



MR.

MONROE

BILLIONAIRES' CLUB BOOK 6

RAYLIN MARKS

Mr Monroe

BILLIONAIRES' CLUB

BOOK SIX

RAYLIN MARKS

Dedication

For my readers

You all have no idea how much I cherish each and every one of you. I know you've waited forever for this book, and it's finally here. I hope you enjoy it, and I want to thank you for having patience with me while waiting for it.

This book and this entire series is dedicated to all of you!

It's all of your constant support and love that keeps me writing and always excited to bring you on all of these fun and unique journeys with these characters!

Thank you!

From the bottom of my heart!

Enjoy...

xoxo

Raylin

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Introduction

I sat across the table from Bree, my happily married best friend, and smirked. I watched as she pushed a caramelized carrot around her plate, her mind far from the dinner I'd dragged her to with a colleague from my real estate firm.

Polly had invited me to talk shop, I was sure, so I asked Bree to come and serve as a buffer, which she was happy to oblige. I wasn't the type to suffer through a work dinner on a Friday night. No, thank you.

"I feel sorry for you," I nearly whispered with a smile.

Her head snapped up, and then she glanced over to Polly, who was caught up in a conversation with a friend who'd stopped by our table five minutes ago. The two were going on about a missed dinner date or some such nonsense, and since I'd never met this Diane character before, I couldn't care less.

I was getting mildly impatient since we'd all faked our way through the meal, Polly acting as if she enjoyed working in the same real estate firm as me, even though I was her most formidable competitor. She'd been dying to take my number-one spot for years, but I was far too good at my job to let that happen. I was the best agent around, and everyone in Southern California knew it. That wasn't going to change now or ever, especially not at the hands of Polly fucking Koker.

I'd been invited to this dinner for a reason, however, and my patience was growing thin while I waited to find out why. My guess was that this was about the Kirby deal, but I wasn't going to find that out if goddamn *Diane* didn't stop bitching about her missed connection.

"Don't worry. You haven't missed anything interesting, and you've not been caught sulking by anyone but me," I smirked and winked knowingly at Bree.

"I guess I'm just not in the mood to be out on a Friday night after all, you know?" Bree answered, trying not to show her irritation.

"Oh, do I ever know these things with you, Bree Grayson," I said, leaning over the table toward her. "That's why I feel sorry for you. I will *never*—mark my words, *never*—find myself in your pathetic situation."

"Pathetic situation?" Polly said, bringing her attention back to us now that her friend was gone. "Oh, dear," she covered her heart while I narrowed my eyes at her fake dramatics, "don't tell me it's about you and Alex?"

She stopped herself, and I wanted to roll my eyes at her inference. This woman was among many on the long list of women who'd have loved for Bree and Alex's marriage to fail so that the handsome billionaire would be back on the market again.

"Interesting," I said, eyeing the woman, sipping my cocktail. "You act like you almost *want* this to be about her and Alex with the way you jump to that conclusion."

"Nat, I'm not trying to act like I know what Alex would've done to cause Bree to have difficulty being out tonight," Polly offered.

Bree went to respond, but I reached across the table, patted her hand, and gave my girl a knowing smile, pleading with her to go along with this for me. Polly was not only a snake in business, but whenever it came to money, she would sink her venomous fangs into you and try to destroy you from the inside out.

“I know you’re not trying to *act* like you know, darling,” I simply stated, “but I would be ashamed if *I* were the one *acting* like I didn’t know what you were getting at. I suppose you are right, though. Alex is the reason why Bree is sulking tonight, completely disenchanted with us and our dinner.”

“What’s going on?” Polly urged, brushing her copper hair over her shoulder and leaning forward to hear better.

“It’s embarrassing, really,” Bree played along, knowing Polly couldn’t care less about her problems. Women like Polly only cared about whether Alex Grayson was going back on the auction block.

I wouldn’t have been surprised if that was why I’d been invited to dinner, and not because of the Kirby deal, but I think this was about Polly wanting to keep friends close and enemies closer. She and I were in a bidding war to land a massive commission for a developer. Bree and Alex’s company was in the mix too, and with their world-renowned architecture firm in *my* back pocket, Polly knew my chances of landing this deal were almost unbeatable.

“Is that Alex?” Polly questioned after Bree was interrupted by a text.

Could anyone possibly be so desperate? The woman had to have been drunk.

“Sorry, and no, it wasn’t Alex,” Bree answered. Her eyes told me she was thinking the same thing I was, that this woman was practically begging for Alex and Bree to split. So pathetic. “This is all kind of embarrassing,” she said, mainly to me now.

