the same time. To offer you to go on a double date I suggested Emmet as a way to go out with Kennedy without having him straight up ask her, which he couldn't.

He loves her, as much as I love you, and asked for my help, since he kept freezing up whenever he tried talking to her. He waited for you to go do your yoga; the miserable guy was so embarrassed to speak to any of you Gallaghers. But now I'll have to tell him no.

I know so, because by night three, when you ignored me banging on your door and pushing out the notes I pushed under it, my insistent brain cracked, coming to terms with you not wanting to talk to me, not now, not for the foreseeable future.

I texted Emmet on day four, my voice too hoarse from crying to call him, and canceled the whole thing.

I'm torn, Roman.

A week. Seven days. I changed from ecstatically happy, jumping into Emmet's arms and scream-whispering we're going on a date, to this shadow of a person I don't even recognize. I don't smile, I don't eat, I hardly speak. Which, by the way, works perfect for Stuart. Having me this docile. Not that you care.

I wish you would've known that your hurt is my hurt. Your ache is lathered onto me like soap, covering every pore, blocking out happiness, darkening my soul. I wish you would've known that even in these bleak moments, I'll be standing strong in case you need someone to fight for you, with open and soft arms to cushion you if you wish to be held.

And I wish above all that you'd realize I can't do any of what my heart truly desires, what my DNA was programmed to do, when you shut me out. Could be I hurt and wronged you, but you left me in the dark about it too, and I can't fix it. I need to fix it, before Stuart sends me to another continent.

Please let me fix it.

Please.

I love you so much—I breathe and ache and bleed only for you.

My whole body, my insides, my soul, and the person I am—they're all yours.

Don't give up on us.

My love,

Justine

I hurled the file at the wall.

There were many more pages beyond that final one. I couldn't bring myself to read them. I couldn't bear the claws that tore at my chest, nor could I see beyond the tears clouding my vision.

What the fuck was I doing crying? I hadn't for years, not for something that happened so long ago, something we left behind us.

Except we didn't. I didn't. My forgiveness hadn't been wholesome, I realized as I read her letters, going through a whole range of emotions, laughing and contemplating, simmering with joy and consumed by sadness. Reminiscing on the good and bad and missed opportunities, the wasted years where I'd loved her like she had loved me—pure, innocent love that wanted the embrace to mean more than comfort, that yearned for the hand holding to be a show of belonging, that I was hers and she was mine.

I rushed to the cluster of papers.

It lay crumpled under the window. I sat on the floor, rolling the base of my palm over the creases, ironing them repeatedly. Like doing so would somehow make the wrongs right. Like it would revert us to the past and dissolve my unwarranted heartache. Like it would take me back to that exact point in time where I'd drop to my knees and ask the girl I left there in agony for her forgiveness.

The sun came up on that ugly Monday morning in my ugly apartment. Its bright, shining summer rays were obscured by the ever-growing darkness of my soul. I felt immature, stupid, unworthy. I kept her safe from the world, upheld my vow to myself and her, all the while convinced she didn't care, and acted like it too.

When it came down to it, I was the one she needed shielding from. On the scale of Slightly Damaged to Fucked

Up in the Head, I ranked at Complete Jerk, Out of Order, Do Not Use.

I hugged the folder to my chest.

She somehow still loved me. She considered me redeemable. And I wouldn't disappoint her.

I showered.

And at the end of this damned night, I let Larry drive me to the office.



Justine: *I miss you. Back from work?*

That was Tina. Sweet, forgiving, heart-shaped human, Tina. A woman that, despite the painful stories in her letters, the ache she'd carried within her for years and was probably engrained in her body as her blood platelets, found it in herself to keep on loving me.

I couldn't stop wondering how the desolation that rose from them hadn't transformed her into a bitter woman. All the shit I inflicted on her, for nothing, without even telling her what she did, none of it made her as cynical as I was. She overcame the bullying, the detachment, the abandonment.

In fact, I didn't wonder. I admired her for it, while hating myself for it even more.

The flashbacks of everything I'd done to her throttled me during that long painful Monday while I sat in my chair at work, held meetings, signed on another huge pension fund as an investor in the firm. They drained me, consumed me.

It was impossible to get past them, let alone contact Justine as shame swallowed me whole. But when my remorse battled with missing her, my selfishness ended up on top and I called her from our home, seconds from receiving her text.

“Hey.” She picked up on the second ring, chill music sounding in the background.

“Justine.” Her name felt unnatural on my lips, laden by immense sorrow as opposed to previously, by my unjustified anger. I held back, containing my self-pity and the hurt I felt on her behalf from seeping through the phone. She would in turn hurt for me, and I didn’t deserve that, not by a long shot.

“Roman.” She mimicked my serious tone then chuckled. “We wrapped up two weddings in less than twenty-four hours. It was nuts, but the best kind of nuts there is.”

I smiled, sunshine filtering through the cracks of my self-loathing when she laughed. “Tell me more.”

“Ha, well, I’ll start with the obvious.” She distanced herself from the others, the volume of the music fading away. “Have you ever seen bridesmaids wearing wedding gowns? Can you even imagine it?”

“Sure can’t, but I’d love for you to send me photos of it. Of the whole two-in-one weddings.” Whatever bathed her in this much delight, made me ten times happier, and I’d strive to give it to her until the end of her days.

“I’ll send you pictures when we hang up.” The growing excitement when she spoke told me I did well, for now.

A few moments passed where I just reveled at having her there, on the other end, no words required. I paced my room, ditching my navy-blue suit in favor of a black T-shirt and sweatpants, imagining she was by my side getting ready for bed, too.

“Am I...” she started, then stopped. When she resumed her question, her voice sounded smaller, insecure. “Are you in the middle of something?”

“No. Well, sort of.” As I walked out of the room that’d felt incredibly lonely, I veered the conversation further from the topic that had occupied me the last twenty-four hours, saving it for when she’d be back to avoid any more misunderstandings. Stowing away my shitty mood, I opted for what Justine would have done if she would’ve been in my shoes—make light of

the situation. “I’m in the middle of the very important task of thinking of you.”

She barked a laugh, tsking once. “Idiot, you almost had me. Where are you? What are you really thinking about?”

“I’m in the great room, sitting on the sofa.” The terrace in front of me served as a reminder of where I’d taken Justine first, of what an asshole I’d been, though I knew mentioning it would ruin her mood, so I preferred reminiscing on something that’d lift her spirits. “I’m thinking about how the days are getting shorter, two to three minutes at a time. The slipping away feeling we’d had when we squeezed in those last days of our summer vacations.”

“They were exquisite.” She sighed. “Sunrises and sunsets with you...they were everything.”

“They were.”

“What else are you thinking about?”

“That I love you.” I leaned forward on my thighs, resting my chin on my palm. “That this house is empty without you here.”

“You did buy a ridiculously giant apartment for one person.” Her snort lacked its usual vehemence. She tried to lighten the conversation, but I recognized the change in her cadence for what it was. For thinking I did at one point have plans of living without her.

Then she shook it off quickly, asking, “Anyway, what are you wearing?”

Justine’s comment finally brought out a laugh from me. “No, no. We’re not going there.”

“Come on, Ro, don’t be like that.” Even her pseudo-whine was molasses to my ears. Neither spoiled, nor petulant. Sweet. “Indulge the only adult, except Noah’s sister, who doesn’t have a date in this romantic scenery.”

“I don’t think we should—”

“I’ll start.” She cut in. “I’m wearing a pink gown with tulle and very generous cleavage.”

“I’m buck naked, giving our neighbors the full view of your lonely husband.”

“What? Really? Let me find the restroom here and we can...take care of each other.” I heard her skirt shuffle, could practically see her cheeks flush.

Fuck me, what I wanted to do to that sweet voice of hers, to her.

Just not right now.

“No!” My quiet laugh morphed into a roaring one. “Stop, no, I’m dressed. T-shirt and sweats.”

The clinking of her heels ceased. Her breathing slowed. “Idiot. I’m in love with an idiot who decided to develop a sense of humor when I’m away from home. Goddamn idiot,” she murmured.

“I won’t argue on that.” I eased back into the cushions, running a hand over my face.

She huffed a laugh, quieting again for a while. “How much of it did you read?”

“A lot.” Denying was futile, and with the admission the last letter I’d read resurfaced, breaking through the dam I’d withheld to not taint her happy day, though I kept trying to contain the conversation to a bare minimum. “Up to the point I realized I have shit for brains and all my meditation and Zen are good for nothing when I couldn’t put them to use when it mattered the most.” At that I pinched my eyes shut, reluctant to face reality.

“To Emmet,” Her soft whisper surmised, devoid of judgment or even a tinge of resentment.

“Yes. Him,” I groaned, catching myself before this discussion deteriorated. “All right, enough of this bullshit. Go have fun. We’ll have our time for the heavy stuff. I’m not going anywhere. Ever. Okay?”

“Okay. And Roman?”

“Yes?”

She hesitated, enough for me to think an emotion clogged her throat, praying I didn't fuck up too badly that she was crying. But then she talked to me, reverent, compassionate, and definitely not crying. “I love you, too.”

“I know, my love.” A rush of air expanded my lungs, each of the four words another injection of life. “I know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Roman

THE CCTV app on my phone showed Justine opening the front door to our penthouse almost a week later. She stood upright, holding her large suitcase behind her. I watched her as she put it aside, admiring the sight of her, my days of yearning to have her close to me coming to an end soon.

But for now, until she came to me, I observed her from my phone, and what a view she'd been—her long hair tied in a ponytail, floral cropped shirt I recognized, the usual short jeans. My fingers itched to touch her, and yet I stayed put.

“Ro?” She ambled toward the source of the music and candlelight I'd set up for her.

Inspired by her friends' proposal party, I'd put on music to welcome her home. Kind of like she waited for me the other day, hopefully leading to a better ending. I'd compiled a list of instrumental covers of songs that held meaning for us, wanting to set the atmosphere without the words overpowering them. We had our own set of words to exchange.