“I would be embarrassed,” I said, sipping my appletini. “It’s just not right. Thus, no one will ever catch me in your shoes. I refuse to let marriage ruin one single night of my life. I can’t even imagine what you go through, honey.”

“That’s you, though, Nat.” Polly paused, and a tight-lipped smirk kissed the corner of her mouth as she looked at Bree and sighed. “And poor Breanne. You, dear, are just a hopeless romantic, and these things happen to people like you. Sometimes it’s too good to be true.” She sat back in her chair smugly. “Thank God you decided to come out tonight. I can’t imagine you sitting at home alone like this.”

“You’re so right,” Bree responded, nodding her head as if she’d been imparted with wisdom. “I can’t imagine myself at home alone either.”

“Especially in that twenty-thousand square-foot home?” I said as if the size of the house offended me. But, in reality, it impressed me beyond imagination.

“Well, if it helps, I’m sort of going through the same thing,” Polly sighed, and now my attention was stolen, and my curiosity piqued. “Well, it’s just a touch different.”

“You?” I hung onto the word, not meaning to sound too dramatic, but I failed at covering my surprise. “You’re in a relationship that has lasted for more than one night?”

“You’re one to talk, Nat,” she answered dryly.

“I *am* one to talk. And, hey, I’m not ashamed that the idea of having one man in my life for an extended amount of time gives me panic attacks. It’s who I am. You, however, are not me.”

My admittedly dysfunctional view of relationships was not news here. The interesting subject matter was that Polly had admitted to being in a relationship and feeling connected to Bree’s fake heartache.

“What’s going on, Polly?” Bree asked.

Polly exhaled, “Mr. Kirby, you know, the developer?”

“Mr. Kirby? You mean Dick?” I said, a little too high-pitched and excited at this conversation turn.

“His name is Richard,” Polly snapped at me.

“I know him as Dick, and he knows exactly why,” I said in my usual sexy voice, prompting Bree to cover her laugh.

“Oh?” Polly’s voice cracked like ice, and the woman’s darker side began to show.

Alcohol was in play here, so I didn’t want to burn bridges over this deal and make enemies, so I backed off a little.

“You wish,” Bree said, saving me before I could save myself.

“True,” I conceded, “I just call him Dick, but rest assured, I’ve never been anywhere near his.”

“Well,” Polly’s smile crept back with a vengeance, “he allowed me plenty of time near his, and if that man weren’t married, I’d happily settle down with him in a snap.”

Bree and I nearly simultaneously choked on our cocktails at what Polly had openly confessed.

“Good God,” I said, unashamed of my tone. “Honey, you know the platinum rule, don’t you? Everyone knows. You don’t fuck with the married ones.”

My tone wasn’t judgmental, condescending, or meant to be harsh. On the contrary, it was a very justified warning, reminding Polly of the unwanted karma attached to moving into another woman’s domain. Not to mention the misery of being with an indecisive fucker. Being single was supposed to be fun, not miserable.

“Listen,” Polly said, her sudden humility somewhat disturbing me, “I know that. I just see it as more of a *one woman’s trash is another woman’s treasure* situation.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I answered.

“It’s a term some people say for getting rid of their junk in yard sales,” she answered.

“Yeah, I know that. I just—You can’t compare a woman’s marriage to a yard sale, Polly,” I returned. “Not only for the sake of this woman, who I’m confident has no idea her man is fucking you, but for yourself above all.”

“Richard says they’re miserable, and she hates him,” she answered. “He assumes she’s probably cheating on him.”

“And you saw this as your green light to fuck a married guy? I mean, I understand that there are irreparable marriages out there and a multitude of miserable couples who need to call it quits—my parents being ranked highest among them. And perhaps, in some rare cases, it takes meeting someone new to break that toxic cycle, so they take steps to dissolve the marriage, but none of that makes it a yard sale situation, sweetheart.”

“You have no idea what kind of a situation it is,” she said, growing flustered.

“Oh, but I do. It doesn’t take a genius mind like mine to recognize that this is bad news for you. The mere idea of succumbing to a married man’s charms—a man on business while the wife is in another country—makes me shudder. The words *I’m married* raise a red flag, and I don’t hear anything else after that; nothing about how sad or lonely they are or how *mean* their wife is. It’s a load of shit they need to tell their therapist about, and last I checked, I don’t have a degree in psychology.”

“You don’t have to be a bitch. It’s none of your business what I do personally, Nat.”