From the screen of the phone, I glanced up when she opened the French doors. A smirk tugged at my lips at her gaped mouth and the awed gaze in her eyes from the setup on the terrace.

“Over here.”

“Hey,” she said, one foot still inside the house. The multitude of candles in every shape and size that were scattered on the floor swathed her in a soft, amber glow. If I'd had a poetic bone in my body, I'd have called my wife the sun.

I placed the phone on the table by my side, walking over to her holding two glasses of red wine. An acoustic cover of The Carpenters' "Close to You" drifted slowly into the summer air. Justine's eyes quit scouring the space, pausing on me. Her hazel eyes that turned a shade of gold, glossy with unshed tears.

"Welcome home."

She took a hesitant step forward, kicking off her sneakers and socks. Now we were both barefoot. Our fingers brushed when I'd passed her the glass, hers trembling slightly. And although I hadn't budged, my heart pounded as hard as hers. I clinked our glasses, each of us taking a sip from them.

"I thought you didn't like to drink." Her voice compelled me, the taunting in it even more attractive. It was *her*. She could do no wrong in my eyes.

"I do, with my wife." I cupped her cheek and pressed my lips to hers. My muscles strained at the taste of her lips and the hint of her tongue slipping out, relaxing only when my body got accustomed to hers from nearly anew.

"The wife you love so much that you asked someone else to pick her up from the airport?" She drew back, an edge of humor in her tone, curiosity too, but no anger, no doubt that I did it to hurt her.

Because I truly didn't. The whole purpose of tonight revolved around showing her I could be what she needed, what I owed her to be—loving, patient, tender, a man who toned down his impulsive responses.

After asking her for her glass, I lowered the both of ours to the floor, stood back up, and held my palm facing up for Justine while my other arm had wrapped around her waist. "Dance with me?"

She accepted, her delicate palm dropping into my larger one. They fit; they always have. "You don't dance either."

I nuzzled her nose, whispering, "As I said. I do, with my wife."

One perk of the lack of distance between us, besides smelling her fresh scent and breathing the same air she did, was the ability to catch her blushing as it happened. She liked hearing these words from me as much as I loved saying them, but the open affection did nothing to dissuade her fire.

“You must’ve needed serious preparations for it. Was that another reason not to come to the airport?”

She was relentless, and smiling. I held onto it, reveling in her smile a little longer before I’d eventually tell her the truth, before this conversation deteriorated into grave matters. “Someone had to set this up, and keep watch so the house didn’t burn down.”

“You mean someone had to get dressed in the black T-shirt and sweats I’ve fantasized about all week while Edith arranged this romantic scenery.”

We began swaying to the music, slowly gliding from left to right. Her skin felt hot beneath my fingers, her body a ball of energy when pressed to mine.

I shook my head subtly, holding back a laugh. “I did wear them for you and no, I sent Edith home early. I wanted every song and every candle bought, lit, and arranged by me. This apology is all on me from start to finish.”

“Is it because of the letters?” She grounded her feet, trying to break from my hold. I firmed my grasp on hers. “I didn’t give them to you so you’d feel guilty, or apologize.”

She sighed, her shoulders sagging. “You didn’t know. I can’t be mad for what you didn’t know, and that’s not why I handed them to you.

“I wanted a clean slate. They’re better than anything I would’ve said. As deeply as you love me, I didn’t see how my words now could bridge over the gaping hole between us. Real, hard evidence could. That’s why I thought you should read them.”

“I get it, and it’s truly behind us now. However, it doesn’t take away from the apology I owe to you, from the obligation I

have to change going forward in our relationship.”

“I don’t want you to change.” Her soulful eyes reflected every bit of what she said, except I couldn’t agree to that, to my past behavior.

“I know.” Touching her over and over like my life depended on it, I explained, “I had time to evaluate my behavior, my impulsive reactions toward you, to fully comprehend how wrong I’d been to not talk to you before jumping the gun. I hold my stance in situations other people would crumple under, but with you, you get under my skin. It’s the deep, uncontrollable love I’ve always felt for you that causes me to lose my mind, and now that I’m aware of my weakness, I promise you I’ll handle it better. Which I started today. By holding on, and waiting for you here.”

“Thank you. I didn’t need an apology, but I’m grateful.” She rested her cheek on my shoulder. “I have one remaining question, just out of curiosity, why didn’t you ask me then? Why didn’t you fight for me?”

I wished I could’ve shrugged it off with clean-cut, easy to explain jealousy. But life was never only simple and uncomplicated.

Chances were that had it been the one shitty, standalone incident of the week, I would’ve gone and asked her. I might’ve barged into her room, demanding her to cancel whatever plans they’d made. Telling her, for the first and not the last time, how no woman could ever take the space in my heart like Justine did, and no man would ever love as intensely and fiercely as I loved her.

The misunderstanding would’ve revealed itself then and there, leading to our happily ever after.

But, like I mentioned, life isn’t that straightforward. The things worth having were things you fought for, sacrificed for, and for Justine I hadn’t blinked an eye when I’d done just that. The second she’d told me about her dad shipping her off to England, the wheels of my plan had been put into motion,

driving me to abandon what I used to consider important, though nothing, nothing was ever as crucial to my existence as Justine was.

And it'd been those sacrifices, these handlings, that'd bled me dry.

By the time I was done with them, when I caught sight of her and Emmet, the ability to fight for Justine or rely on logic had long since fled from me. I was just mad. Mad at the world, mad at her, mad at myself most of all. So, I acted. I, the boy who was taught to keep his head since more or less birth, sought to destroy instead of reasoning through it.

I severed our long relationship like it meant nothing, carried the hurt on my own as I, despite it all, kept shielding her from what I'd done. Even then, torn and broken, I'd maintained the belief that Justine should never carry the blame for what I'd done.

It dawned on me, as I gazed down at the love of my life, at the woman I'd sworn myself to protect no matter the costs, that I was obligated to maintain the status quo. Exposing the wrongdoings her dad inflicted on me and on others would do more damage to her than good, to her in particular.

I'd accumulated plenty of ammo against Stuart to reverse that decision, to get vengeance for both of us, for my family, without making waves. To finish this once and for all behind closed doors. Justine would never have to go through the remorse that tormented me, for something she didn't know of. I'd shelter her from harm, I'd provide for her, I'd forever love her. And I'd finish her father in secret, without publishing the interview.

I kissed my wife's lips as the beginning of "Nights in White Satin" played, settling for a vague answer to her question. "I did a lot of fucked-up things without consulting you, and I'm sorry, Tina. I'd take it all back if I could, well, most of it, but I can't. What I can and will do is everything in my power to make sure you feel loved and cherished and

adored beyond every reasonable doubt for the rest of our lives.”

Her eyes darted up to me, gleaming under the Manhattan skies. “What part do you not regret?”

I chuckled, only mildly stunned how she looked over my heartfelt declaration to her and zoomed in on the holes in it. I say mildly, because I shouldn’t have been in the first place. Trust, as I knew better than anyone else and given our past, needed to be earned, not taken for granted.

“I’d never, ever, ever, ever regret forcing you to marry me.” I scrunched my nose, reconsidering my statement. “Unless you weren’t interested. Then I’d definitely feel bad.”

She pinched my cheek playfully. “Shut up. Under this layer of *I don’t give a fuck about the woman who broke my heart*, you had to have at least suspected, sometime during all these years, that I was interested.”

“No, sorry. Must’ve missed the memo of how much you liked me between hearing how you said no to your dad for the millionth time and you telling me straight up *I hate your fucking guts*.”

We exchanged meaningful looks. I could tell her mind was brewing with questions, seeking for ways to articulate them. I didn’t pressure her, continuing to dance while stroking her back to the rhythm of the song.

“Roman.” She sighed, cleared her throat from any sort of sadness or regret. “You say you would’ve regretted our marriage if I wasn’t interested. Why didn’t you ask me then? On a date? Like normal people do?”

I could’ve told her it was a part of the deal, something I wanted Stuart to work hard for, to make him sweat. Could’ve reiterated the lingering hurt that gripped me every time I even dared to consider a relationship with her, one I’d never stopped wanting.

The first I swore not to tell her, the latter she’d heard from me before.

Both would hurt her, unnecessarily so, and I preferred avoiding them, chose to keep my wife's smile wide on her face for as long as possible.

“That's all it would've taken?”

A sharp, surprised laugh escaped her. “Fuck no. I've always loved you, but for the years of torture, I would've made you beg before I even considered considering saying yes. And if done right, I would've dated you.”

“I'd deserve it.”

“Yeah, you would,” she whispered. “But even though you bulldozed your way back into my life, you know what?”

“What?”

“I don't regret marrying you either.”

My demonstration of patience ended the second the last word left her beautiful mouth. I dove into her lips, sucking her air in, kissing her, biting her, burying myself in my wife. I groaned when she let my tongue in, grasped both sides of her neck to angle her head higher for me, to deepen the kiss.

Having our bodies joined into one couldn't have happened fast enough for me. I walked Justine beyond the candles, past the French doors, securing my hold on her as to safeguard her from stumbling and falling. Nothing bad would ever happen to her again.

“I have another thing I don't regret.” My voice was ragged, trying to form a coherent sentence as our kiss grew more violent, more desperate, unencumbered by need.

She clutched at my shirt, forcing me to stop just as we reached the marble table inside the house. “What's that?”

I crouched down to press the remote I'd left on the table, shutting down the blinds to shield the view of her naked body, of her coming time and again tonight.

When the curtains closed, I got rid of her shirt, freeing her breasts from her bra. The initial force of seeing her like that, of

her scent all around me, her hands clutching onto my arms, and her taut nipples rubbing on my shirt as I sucked on her throat—I wanted it all.