“Yes, you’re right, it is none of my business, but somehow, you made it my business since I’m trying to land a deal with this philanderer. And land this deal I will, regardless of whether he is using you as his fuck buddy while in the states.”

I watched tears pool in her eyes. She was already in too deep, listening to charming words from a weasel and a coward, using her as some side chick while not attempting to dissolve his so-called miserable marriage.

I ordinarily wouldn’t have given half a fuck about any of this, but I wanted this deal and my monumental commission. Deep down, something else drove me to be a saint for a minute—apparently, I needed to make up for some bad behavior so as not to burn in hell—and here I was, acting like Oprah and trying to impart wisdom about not fucking around with a married man.

“He won’t break my heart,” she said after we grew quiet. “I know he loves me. He said he and I met for a reason and that I was an answer to his prayers.”

Classic words to keep a vulnerable soul around.

“Of course, he told you that, or you wouldn’t believe his chicken shit lies, telling you he is miserable with the wife he never plans on leaving.”

“Dear God,” Bree said and rubbed her forehead. “Polly, everyone knows that married men always return to their wives. Your relationship is probably even what’s making him appreciate her more. Don’t do this to yourself.”

“Bree’s right,” I added. “Dick has a lot of wealth and power. Do you honestly think he will give up his image because he wants to settle down with some hot American real estate agent? It would expose him as the dirtbag he is. People like that don’t soil their reputation with divorce.”

I didn’t need to get started on my views of spouses doing spiteful shit like this to each other and my prejudices of married men being predators, looking for the next piece of ass because they were too chicken shit to just end their marriages. I couldn’t go too hard on Polly, though. I saw the look in her eye that said she’d already given this liar her heart because he told her exactly what she needed to hear. It was heartless and brutal if you asked me. But the best part was that I could be just as vicious with these cowards. These men—like my father—ruined everyone’s lives they touched, and somehow, they could still look at themselves in the mirror every morning.

“You fell for him, didn’t you?” I wanted to hear it from her mouth.

She shook her head. “You guys don’t understand. None of the men I’ve been with have treated me as well as he has. I love him, and I’ll appreciate it if we can end this conversation here and now. You don’t know who he is or anything about his feelings for me. He’s not some random cheating husband. He’s

in love with me, even if he is stuck in that miserable marriage for now.”

“This is the horror of marriage,” I bluntly stated, possibly a little too loud. “Whether this man truly loves you or not, if he hasn’t ended things with his wife, he’s not planning on doing so any time soon. Or ever.”

“You don’t know that,” Polly returned lethally.

This shit was hopeless. I was done with the conversation but not with Dick Kirby. I guess it was easy to see that I hated married men who played like they were single just to get attention.

“Fine,” I said, sipping my cocktail. “Your love for this man won’t stop me from landing this deal and burying him. Forgive me if I’m not so gentle with men who play games on a personal level.”

“Burying him?” Polly arched an eyebrow at me, warning me as she protected that cheating mother fucker. “I won’t let you do that.”

I smiled at her. “Hold tight to his neck, honey, because you gave me all the motivation I need to use Alex and Bree to spike this bid well over what Dick wants to pay. And he will pay it because I’ve never met a desperate and lonely man who would turn my sexy ass down.”

“So, after everything I confided in you, you’re going to use it to sleep with him?” she said more insecurely than angrily, to my surprise.

“You believe you’re in love with this man, who will soon leave his wife, yet there is already zero trust in him,” I said.

“You’re a whore,” she snapped.

“I’ve been called worse, but I’m not allowing that man within inches of my body; however, a little heavy flirting will get me the deal I want and send him back to the wife he was never planning to leave in the first place. Trust me, you’re in too deep already, and you’ll thank me for this later. Married men never leave their wives.” Bree rose with me as I grabbed my clutch in preparation to leave. “And don’t call women whores. There’s no shame in a woman getting around as much as she goddamn well pleases. It really is the laziest insult.”

I finished with a hint of pride for saving this woman a lot of grief and heartache, knowing I’d be rewarded by nailing this fucker with a hefty bid he couldn’t refuse. I suddenly felt renewed and restored, knowing my time tonight was not wasted.

We stood outside the restaurant, waiting for the valet to bring the car, when I heard a deep, sexy voice utter my name.

“If it isn’t the elusive Natalia Hoover.”

I couldn’t spin around fast enough to get an eyeful of whoever wanted a piece of—*Ah, fuck!*

Dear God, why? Now, I was face-to-face with him, and the glaring reminder that there were a lot more dicks in the world beyond Dick Kirby.