My body hummed with her moans, vibrated to the beat of her heart. Resting my palm flat on the small of her back, I pressed her to my hips, despite the fact we were as close as two people can be without being naked, but the desire to be inside her overcame any semblance of common sense.

“What I don’t regret”—I was rock hard in my sweats, tugging on her hair to grant me more access to Justine’s skin, gliding my tongue over her collarbone—“is getting this huge place. I only realized it once you were here, once the long-lasting anger simmered away, that I never intended on having this house all to myself. I always meant for it to be ours.”

The words I whispered to her danced over her soft chest while I bent down to suck on her breasts. My lips closed on a pebbled nipple, my teeth nipping the taut nub, administering the slightest of pain. Oblivious to what I’d said, Justine responded to my touch with her nails piercing my skin as I licked the place better, giving way to moans of pleasure when I resumed the sucking and biting.

Her haze hadn’t lasted though. One moment we were submerged in each other, the other Justine’s panting ceased, pulling away from me. I glanced up, my eyebrow quirked in question.

“Wait, wait. You what?”

I stood upright, moving us to the sofa in two strides. Her face was in my palms, her gaze searching mine, hopeful and longing. “When I bought this house, it didn’t make sense, even to me. The realtor showed it to me and the damn thing was too fucking big, and still something nagged at me to get it. So, I bought it. Now, over five years later with you here, with our lives worked out, I finally understand. Somewhere I always knew we’d be together, fill this giant unused space with love”—I unhooked her jean button, shedding it and her

underwear—“with us”—she clawed at me, stripping me in the time it took me to say—“with a family.”

The room lacked almost any sort of illumination, but our faces were so close, my nose to hers, our mouths a hairsbreadth apart, and nothing mattered to me other than having her eyes in my sight when she sighed my name.

She was beautiful when she loved me. Was breathtaking when she trusted me. Fascinated me to no end when her vulnerability and ferociousness went hand in hand like the two weren't complete opposites.

My fingers, strong and demanding, roamed over her curves, memorizing every inch of her skin, from her neck to her shoulders down to circling the hollow of her navel without ever losing sight of her eyes. I took her mouth, cherished it briefly, then got down on my knees.

Justine must have felt the need to maintain our connection, her head tilting lower to watch me as I dropped to the floor. My soul brimmed, overflowing with apologies and reverence as I traced my hands and lips and teeth from her ankles up her calves, to the backs of her knees.

No amount of regret could atone for my actions, for the time lost, for the damage done, but I'd die trying. I ravaged her exposed flesh, treating her as though my hands, lips, and teeth had a voice and they were begging for her forgiveness.

She moaned when I nipped the inside of her thighs, tugged at my hair when my tongue drew a line from her wet sex, parting her lips and circled her clit, repeating it, devouring her, worshipping her.

“Roman,” she said my name again, this time her plea barely making a sound.

Her grasp on my hair intensified, her legs went limp in surrender, allowing her to melt into my protective hold, to let me devour the woman I loved. It was lust I felt for her, no doubt about that, but as I tasted, sucked, and grazed my teeth

on her pulsating center, I was flooded by love, admiration, an unyielding possessiveness.

Her pliant thighs tensed, her pussy thrusting in my face when she came on my mouth. A deep, guttural cry tore from within her, my wife's orgasm rippling from her center outward, to my lips, my tongue, my lungs. I breathed her in, elongating the sensations until her quivers were subdued, her sweet body relaxing into me.

Her words, however, were not quite as subtle. "Fuck me."

I blinked once, stopping the trail of kissing her lower belly.

"I want you to fuck me," she repeated, her fingers running through my hair, pulling me up.

Without the slightest deliberation, I rose to my feet and had Justine's back on the sofa in an instant. The air whooshed out of her lungs, but her gaze, the intense way she looked at me as I set one foot on the floor for balance and spread her wide, held no surprise in it. I watched her, one of her feet on the cushions, her glistening entrance calling me to her.

From my place on top of her, I descended to position myself between her thighs, teasing her opening with my cock, then leaned down so we were nose to nose. "Repeat that for me."

"I want you to fuck me, Roman Gallagher." She pressed her hips up; I raised mine away from her.

"Again." By holding back from making love to her I received a glimpse to another side of her, the feral, hungry side of her, and like everything about her, I wanted more of it.

Her fingers clasped at the back of my neck, tugging my hair so our lips brushed. "I want you inside me, to take me, consume me, control me, and treat me as your equal. It doesn't make any fucking sense, but I don't care. I've wanted you my whole life and I want you now more than anything and you will fucking take me."

The honey in her eyes flashed, red flames roaring from deep within. And I had every intention of giving Justine all the things she craved for and more. I burrowed into her, driving my dick up to the hilt, and stopped. Struck by the intensity of the moment, from the unbreakable connection, I stopped and just *felt* her.

“I’ve loved you for forever, Tina. I’ll always love you. And no one is sorrier than I am that we weren’t each other’s firsts.” I pulled out slowly, using my thumbs to caress her temples when I pounded back into her. “But from now on, I’ll treat you and love you, kiss you and fuck you as if we were. Because you’re everything to me. Every fucking thing.”

We didn’t talk anymore after that. I gave myself to her completely with every shove, and she offered me the rest of her, the raw and ragged and everything in between. We kissed, our tongues slid and swept across one another, neither of us needing air. Her breasts swayed beneath my chest, her heart beating against mine, making me hers as much as she belonged to me. We came together, gasping, still gripping the other, our orgasms rolling off us in slow waves.

My lips brushed across her forehead, on both temples, on her closed eyelids, on her nose. “What I wouldn’t pay for a time machine.”

She giggled when I nibbled the tip of her nose, her eyes blissfully closed. “Even if we had to do a restart on life?”

“Fuck”—right cheek—“yeah”—left cheek.

She opened her eyes, searching for my bluff. “To do *everything* again? Including school? Starting from scratch?”

“Definitely, yeah.” I kissed both corners of her mouth as they tugged up. “Knowing what I know now, having a chance to do it right, with you? I’d agree to a do-over in a heartbeat.”

“Seriously? Wouldn’t it bore you to tears?” She cupped my cheeks, pulling me up.

Something in her needed reassurances. I understood, oh boy, did I understand. I wiped any semblance of humor from

my expression, staring at her, unblinking. “I’d go through our story, the good version of our lives, for an infinity. Nothing can bore or tire me when it involves loving you.”

I slipped out of her, rolling us to the side. Arms entangled, legs crossed, souls entwined.

“Since when did you become so corny, Roman?”

“I don’t know.” I ran my fingers through her knotted hair. “I’d say it kind of snuck up on me. Like you.”

“Hmm.”

“*Hmm* what? You don’t like it?”

“I like it plenty, all this warm and fuzzy, and apologetic.” She pursed her lips, struggling to suppress a smile. “All I’m saying is...”

The music outside quieted. That was fine; her voice was the one thing I cared to hear anyway. I placed a finger under her chin, raising an eyebrow. “You want more?”

“Maybe.” The smile she locked away from me couldn’t be contained anymore. “Possibly. Yes.”

“You’re my every sunrise, my reason to wake up, the motivation behind all my actions. I love you. And I apologize, from the bottom of my cold heart, I apologize for being an asshole. For my crimes, I deserve the worst of punishments, though I hope my pleas will suffice.” I spread a million kisses on her knuckles, peeking at her from behind her palm. “Did I do well?”

“Maybe. Possibly.”

She left me no choice. I had to keep kissing and hugging and apologizing to the sound of her giggles until we fell asleep on the sofa and stayed there for the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Roman

“STUART,” I said, making sure the grin I wore simmered into my words. “For what do I owe the pleasure of having you call me directly instead of having John transfer the call?”

“You pathetic scum and excuse for a human being. You’re even less of a person than your father,” Stuart screamed into the phone, ignoring my question about his personal assistant making all his calls, even family-related ones, for him.

I reveled in it far more than I should’ve, leaving the earpiece in place to absorb all of his rage. Within the scope of thirty minutes, from the moment I sent him the incriminating email, I managed to rattle the asshole’s world like nothing ever did. I basked in his fury, enjoying it for both Justine’s and my benefit, remembering this was only the beginning, and a giant step towards the man’s end.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Language, Stuart. After all, we’re talking business here.” I relaxed further into my office chair, crossing an ankle over my knee.

While the asshole’s frequent vacations were high on my list of pet peeves, I hadn’t minded the one he was supposed to be enjoying now, just a few days after I’d decided to shut my father-in-law down once and for all behind closed doors. Because pissing him off with the sound of the relaxing waves at his private beach in Fiji far outweighed simply pissing him off here.

“It’s not business and you know it damn well,” he hissed, then murmured, “son of a bitch.”

“Oh, you can trust me that it is. But you know what doesn’t fall under my definition of business? How one *doesn’t* conduct

it?” My unaffected tone provoked another curse to ripple out of him. I wished I could’ve witnessed his face. “You don’t even need me telling you. Just look in the mirror.”

The line went silent. He realized I was on to him, waiting for me to show my cards so he wouldn’t spill something I might’ve missed. “Because I did. Looked at you, and your so-called *business*. I’ve been looking long and hard for years, did my research, found plenty of proof to how you mistreat and keep mistreating people. And guess what? With what I have on you, the whole world will see the real you, too.”

Another silence ensued. I didn’t mind. I had time. I had all the time in the fucking world. When his voice came back on, it held a misguided hint of triumph. “Now that I consider it, I’m damn sure you won’t even go through with it. You’re still a goddamn child, and a bullshitter on top of that. Waited for me to be sixteen hours away to try to weasel out of our contract. It won’t work.”

As I mentioned, any triumph he might’ve felt was completely misguided. I happily squashed it like the bug he was. “I’m not scared of you; you can forget about that like you tend to forget about your only child. What I’m doing is saving us the unnecessary drama and damage to this firm’s reputation you’d have undoubtedly caused if you were here. I’m offering you a chance to save your legacy.”

I skipped the part where I didn’t want us doing this at his house or mine, the aspect where I’d admit shielding my wife from harm was my number one, nonnegotiable priority. I’d vowed this wouldn’t reach Justine, and I planned on keeping that promise. The sordid details about her father’s dealings, about the sacrifice I’d made, they’d hurt her. Unnecessarily too, which Stuart would have loved rubbing in her face, probably would’ve called her to come over the second I walked out of his house. I couldn’t have him do that, not ever.

“I’ll tell her,” he threatened, his conniving mind tapping into the thoughts I did my best to conceal. “I’ll tell the

daughter you love so much that her pathetic, lovesick husband is extorting her father, see what side she takes then.”

Breathe in, breathe out. Focus.

“The fuck you will.”

“Is that fear I hear in your voice?”

He might’ve picked up on fear, but for an entirely different reason than what he had in mind. A selfish man like Stuart would assume I didn’t want Justine finding out about the ultimatum I’d extended to him. A man like me, I only wanted her to not feel guilt, not over me, not over him.

But I had to put him in place, nonetheless. Ice streamed through my veins, concealing any emotion my tone might’ve betrayed. “How many times do I have to repeat this until it sinks in? You. Do. Not. Intimidate me.”

Riley, one of our managers, which I hoped by the end of this week would be *my* firm’s manager, came to knock at the door. I made a hand gesture for him to return later. “I’m reminding you that if Justine chooses to divorce me, our agreement is null and void. You can’t win this one.”

Stuart huffed incredulously. “You’ll allow her to live on the streets? Because I’m not taking her back.”

“Wrong again.” I shoved myself to standing, smoothing down my dark green polo and black jeans. Despite not dressing casual to the office most days, that particular Friday I felt good, alive even, and not in the mood to be bound to a suit. I headed toward the windows overlooking the Financial District, avoiding the slight chance any of our employees decided to try lip-reading. “I’ll give her everything, and I mean *everything* she’d ever want or need to have a fulfilling, financially independent life away from you and me.”

“The permission to be a sloth, all you and her mother encouraged her to be from the day she was born.”

“Don’t you fucking talk about her that way, ever. You know nothing about her.” My less-than-subtle reaction, the one

I tried to contain, revealed my weakness points, and the fucker pressed them, hard. In order to hide my distaste and dislike of Stuart, to return the calm to my voice, I drove my hand into my hair, tugging at the strands until it hurt.

It worked. “But let’s pretend you do. Let’s pretend she was lazy, or lacking any sort of ambition. A) You couldn’t have realized it since she was a child, and b) What does it have to do with you loving your daughter or not?”

“Makes sense that a man with low standards like Michael would agree to something like that.” He snorted a derisive, infuriating snort. It took everything in me to not punch the window when he added as emphasis, “Figures.”

He and Justine couldn’t have been more different if they tried. He’d never measure up to her sweet nature, and no, being nice exclusively to her mom didn’t count. More often than not, I conjured scenarios in my head where maybe Justine was born outside of wedlock, a product of an affair her mom would’ve never had. After a little digging into her birth certificate a few years back, I realized, to my demise, that these claims were unfounded.

Shame, seeing how it would’ve brought to light a whole lot of things, starting from Stuart’s inexplicable hatred toward her. His only child, who arrived after a long period of trying and inability to conceive later.

Then again...

Holy shit, how did I miss this all along?

“You don’t hate her because you think she’s not smart, or lazy.” Memories flooded me, visions from when we were mere toddlers playing around. She, a year and a half younger than me, helped me learn to read and write, had completed puzzles I sought to abandon, had won everyone’s affection without ever trying. A clever, kind person who was easy to love, just like my dad. A person who represented everything Stuart wasn’t and would never be.

“You hate her for being so incredibly perfect because she shines a spotlight on what a flawed human being you are. Fuck.” My laugh was humorless, incredulous, the more the realization sunk in. “You were jealous of your own kid. Is that why you love Pauline? The woman who’ll always blend into the shadows for you?”

“Spare me your bullshit psychology,” he muttered, much less confident than I’d ever heard him.

I’d brought him down, but I was in no way finished.

I delivered my message slowly, my voice steady and cold. “I’ll tell you something, Stuart. My wife—I don’t need her to hide shit about her personality. Her backbone, brains, kind and loving heart—she can celebrate all of it however she likes. She can run her own company, or she can stay at home watching reality TV from dawn to dusk.” I inhaled, closing my eyes briefly. “My wife will be whatever she likes, however she likes it. And I’ll still put her on a pedestal to shine brighter than me, still love her with everything I have.”

At the end of my monologue, a gasp came from behind me. I recognized that gasp. Been hearing it, albeit in a sexual content, every morning and every night on every flat surface of the house throughout the week. Ever since the Friday Justine returned from Los Angeles.

I twisted to find her standing inside my office, her jaw slacked and eyebrows knitted together. I mirrored her expression for a second, sorting through my mind for any mention she might’ve made about dropping by my office before her session with her student, Max.

Less than half a minute passed, and I came up blank. Holding off any longer would’ve given her father the upper hand, the idea I second-guessed myself, so I marched on.

“I’ll be brief.” I locked my eyes on her wide ones, a silent plea for her to stay put regardless of what I’d tell him. “For every immigrant you silenced for complaining about their living arrangements, for every one of them that you threatened

to send back to their country if they came forward with proof of the less-than-human conditions of the housing projects that were supposed to be repaired by the donation money you stole, you'll pay. I'm assuming you did it to finance your other failing real-estate investments without alerting anyone of you being in trouble, but then again, I don't give a fuck."

Justine remained where she was, still as a statue.

I wanted to go to her, needed to go to her, though I couldn't. The finish line was too close for me to falter. "You'll remodel their homes and compensate them as I see fit for the time and the anguish you caused, and when you're done, you're selling all these buildings to a person I trust, steering clear from any further contact with them. You'll resign from our firm, and whatever money you have left, you'll donate half of it to whichever charity organizations Justine decides on. The other half I'm letting you keep for Pauline's sake, otherwise I'd have you donate it as well. Fail to deliver any of these, and I'll stream the interview and evidence on Lennon's blog. By the end of the week the whole country will know what a scumbag you really are."

My eyes hadn't wavered from Justine's as I witnessed her astonishment switch to anger. Her slightly open mouth pinched into a thin, white line, her eyes narrowed, hands placed on either side of her hips.

It confused the living hell out of me. I'd told her I planned on taking down her dad, a mission I was in the stages of completing in private, without calling the cops on him. She must've known I didn't plan on following through with the threat and release the interview nationwide, since Stuart would end up agreeing to my terms if I had to go to Fiji myself and force him to do it.

She must've realized I would never hurt her. She had to.

In the background, from Stuart's end, a glass crashed, jolting me from my thoughts. "You'll burn the firm's reputation and with it the firm to the ground."

“You’re mistaking me for a person who cares, old man.” I wrapped up the conversation, desperate to shut him up and clear things up with Justine. “I can let go of this business any day now, and I’ll still have at least thirty years to rebuild myself, should I want to. You, though, once your filth is out in the open, in your sixties, you’re dead. Choose wisely.”

I hung up, throwing my earpiece on the desk.

“Are you going to do it, Roman?” Justine didn’t make the tiniest step in my direction.

Neither did I. “No.”

“Why did you lie?”

“I call it negotiation techniques.”

“No.” She shook her head softly, twisting her white shirt between her fingers. “Mom sent me your email when Stuart went batshit crazy, asking me to help them.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but she held her hand up to stop me. “I’m not here to take their side. I’m here to understand. The interview. The part about me. You fucking lied. It was Mom who talked Stuart into not sending me away to the boarding school, not you. It was Mom.”

“Really, though?” I still reeled from the conversation with her father, and it screwed with my judgment, with my tone, with my choice of words. I tried my hardest to keep it together, remembered old past lessons I recently learned, and failed.

“You’re a smart girl, Justine. Do the math. When have you ever seen your father give in to your mother’s requests in regards to your rights, to making you happy?”

“You...you said...” Tears welled behind her eyes. She looked up, gathering herself. “You said he agreed for your part of the company. Why would you do that?”

I crossed my arms over my chest, holding my position. Something inside derailed me from leaping forward and gathering her in my arms. I resented myself for it, but couldn’t fight it.

“I. Love. You. Justine. Stuart knew it, knew a part of me would die when he took you from me. On top of that he was very much aware of my dad setting me up to inherit his stocks and take over when his health deteriorated to the point he couldn’t work, which happened fast, and it doesn’t take a genius to see how Stuart had something to gain from me along with the means to take it. And call me an idiot, but I don’t regret it. We weren’t together and it hurt like a motherfucker, but I don’t regret a thing. You had your life here, your mom, your stability.”

“The marriage clause?” Her lips quavered and she pursed them together. “You really asked him for it?”

“No one would’ve laid a finger, figuratively or not, on you that way. I would’ve provided and cared for you and been there for you, always.” I bit the inside of my cheek, mentally preparing myself to reveal a weakness I hadn’t intended to share, ever. “Even if you hadn’t loved me like a boyfriend then, or if it was too soon for that, I had faith we’d learn to love each other, to grow together. I believed in all of it back then, in keeping you safe above everything else, as strongly as I believe in it now. That’s why I insisted on that clause years later.”

“You’re telling me that for thirteen years you kept this to yourself?” Justine paced forward, fire spitting from her eyes. She reached me, her hands lifting, almost grasping my shirt before dropping to her sides. “You haven’t consulted me, haven’t had the decency to ask me whether I was willing to let you make this sacrifice? What about us being friends, partners? Haven’t you considered, for once, that maybe *I* can help *you*? Huh?”

She raised her hands again, shoving me lightly. “What about what *I* want? Because you didn’t ask. Like you didn’t ask about Emmet, like you didn’t ask about marrying me, like you didn’t ask the most important fucking question which is *do I want to shield you*. You don’t ask, Roman!”