“Spencer Monroe,” I acknowledged the sexy billionaire, who was uncatchable and untouchable. Polly could have used this man to get over that married asshole, but Spence was just as toxic, in my opinion.

We were in a stare-off as Bree caught up and smiled at her husband’s friend and business partner.

“Hey, Spence,” Bree said, trying to cut through the sudden tension that crackled in the air between us.

“I truly feel that if I never saw you again, it would be far too soon,” I said before he could answer Bree’s cheerful greeting.

“You insult me every time you see me. This is not war, you know?” he responded, unashamed as always and making me angry with his flirty grin.

Aside from our insulting sexual experience, which I was certain I would never get over, he was devastatingly handsome. Unfortunately, and much to my dismay, the chill running down my spine confirmed what the heat between my legs was begging for. I *wanted* this man.

Perhaps it was the alcohol that was evoking my horniness because I usually wasn’t so reactive to any man, especially Spencer Monroe.

“Good evening, Breanne. How’s Alex?” Spencer finally managed to return Bree’s greeting.

“He’s good. At home with the twins while I’m out,” she smiled.

“And from the conversation I overheard at your table, I’m assuming Polly Koker is not sleeping with *your* married man, then?”

I rolled my eyes. “Do I look like I would sit casually at a table with anyone who would dare to hurt one of my friends?” I said, irritated with myself that I felt the need to respond, and when I did, my response sounded quite dumb.

“You couldn’t hurt a fly, Ms. Hoover,” Spence taunted while Bree checked her phone again.

“How would you know, Mr. Monroe? You obviously couldn’t nail an orgasm with me without being distracted

enough to answer your phone, so you have *no idea* what I am capable of.”

Bree dropped her phone after I said that too loud, and because I was in this stupid standoff with this dreadful asshole, I ignored that her case had popped off and gone one way while her phone went the other.

Spencer broke the stare, and in true gentleman fashion, he walked to the right and snatched up her phone while Bree fumbled for the case on the floor.

My night had turned on me, and I was over this place and everyone in it.

“I think Nat’s had one too many tonight,” Bree covered for me, seeing my expression and knowing it was time to dip out of here.

“Seems so,” Spencer responded while my eyes narrowed at him.

The truth was, I wished I’d had one too many tonight so I could shrug this asshole off. Spencer Monroe had insulted me in the worst way possible, by answering his goddamn phone mid-thrust right when I was about to climax.

I couldn’t think of a bigger insult from a man. Maybe I was just that simple of a woman, or maybe I wasn’t. I didn’t know. Nor did I care. I also didn’t ask for this run-in and reminder of *that* hopeless sexual experience again.

“Bree, you were missing Alex and the twins at dinner, and suddenly, all I want is to relax at your place with one of your chick flicks. I’m ready when you are.”

“It was lovely to see you again, Nat,” Spencer said with that sexy smile.

“All you want is another opportunity to prove yourself, and I will be the first to tell you that your business schemes may work on others, but they don’t work on me. So, save your charms for someone else.”

“Lovely to see you tonight too, Breanne. Tell Alex we can catch up when I return from business in London.”

He walked over to the valet stand and handed them his ticket.

“God, that man irritates the shit out of me,” I said, moving my shoulders as if I were shrugging off a nasty disease. “I do not lie when I say I can’t stand these ridiculous, unexpected run-ins with him.”

“Oh, Nat,” Bree rubbed my arm. “Of all the men you’ve been with, you’re the hardest on him. He’s part of our friend group, and you’ll eventually have to sit in the same room with him without sparring.”

“No. I don’t have to do anything that involves being in the same room with that man. I have boundaries.” I smiled at her.

Bree shook her head. “Does this sudden crappy mood mean we can go home and eat ice cream?”

“Bree, darling, whatever will I do with you and this sappy married life?”

“I know you love it,” she said.

“I love it because I love you and the family, but is this in my future? Absolutely not. I will not be a part of all the stresses that come with marriage. As I said, I enjoy my freedom.”

“Then you shall die a lonely maid,” she teased with her usual dramatics.

“Me, a maid? Never. And lonely? Do you even *know* who I am?”

We laughed, and the evening’s drama-filled events slowly slipped to the back of my mind, but there was one thing that didn’t, and that was ensuring I never came face-to-face with Spencer unexpectedly again.

No man insulted me and got away with it, and they certainly never got a second chance.

CHAPTER

One

SPENCER

I tilted my seat back and shut my eyes to enjoy my first minute of peace since I'd boarded the jet in London. I had nine more minutes of silence to indulge in before I went back to my computer and continued going through the background checks I'd requested for the companies I'd gone on this latest trip to investigate.