“I don’t need help from you.” The statement, the lie, fell out flat from my tongue, an unconvincing tune, even to my own ears.

Because I did need her. For numerous seconds, minutes, hours, I’d needed her presence, warmth, her beautiful laughter. Over days at the hospital with Dad or in those ugly, lonely nights when the longing for her eclipsed any other hateful sentiment.

I needed her, but the ego I worked relentlessly on suffocating through hours of meditation, reared its ugly head, prohibiting me from sounding weak.

And the words *I need you* were swallowed down my throat.

“Because you’ve been doing amazing using that approach.” Her hand gestured wildly in the air, saying *Look at you*. “Gave up on love, gave up on your best friend, gave up on anything unless it revolved around your revenge. Are you happy?”

“There was never a day your best interests weren’t in the forefront of my mind,” I repeated like a robot, reverting to building walls upon walls when all I wanted was to wrap her in my arms and apologize. “It’s too late now, anyway.”

“Yeah, it is. The past is in the past.” She blinked a few times. “But we can fix it. Going forth, we’re going to have full transparency and mutual respect and...”

I cupped her cheeks, the touch sparking currents of electricity straight to my heart. “You don’t have to do it.”

“Do what?” Her hands clamped on top of mine, halting the strokes of my thumbs.

“You don’t have to forgive me,” I breathed.

“What the...?” My love tilted her head, genuinely perplexed.

“Or stay with me.” The words ripping my heart in two were brought forth, giving her a free pass in case the amount

of shit between us was the last straw for her. “I’ll understand if you want to divorce me.”

“Divorce you?”

“Yes, Justine.” I released her face and collapsed my back against the window, using the last of my strength, trying to appear like I was leaning casually.

Like her answer wouldn’t devastate me.

But as a last selfless act, I wanted to give her this, the chance to live life how she always imagined it to be. Because a flower in an environment not fit for it was bound to wilt, sooner or later, and I refused to see her wilt.

“I said you could leave. I’m not backing down from my word. Should a divorce be what you want, Tina, it’s yours.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Justine

I SPUN on my heels, walking out of Roman's office. I passed by Stuart's empty one, then jogged down to the ground floor. My sneakers thumped loudly on the brass stairs as I took them two at a time, bringing the traders' eyes up from their phones and computers.

Some were discreet about it, lowering their eyes as soon as I passed by them, others flat out staring back at me.

At the daughter.

The wife.

The useless.

And now the disposable.

Don't you dare cry.

I bowed my head, keeping to myself, sinking further into the trail of poisonous thoughts. Roman and I had managed to build ourselves from scratch and put in a shit ton of effort to get to the good place we were today. We loved one another, promised to have futures together, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, for as long as we both shall live.

That was our bond.

So why did he go and bring up divorce?

This one word entailed a whole world in it, of letting go, of not trusting me to be strong enough to hold on to him through whatever life hurled at us, of our relationship being expendable.

My legs marched on, and so did the wheels in my head.

I thought of him.

The boy I loved, who had tackled heavy shit almost by himself for over thirteen years.

The man I loved even more, who had apparently reached his limit.

The human who'd given everything to me, who was willing to give me my freedom and be left alone.

My person.

I turned after already reaching the glass doors that led to the lobby, intent on climbing back to his office and setting him straight, forcing him to get it into his obstinate head that he was stuck with me for life, that I wasn't letting go.

Swiveling on my feet, instead of heading toward the stairs, I was hit by a brick wall. A brick wall smelling like a familiar cologne. My husband.

Roman gripped my wrist, balancing me when I almost tripped to the floor. His black eyes narrowed, their corners wrinkled in pain. "Don't go."

He understood he had made a mistake; I knew from his body language without him needing to breathe a word. But for us to be together forever, for the long haul without this torturous back and forth, I couldn't chase him anymore. It was Roman's turn now to state his intentions, his promises to me loud and clear.

I leaned into him, speaking in barely a whisper as too many eyes were on us. "*Don't go as in I have divorce papers upstairs for you to sign?*"

He raked a hand over his neatly trimmed scruff. "Justine..."

"No, I'm serious." My maneuvers to reclaim my hand were met with solid resistance. He didn't hurt me, he just...held me, in that silence *I'm not going* way of his, driving every single emotion up from my heart and to the backs of my eyes.

“You can’t do this to me. You can’t live inside your head, alone, when you say you want us to be a couple. You think I wronged you? Come to me. You want to protect me? Ask me if I need saving. Consult me on how we can guard each other as. A. Team.”

Roman’s sweet, caressing lips brushed over my knuckles. “You’re right.”

But I wasn’t done. “This one-side approach isn’t working. These separations...fuck.” The damn tears blurred my vision, the wave of emotions clogging my throat.

It didn’t shame me—crying and speaking in clipped syllables. They were a part of my identity, markers of the pain he caused from him shutting me out of his life. He should’ve been aware of what being separated from him did to me.

“When you walk away, it’s like a knife to the heart, Ro. It’s gutting my insides. It’s not fucking fair to either one of us.”

“May I speak?”

“Not yet.” I inhaled, oxygen seeping into my lungs, enough for me to finish what I had to say. “What’s worse? It isn’t like you to quit. That’s what wrecks me the most. You know it’s wrong for us to be apart, you have a fight in you unlike any other person in this whole fucking universe, and yet you’re doing it again, when we’re so close to happiness.”

The agonized gaze hadn’t left him when he repeated his question, “May I speak?”

“Yes, you may.” I sighed, fully and thoroughly done.

As if in slow motion, for his whole firm to see, Roman lowered to one knee, my wrist remaining in his firm hold. My head spun from left to right. The traders, analysts, the office’s administrators—they all huddled around us. They gave up their stealth mode while we were busy talking, their smiling faces crowding my vision. I bet we were quite the sight, a married couple going through a proposal.

“Over here.” Roman flexed his fingers on the inside of my palm. “No one besides you and me, right?”

I bobbed my head, stunned silent by his public display. “Us.”

“Yeah, us.” A smirk crept up his face, then vanished with a formal cough.

“Justine Noelle Gallagher, from the first moment I laid my eyes on your big hazel ones, you owned me. It doesn’t matter that I had eighteen months of life in me, or that I don’t remember it even happening. Life made it so that I. Was. Yours. When you smiled, my world brightened; when you cried, my chest constricted as though the hurt was my own; and when you danced, oh well, I’m no dancer but I adored the life out of watching you move. I’ll never tire of that.

“Justine, you were, are, and will forever be the most beautiful, precious, and special person in my life. Without you, no amount of money or prestige holds any value to me. I’m as good as broke if you’re not by my side. You’re so perfect, beyond perfect, and I don’t feel worthy of you, never have, but I’ll work hard to be. Every day of my life, I’ll work to be worthy of your love, of being your partner.”

“Roman...” Breathing became a chore, my heart galloping, bruising my rib cage with its intensity.

“Not finished,” it was my husband’s turn to say. “I fucked up, Tina, twice, and both were seriously bad. For a long period of time too, the fucking overachiever that I am.”

The room broke into laughter, while I was sob-crying. Stuart never would’ve permitted a scene like that to happen, but even with him gone, I assumed Roman would’ve done exactly the same.

“And what an asshole I was, wasn’t I?” When someone hooted, Roman yelled without gazing away from me, his smirk reappearing. “Only she gets to call me that, assholes.”

I clenched my hands on his. “The answer is—”

“I love you.” He didn’t let me stop him. “I’ve been in love with you my whole life. Even when our relationship was in the gutter, which I’ll make up for in any way I can, I loved and adored you. I’ll do anything in my power to ensure you’ll be protected, to be honest and vulnerable and treat you as my equal, because that’s what we are. You’re a part of me, you run through my blood, the flesh on my bones. You’re the Buttercup to my Farm Boy, the Highness to my Stanley. You’ll be my Tina, and I’ll be your Ro. Forever. Say yes.”

Fresh tears poured down my cheeks. The universe ceased to exist.

“Please.”

“And you’ll do what?”

Roman seemed puzzled, a confusion which lasted less than a minute. He straightened up, his lips quirking to the side. A crack formed in the black of his eyes, a mischievous gleam penetrating through it.

My forever person leaned to my lips, whispering against them, “As you wish. I’ll always do as you wish.”

EPILOGUE

Justine

THREE YEARS LATER

“ELSIE, I hope you have another phone, or a camera lying around here somewhere. Sheesh, the number of photos your husband is taking of Ariel.” Kennedy wobbled into the kitchen from the porch, rubbing her huge, week thirty-seven stomach. Another Gallagher, or more accurately a Conaway, was preparing herself to emerge out into the world.

It'd been a big, elaborate gathering to arrange, given everyone's schedules and how quickly we wanted to tell the boys together as soon as Alda, Elsie, and I found out we were pregnant in the exact same week.

Alda and Noah caught a plane a day before the filming of their latest movie ended, leaving the final details to Bold & Better, the production company that collaborated with Noah and Kyle's Breathe to Life Productions.

Kyle and Elsie were in Chicago for their quarterly trip of both visiting her family and checking up on Kyle's author clients, Floyd in particular.

Kennedy had her hands full from managing her clothing stores in NYC throughout her entire pregnancy, and Emmet postponed meetings for potential start-up investments to the following week.

Last but not least were my husband and me. Roman did some rescheduling, which wasn't a chore since he didn't work as many hours as he used to after showing Stuart the door. He hired Edith's daughter, Everleigh, to take my dad's place and promoted Riley to the position of co-CEO. He'd eyed that

move for a while, doing his best to clear up the weekends for family time and being home for early dinners.

I, however, added hours to my volunteering, both as a tutor and managing the creative writing program in the School is Cool center. I allocated most of Stuart's fortune into its expansion, contributing to the arts program Erin Cooke donated to and managed herself. Roman and I even flew out to Boston to meet her, her husband Thomas, and their twins, and imagine our surprise when we discovered their best friend was the partner at the law firm that handles Roman's affairs.

Then again, Roman and I were true believers in fate, so maybe we weren't so surprised after all. But I digress.

Through joined forces of us three girls, we brought the ten of us for a week at Roman's and my house in the Hamptons, all the while keeping to ourselves the reason we needed to meet on very short notice.

Alda, Elsie, and I had colluded in the kitchen before our big announcement, sending the men to the deck to play with the kids, and the unsuspecting Kennedy to rest alongside them.

Well, an unsuspecting Ken up until the moment she entered the kitchen, causing the three of us to quiet, unusually so.

She ambled closer, raising an eyebrow. "What are you guys up to?"

"Nothing," we said in unison.

Then Elsie lost it, darting to the guest bathroom and puking her heart out. Alda and I had our mouths gaping, totally befuddled. She looked fine less than a minute ago.

Oh, well.

"This"—Kennedy smiled widely, pointing in Elsie's direction as she dragged her feet to the kitchen—"is not nothing. Congratulations, Mrs. Turner. Does the photographer father know?"

"I found out last week. Same as these two." Elsie clamped her hand on her mouth, this time not from a bout of nausea.

She glanced at the two of us, her eyes wide. “Shit. Sorry.”

Kennedy gasped, then her shoulders shook with laughter. “Fuck me to Wednesday, I heard about synced cycles, but synced pregnancies?”

We stared at her, synchronizing our shrug, too.

“And holy shit does that mean I’m going to be an aunt? And my parents grandparents twice in less than a year?!”

“Fingers crossed.” I grinned, sensing a twinge of nausea starting to creep up on me too. It didn’t matter. The giddiness I felt skyrocketed each day for the past two weeks since the two stripes appeared on my pregnancy test. And as if carrying a half Roman, half me inside myself didn’t bathe me with enough joy to last an eternity, giving my in-laws another reason to rejoice besides Ken’s pregnancy and Stuart acting nice sure as fuck did.

Yes, my father needed his world turned upside down to stop being such a monster and start appreciating life and the people in it. Michael, Roman’s dad, had accepted Stuart’s acts of kindness and friendly dinners like nothing had happened. Me, though? I’d taken my time. Twenty-eight years of mistreatment and witnessing what true evil the man was capable of weren’t something you swept under the rug, even when you believed everyone deserves forgiveness. We’d get there, though. Probably in nine months’ time.

Kennedy rounded the island to hug me, her cute belly bumping into mine. When she pulled back, she asked, “Little Roomie has no clue either, does he?”

I shook my head, my smile stuck in place.

“Men.” Kennedy laughed, continuing to embrace my friends and congratulating them. “So, what’s the plan?”

Alda turned to the cabinets, drawing out two small pieces of paper and one sealed inside a plastic bag pregnancy test, placing them on the counter. “We’re going to recreate our proposals.”

“Although only two of them were sweet,” Elsie continued.

“Let’s just say I was inspired by Roman’s way of pulling me into marriage.” I picked up my test, sticking it in the back of my jeans. “Every man will get as good as he gave. It’s first impressions that count.”

Winking, I swiveled my sister-in-law toward the direction where she came from. I massaged her shoulders once, giving her a light shove. “Now, go outside, tell them we had synchronized pee or something.”

“Elsie should go first,” Alda said, eyeing our pale friend warily. “No offense or anything, but I don’t know how long you’re going to last.”

Elsie took a sip of the water I offered her, nodding. “Yeah, makes sense. Good thing I wrote it down, my brain is mush.”

When she put the glass away, I held both their hands. Excitement seeped through my pores, into my skin, raising a tingling sensation to my eyes. The kind that dampened them, but in the best way possible. The happy way. “Ready, ladies?”

“So ready,” Alda whispered.

“Dying-to-sit sort of ready.” Elsie laughed. “Kidding. Never been more ready in my life. Can’t wait to see their faces. Too bad the kids don’t understand.”

I kissed her cheek. “Maybe it’s for the best; we don’t want them dying of all the *Mommy loves Daddy* declarations.” A tear dropped down her cheek, and I broke our contact to wipe it off her. “That’s our cue to leave. Besides, I’ve been hiding enough from Roman to last me a lifetime; I need this to be done.”

We all nodded at each other, going out through the French doors to the deck.

“Els, you have to see what Ariel just did...” Kyle called out to her. Then he saw her pale face, picked up their two-year-old girl, and strode to where she stood in three large steps, wrapping an arm around her. “...Els? What’s wrong?”

“Mama!” the auburn-haired Ariel called.

“Mama’s here, baby.” Elsie soothed her, smiling meekly while allowing him to lead her to one of the long deck chairs. Seven sets of eyes, even little Elijah’s, were transfixed on the three of them. With Ariel in his lap, Kyle took Elsie’s feet as she relaxed into the diagonal backrest.

“You were okay half an hour ago.” Kyle stroked her ankles, his eyebrows knitting together. “Family’s okay?”

“They’re fine. I’m fine.” He took her outstretched hand. “I have something to say to you.”

Kyle’s gaze roamed the rest of us, her need to confide in him reminding him they weren’t alone. “Here?”

“Exactly here.” Her lungs expanded, her voice steady when she read from the note she pulled from her black jeans. “Mr. Turner, my husband, my everything. I say these words to you whenever I can, but I guess it wouldn’t hurt to say it one more time. I. Love. You. You’ve shown up for me since day one, and you keep proving what an amazing, devoted partner and father you are at any given moment. When I was lost in the dark, you found me. You taught me to embrace all of me, same as you do with our Ariel.” Elsie paused, scrunching her nose. “Same as you’ll do with her baby brother or sister.”

At first Kyle lowered her chin, expecting her to continue. Then his eyes widened, understanding dawning in them. His hand stopped its caresses, a huff of a laugh escaping from his lips.

“You’re shitting me.” His Boston accent returned full force, completely unbothered by the curse word in front of their daughter.

“Nope.”

“We’re pregnant.”

“Yup.”

Kyle kissed Ariel’s head, placing her slowly on the wood floor before scooping Elsie into a hug. He cupped her cheeks,

peppering her with soft kisses and whispering, “I love you so much. Thank you. I love you. I’ll be the best father, again. And. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said.

Just as Kyle gathered his daughter into their embrace, Alda, who took the chair next to Noah who had their son Elijah in his lap, pulled a note out of her jeans as well. “I... um...I also have...news.”

“No way.” Noah stiffened beside her.

Roman’s soft laugh reverberated in his chest. “I need some popcorn for this.”

I rested my head on his shoulder, snuggling into his side and suppressing a laugh that wanted to sputter out of me. “You’re going to need to sit, more like it,” I whispered.

His chin grazed the top of my head when he twisted it to look at me. “What?”

“Shh.” I patted his arm. “Let me hear her.”

“Way, Noah Lear.” Alda caressed the scruff on his cheek, her eyes dancing from him to Elijah, eventually resting on her husband.

Her gold bracelets shone bright under the summer sky as she twirled them around and around. None of us spoke, anticipating the sound of her lovely, gentle voice.

“Noah, my first love, my biggest love, my only love. The four years we spent apart held the longest minutes I ever had to endure. You were everywhere and nowhere, a ghost of my mistakes and a phantom of my bleeding heart. Being yours and having you as mine again was the embodiment of what my soul yearned for. My miracle. My first miracle. Then Elijah blessed us, my second miracle.” Tears were streaming down her cheeks, her hands rubbing her belly. “But not the last.”

Noah maintained a serious expression while she spoke. His only tell, the one his closest friends could pick up on, was the longing in his eyes. For Alda, always for Alda. And despite his

somber nature and evident shock, his response had everyone laughing. “Is this the part where I say I do?”

He reached to wipe the tears off her smiling face, dragging her chair until the arms of each touched. He nuzzled her nose, saying, “Beautiful, I love you. I love all three of you. You’re the reason to my joy, the sun to my midnight, the utmost important people in my life. *You* are my miracle, *you* are my blessing. I’ll never tire of having more and more of you, of us. Ever.”

“Can’t wait for our reveal moment,” Roman spoke into my hair.

Thank God for the opening, I thought, unable to contain myself a second longer. I wiggled from his hold, swiping the crunched plastic from my jeans and grasping the stick like a torch between us.

“Ta-dah!” I exclaimed, pretty much stumped, thrilled, and *oh shit*, too fucking emotional to say anything else.

Everyone laughed and clapped, aside from Roman. He scanned me up and down, as though my husband had never seen me in his life. But I knew better. What he searched for were the signs he’d missed. We’d learned each other’s bodies, inside out, for the past three years, through honesty and trust and making up for moments lost. No wonder he felt lost as this huge-little detail escaped from under him.

“Tina...” he mouthed, hardly breathing. He was shocked, though that didn’t last long. At all. Roman swept me in the air with ease, his short, straight hair twirling when he spun us in circles. I clenched my arms around him, giving him everything in me, letting the stick drop to the floor.

We hadn’t been trying for more than a couple months, nor were we under any pressure to conceive, but fuck me if this didn’t feel good. And when Roman’s befuddlement transformed into pure elation, I knew we were riding the exact same wavelength.

He lowered me carefully, shaking his head and grinning. “When did you find out?”

“Less than two weeks ago.” The smile that tore at my cheeks wouldn’t leave, just like the rapid thudding of my heart. I was *joy*. “In my defense though, it was a surprise. I didn’t hide anything.”

“I’m surprised how well you pulled it off, but I don’t care that you did.” Roman kissed me every other word—forehead, eyes, cheeks, and lips. After a long kiss and Kennedy telling us to get a room, he rested his forehead on mine, murmuring in that sexy, low, husky voice of his, “Don’t I deserve a proposal?”

“I didn’t think you’d like a public one.” Although Roman’s cold attitude melted as we grew together, he was still, on the outside, a very somber man. An emotional reveal, at least in front of our friends, didn’t sound like something he’d like, so I left my letter upstairs for later.

His fingers flexed around my waist, pulling me closer. “I. Don’t. Care. I love you, to the core of my very being. From your hello’s to our into-the-night conversations, from your chaste kisses to these sexy grinds you call dancing when we go out, love all of it, public or not. Now tell me.”

“I’ll have to improvise.”

“I’m waiting.”

“Yeah, some of us, apparently almost half of us, are eating for two here, and we’re hungry.” Roman raised his middle finger to a laughing Kennedy, returning it to envelop me just as quickly.

“Here goes.” I stole another kiss, closed my eyes, breathed, and opened them to find the most exquisite black eyes staring right back at me.

“Ro, over the course of our thirty-one short years together and apart, you’ve been many, many things to me. My friend, my confidant, my defender, my savior. You were my enemy as well as the secret wish I never believed I’d get to fulfill, and I

loved through our trials and triumphs, through tears and laughter. It was *us*, the two of us, ugly and beautiful and messy and perfect. But now..." I unhooked his hands from my hips, guiding them to my navel. "Now it'll be the three, or four, or even five of us if we have triplets, I'm not picky. Truth is, I feel nothing but love. I'm so fucking in love."

"Me too." He brought our palms to his mouth, kissing my knuckles as his eyes glossed over. "From the moment I saw you and until the moment I close my eyes, I'm always and forever in love with you."

The End.

Thank you for reading *Marrying a Writer*!

If Justine and Roman's story moved you or simply made you happy for a few hours, I'd be grateful to have a review from you :)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Marrying a Writer, hands down, was the most difficult book I ever wrote. I walked, breathed and dreamed this couple's story. They haunted me in my dreams and I had their playlist on repeat and their adventures on my mind for so long I'm sure I drove a handful of people nuts.

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To my readers, last but definitely not least. Thank you is too small of a form of appreciation, and grateful doesn't begin to describe what I'm feeling. But that's what I have and I'm sending both to you. Thank you for taking a chance on Justine, Roman and me. All my love.

Last but not least, to Ben Barnes. If you ever see this, thank you for inspiring my most loved character. This lady over here is obsessed with you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shani Haim has been a romantic at heart for as long as she can remember.

One of her greatest passions has always been reading, and she devoured anything that swept her away to faraway places.

From reading she made the transition to writing, falling in love with her flawed, broken, and full of soul characters one happily-ever-after at a time.

When she's not swooning over book boyfriends, she's practicing yoga, drinking unhealthy amount of coffee, or watching Netflix with her husband in their Tel Aviv home.

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Booklist and Future Releases

PROLOGUE

Excerpt from *When You Took My Heart* by Noah Lear

“PLEASE STAY,” I said.

I wasn’t one to beg, but for her I would—if it boiled down to either that or her leaving me. “I love you,” I blurted out, saying it as fast as my mouth allowed me.

In case she forgot.

My stomach was tied in knots as my mind tried to function, to remember when was the last time I told her how I felt.

Shit, shit. I didn’t share my feelings enough. I should have voiced them more often.

Or maybe she just forgot.

Nicole gasped and closed her eyes. When she opened them to look at me, the gaze in these light green gems was empty. They no longer sparkled for me. She’d checked out, already on the flight to Paris despite every physical aspect of them and her still here in my apartment.

To the naked eye nothing changed, yet through my eyes, regardless of the tears welling behind them and blurring my vision, nothing seemed the same.

Yes, the couch and the rug were where I put them the day I moved in, along with the guitar I’d been trying to play unsuccessfully for years. The hollow wooden instrument had been collecting dust since the beginning of summer, two months ago, when she returned.

With her here after four months of missing her so much it hurt, I didn’t even notice they were there. For all I cared, we were in an empty warehouse, she and I and our love.

The love I failed to show her.

Nicole let go of a tear of her own and it marked her olive skin in a smooth trail as it rolled down her cheek. A wave dying out on a sandy beach. For an instant, I craved to reach out and trace it with my finger. To taste the salty liquid on my tongue.

To be on that beach of hers.

I probably would've done it, had I not been so utterly dumbstruck by her statement. "It's done, Allan." Her words were thrown in my direction, small, sharp knives.

Each one hit me with precision, driving into my skin, slashing me apart. "I signed up to go and study abroad next year and I won't be canceling it."

Besides the visible tear she refused to wipe, her face demonstrated no sign of pain. Her lips were pressed together, hiding their fullness behind a white line. A border to keep me away from her.

She doesn't love you. The voice I had buried during her absence reared its ugly head. A bead of cold sweat ran down my spine at the thought it might be true, making me shiver involuntarily. I shoved it back to the pits where it originated. She did love me. She must have.

My Nicole's departure to Paris in less than ten days clouded my vision, my thoughts, my heart. The promises she made to return for good snapped one by one like twigs, so easily broken. If she ever truly meant them. If they weren't a mishap, thrown into space to appease my dire longing for her.

Whatever they were, I lived and breathed these promises for the past four months. They meant something to me.

And I refused to believe they meant nothing to her.

With every kiss, hug, call from near or far—the evidence of her love was scattered everywhere. The moment had come to show mine. "I'll stop investing so many hours in writing. I'll be with you as much as you want me to."

Her stern expression broke with the saddest smile I'd ever seen. "Allan, it's not that."

"Is it the money then?" I grasped at straws, refusing to believe it simply was her wanting to add more months on to her adventure. "If it's about the money then you don't have to worry. I'll work double shifts at the bar and pay back the deposits you made."

Nicole fell back on the mattress with a huff when I extended my hand to touch her. The long brown curls of hers sprawled on the pillow in wonderful disarray. "You're making it harder than it already is."

She nearly yelled, covering her eyes with the back of her palms and then looking at me. "I'm going. It's final and you'll have to accept it."

"By next year I'll be gone." I voiced a weak threat, my last resort in convincing her not to leave. "I'll move, and there'll be no us."

I regretted the ultimatum as soon as it left my mouth, wishing to take it back. Its impact, however, affected her and there was no returning from this.

A storm raged behind her eyes, a twister in a rainforest, and her brow furrowed so deep that lines creased on the smooth planes of her forehead. She spun the two gold bracelets on her left wrist furiously, the ones she received as a birthday gift from her late parents, the ones she clung to whenever something distressed her.

Heart-wrenching moments passed when even her breaths were inaudible. The only sound breaking the silence was Nicole cursing as she stumbled into my boots while collecting her clothes. Black shirt, black jeans, black underwear that I tore off of her were being placed back on in a reverse motion.

When my senses returned to me, I scrambled to my feet to help her. She shook her head and turned from me to pull her jeans up her hips.

Being mindful not to crowd her space again, I threw her name in the suffocating air between us. “Nicole?” I asked, suppressing the dire need to kiss her, erase these last fifteen minutes from our lives.

“If you want to leave, Allan, I won’t stop you.”

The ice in her tone made me freeze in my place.

Fight for us, I willed her through my thoughts as the pressure in my chest persisted, a rope cinching around my lungs.

Nicole had the qualities of a magnificent warrior and she manifested them there in my room. The slow intake of breath, the jut of her chin, the tight fists her small hands balled into. She fought her own self and for a split second I believed my mind had screamed loud enough to reach her.

When she sniffled, my hope grew. There was no telling what emotion stood behind the noise since she had her back to me. Being the selfish bastard I was, I hoped tears brought it on. Tears meant she cared.

This hope, along with the rest I held on to today, went up in smoke.

“I have to go.”

Boom. The door slammed shut.

The sound echoed in the apartment long after she went away. Even as more sounds echoed in it. Sounds of plates, glasses, and anything within my reach as they crashed into the wall.

CHAPTER ONE

Alda

“FUCK,” I hissed when the knock on the door nearly made me drop the mug in my hand.

It belonged to my recently passed *nonno*, grandpa in Italian. I wrapped my fingers tighter around it so as to not lose this memento of him.

The move to Brooklyn from my home in Boston for the last twenty-three years was long coming, though I wished it'd happened under better circumstances. When he passed and with my sister Lia living in Paris, any ties I had to the city were severed. Nor did I want to stay in a place with so many awful memories, after four long years of witnessing him slowly wither with every unsuccessful cancer treatment we tried.

We were able to afford the medical bills from my parents' inheritance, but unfortunately none of them worked against the Leukemia. On his deathbed he wished for me to chase my dreams, make the move I'd been talking about for ages, become the writer I always wanted to be.

I had every intention to make good on that promise.

But in that late afternoon, I had to protect his mug and see who might come and see me in a city full of strangers. I approached the door when I didn't hear any sounds from the hall. “Who's there?”

“Your new neighbors.” The two voices sing-songed as one.

I'd say their visit took me by surprise, though with how loud my movers were and the building being only three stories high, it probably shouldn't have.

The women on the other side sounded friendly. I cracked open the door, leaving on the chain lock just in case. A girl alone in a new city could never be safe enough.

Both ladies were young, near my age. The one closer to the door wore her wavy, auburn hair in fishtail braids and the other donned a half-up top knot as the rest of her straight, long brown hair cascaded down her back, and her large diamond earrings shone even in the dimly lit hall.

They seemed like good people, both beaming and waving at me.

“Or should I say old neighbors since you’re the new girl?” The auburn-haired one giggled. “Nice to meet you. I’m Elsie Jenkins and this is Justine Sutton.”

“Please, enter.” I returned their smiles and gave them my full name as well. “I’m Alda, Alda Ricci.”

“Alda? That’s an unusual name.” Justine perused me, her eyes flickering with interest. “But I like it, it suits you.”

“Thanks, I guess.” I tucked an unruly curl behind my ear and glanced around the house.

Cardboard boxes with my entire life packed inside them were strewn around the dusty loft. “Sorry the place is a mess.”

Elsie leaned against the door and shushed me. “Don’t be silly, we’ve all been there. We’re actually here to help.”

“Help?”

“Yes, help.” Her smile persisted at my disbelief. “This is why we rushed down here as soon as we saw the movers. So, unless you want to kick us out, we’ll be more than happy to assist you.”

With another quick look around the room, I nodded reflexively, not believing something good could happen to me. The number of boxes and amount of dust and dirt meant hours of labor, and the thought of unpacking brought on another wave of exhaustion on top of the one from the long drive.

Before we did any cleaning or unboxing, I had to thank them for their kindness. Being a bartender during my college years, I knew exactly how to do it. “Would you like wine?”

“Hello to my new favorite neighbor.” Justine’s giggles reverberated through the old loft.

“Umm hello?” Elsie elbowed her, giving her a stern glare laced with a smile.

“What?” Justine faked offense as her laugh died out. “You know I’m a sucker for wine.”

“We’d love some.” Elsie turned to me, ignoring her friend. “*Our* new favorite neighbor.”

They sat down and talked animatedly while I went through the boxes marked *fragile*, searching for tumblers. Next, I found the wine box with the bottle collection my nonno had for our evenings together. His ailment prevented us from drinking them, and a part of me felt like sharing them with other people was a betrayal.

Shaking it off, especially since I remembered how he loved me having a social life before they vanished, I headed to the dining table where my new friends sat.

“So, Alda, let me guess.” Elsie stroked her chin. “You’re either a writer or an aspiring writer. Correct?”

The hold I had on the bottle loosened before I fastened my grip on it just as fast. When I felt like it wouldn’t drop, my eyes inspected the floor around me to see if the notebook where I kept my notes had fallen out of my bag. *Nope, not on the floor.*

“How did you know?”

“Cool party trick, isn’t it?” She took the bottle from me, and Justine helped me with the glasses, placing them down on the table in front of us. “I’m not a clairvoyant or anything, but you’re at the right age, moved to Bushwick, and don’t have any paint stains, which is what a painter usually has.” She shrugged. “I made an educated guess.”

I sighed a laugh, the tension I had no idea I was holding in my chest rolling off me. Besides being a bartender and an inspiring writer, I operated a lifestyle blog with decent traffic.

It wasn't like I kept my identity a secret, but I looked forward to them liking me for who I was without prejudice about what they read online. Especially with the plethora of the online haters I had.

“Well, I'm still not a writer-writer.” I opened the bottle and kept on talking while I let it breathe. Sharing the wine with others was one thing, but the tradition had to be maintained. “I majored in English and have been writing a book of short fictional stories since my sophomore year.”

With the wine living and breathing and spreading its scent in my tight kitchen, I filled our glasses and sat down, then played with a splinter coming off the table. “I haven't published it yet or anything.”

“You don't need to be published to be called a writer.” Elsie placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “As long as you're writing.”

“So true. Elsie and I are writers too, even if we do it slowly and even if what we do write ends up stashed on our laptops under a locked file.” Justine raised her glass in my direction and took a sip. “Even if I'm an English tutor supported by her fart of a father and Elsie is a marketing manager for a publishing house instead of publishing herself.”

“Hey!” Elsie laughed at the blunt description.

Warmth spread throughout my belly, a combination of wine and the sentiment of being a part of a group. Sitting with them brought on a flashback to my younger years when the main topics of conversation weren't hospital appointments and chemo sessions and arranging funerals. Their giddiness consoled me, and my heart felt a little less broken in their company.

Elsie checked her phone and quickly placed it facedown. “A group of friends are meeting at a someone's house this

evening for a party if you're interested."

Enjoying the company of these two in the environment of my home felt safe with the grief still scraping at my heart. A party with lots of new people while being depressed with my sob story sounded less appealing.

"My clothes are still packed and I've got nothing to wear." The excuse sounded lame even to my own ears.

"Let's get this unloading party started then." Justine poured us more wine, filling the glasses to the brim and handing them to us. "We're not supposed to drink and drive, but we most certainly can drink and clean. In fact, cleaning sober should be outlawed in my opinion."

"I second that." Elsie gulped down her drink, got to her feet, and placed her hands on her hips, inspecting the apartment. "You tell us what goes where and we'll make sure you'll have something to wear by the time we have to leave."

Their expressions implied they weren't going to take no for an answer and with a heavy sigh and no other excuses, I agreed. We unpacked, organized, and cleaned the entire place, making the house look more like a home.

When we finished, we stood at the doorway, observing our accomplishments with the front of our shirts covered in dust and dirt while satisfied smiles decorated our faces.

Elsie wiped her hands on her shirt and turned to walk out. "Meet you here in an hour?"

"See you then."



When we arrived at the party, the place was swarmed with people from the age of twenty to probably forty and over. There were so many of them that I barely saw their faces, strolling in and out of rooms, leaning casually on the walls and having conversations with plastic cups in their hands or

cramming outside on the balcony, where the cigarette smoke came from.

Their laid-back attitudes and casual outfits of jeans and plain T-shirts or flannel shirts rubbed off on me. The unnerving feeling of this being too soon to start going out all but faded.

“Creed, Jane, this is Alda, our new neighbor.” Justine addressed a couple who lounged in the kitchen, leaning against the counter as we went there to get our drinks.

“Welcome to the neighborhood.” Jane nodded at me. “Where are you from?”

“Boston.” I thanked Justine when she passed me my cup, and filled two more for her and Elsie. Thankfully, she stuck to wine instead of mixing it with the many other drinks. “It’s my first night here.”

“That’s awesome.” Her blue eyes gleamed under the orange light from the hanging lamp. “If you need friends to commiserate with over the roaches, we’re here for you.”

Justine leaned in as we left to search for Elsie. “She’s exaggerating. There’s like one, maybe two a month tops.” She raised her head to scour the room. “Where is that girl? Do you see her?”

Following her lead, I twisted my head and scanned the groups of people with squinted eyes, when I locked in on the tall man who strolled in from the balcony.

As if he didn’t have a care in the world. As if the sight of him alone didn’t make everyone else disappear, making him the sole focus of my attention.

He wore his dark blond hair longer than last time I saw him, and his tattoo sleeves covered his arms down to his wrists besides the older one I recognized on the front of his palm, the star shaped one. I’d caught on these changes on television, and yet I couldn’t get over the shock of seeing them in person.

Because other than the tattoos, nothing had changed about the brown-eyed boy who left me all those years ago.

The boy who tore out a piece of my soul.

Noah.

No air came in or out of my lungs. They were crushed under the weight of years' worth of love, abandonment, and loneliness that this man's existence brought on me. The weight felt as heavy as the day he released me, the day I understood what it felt like to have someone's boot crushing my chest.

My body was trapped in this no-breathing, no-moving limbo. Running far, far from here like I urged my limbs to do turned out physically impossible and I stared dumbly at Noah, gravitating towards him right along with every other person in the room.

"Earth to Alda." Justine waved her hand in front of me, bringing the room back to focus.

"I—I'm here."

She stirred me awake at the exact same moment Noah's head lifted slowly in my direction. The magnetic force between us worked both ways. Whatever conversation he took part in ceased and when his eyes found mine, our gazes locked, no one interrupting us.

When he looked at me, the years of stagnation were woken by his pull, a pull he and no other had on my heart. The identical all-consuming pull he had had on me since the very first eye contact we made almost five years ago.

And when his lips curved up to the side showing a flash of his teeth, I knew I was doomed.

There was no escaping Noah Lear.

Kissing a Writer

Available on Amazon: <https://amzn.to/3NYBGuv>

Sneak Peek of Loving a Writer: Elsie and Kyle's story in Book
#2 in The Writer series

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PROLOGUE

Kyle

FOUR MONTHS AGO

A FULL head of thick, auburn hair, sparkling blue eyes, a mesmerizing smile, and blushing from the compliment I gave her.

Beautiful.

No, not beautiful.

Freaking perfect.

I'd seen her somewhere, I just couldn't place it. How the hell could I have not remembered with an aura like hers?

"The reading is about to start." My friend Noah's voice was a blur. From the corner of my eye, I registered him nodding his head forward. "Let's grab a seat over there."

Tearing my eyes from her took an effort. I felt drawn, like fate struck an invisible lightning bolt between us. A literary agent meeting the perfect woman in a bookstore—what are the odds?

Noah elbowed me when I didn't so much as wink, and that stirred me from gawking at her.

I looked toward the direction he signaled, five available spots one next to the other. "Yeah, there is fine."

Our small group wandered over, Noah sat at the far end, next to him his girl Alda, then her friend Justine. And, as fate would want it, Elsie sat last.

On the chair at my side.

She glanced at me, resting her delicate chin on her shoulder.

Her lips curved up. “Hi again.”

“Hey.” I returned the smile, regaining some of my composure. She didn’t seem like a woman who’d consider dating an ogling creep, so I tried to not come off as one.

“I have a good feeling about Hunter.”

For a moment I’d forgotten anything existed but her. “Who?”

“Hunter.” She chuckled, soft and sweet. “The one reading today. Ridge, the owner, said I should check out his work, so I’m here.”

“Oh yeah, the author.” I raked my hand through my hair, masking my embarrassment. “How do you know Ridge?”

“I’m a marketing manager at a publishing house, and we distribute our books here.”

The perfect woman also works with books. Sign number three, check.

“So, sometimes Ridge invites me to see authors he thinks have that something extra.”

“Shhh.” Justine gave us a meaningful stare as Hunter appeared behind the reader’s table.

Elsie’s blush returned to her cheeks, equally beautiful as before. “Oops. Well, then nice meeting you, Kyle...?”

“Turner.” The lump in my throat swelled. I gulped, shoving it down, then offered her my hand. “You?”

“Jenkins,” she whispered a name I vowed I’d never forget. A beautiful name like the beautiful woman she was.

Elsie Jenkins.

Available on [Amazon](#)

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