All in all, the week had gone as predictably well as every other trip I took to London these days, but for some reason, I was more drained than usual as I took the transatlantic flight back home on the luxurious company jet. I'd started frequenting the Beaufort Bar at the Savoy back when I'd graduated from Oxford, and it had been in that very bar where Jim Mitchell had given me the job offer that had changed everything for me. I would be the first to admit that it was a change for the better, but these trips to the UK had become more draining whenever I went. If I hadn't seen her text the week before, I would've assumed that Heidi had died without letting me know and was now haunting the city where she'd grown up.

Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!

I opened one eye and glared down at the phone vibrating on the polished mahogany table where all my work was spread

out in the usual *a bomb just went off* pattern that my friends always gave me shit for. I had to admit that they might have a point, but my way of working had gotten me to the top of my class at Oxford University, an honor also held by the one and only Jim Mitchell, who'd graduated two years ahead of me.

The very same son of a bitch who was calling me now.

I picked up the phone with a sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose as I sighed. "This had better be an emergency."

A throaty chuckle that sounded like a mix between thunder and a jungle cat rumbled down the line. "I'm sorry, have I interrupted one of your sweet naps, little Monroe?"

"Actually, yes, you twat, and they're more precious than sweet. Get it straight."

"*Twat?* Why is it that whenever you go to the UK, you come back sounding more and more like Gordon fucking Ramsey?"

"First off, leave my man out of this. Ramsey comes correct, whether anyone likes it or not. Second, I have no idea where that word came from. Who knows, call it the class factor, something you've never managed to grasp, despite your massively impressive education and even more massive ego." I knew nothing I said made any sense. I needed sleep, but there was no rest for the wicked. "Ignore my rambling. I'm too exhausted for this shit."

I heard Jim laugh; he knew my ass was fried. I never explained myself to anyone. I was a man who was steady on his course, and I didn't care what the next mother fucker thought of me. I handled shit and lit fucks on fire as I walked away. It's just who I was.

“What’s up?” I finally questioned, irritated I had shown some weakness to Jim.

“I got the files on the Liedenhaus acquisition,” Jim said, his voice becoming far more serious and subdued. “They came with an interesting email from Wendy herself, with some fascinating new demands for the expansion of the galleries. I just forwarded it to you.”

As usual, I could be dead ass tired, but once shit started getting real, I woke the fuck up and was ready to handle it like I’d just had twenty hours of sleep.

“I’m curious as to why I wasn’t CC’d on that email, but fuck me, right?” I answered, opening my laptop in annoyance. As I pulled up my email, I heard a door open on the other end of the phone and a sweet little voice say, “Daddy, can we go to the movies today?”

“What did Mommy say?” Jim answered the voice.

“She said to ask you. She said there’s a problem at the center that she’s working on, but Izzy and I want to see the new Minions movie.”

“Let me finish talking to Uncle Spence, honey, because I’m having a problem with work. Do you want to call Auntie Ash? Maybe you could go with her, John, and Kaley?”

“Throwing Ash under the bus, huh? I’m sure she’d *love* to go to the movies with four kids, Jim,” I said with a chuckle, my mind happily absorbed in this conversation.

“But we want to go with you, Daddy.”

“How about this?” Jim said, ignoring me. “Uncle Spence and I will finish this phone call as fast as possible, and then we’ll watch the movie and go get mac and cheese for dinner.”

“Okay!”

“You’re adorable,” I said as I heard the door shut. “Father of the fucking year, Mitch.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “Wait till you have kids.”

I chuckled, not bothering to remind him that would never happen. As much as I enjoyed being Uncle Spencer to Jim’s and the others’ kids, hell might have to reach an ungodly level of cold before I considered procreating.

I was too much of a cold-hearted bastard. Seriously, honey badgers probably had more of a conscience than I did.

“Jesus,” I said, looking over the email Jim forwarded to me. “What the hell is Wendy Lieden thinking? How does she believe she can demand this?”

“I’m not sure, but somehow she thinks that even though she’s keeping her job, creative control, *and* getting a massive payout, she can maintain control over the books and the financial expansion.”

“Do you think she has some kind of financial kink?”

“No idea, but it wouldn’t surprise me.” He groaned, and I heard his chair creak as he leaned back. I wouldn’t be surprised if he were putting his feet up on his immaculate wooden desk.

“Listen,” he said, “can you pull up the financials on Liedenhaus? We need a closer look at how they were bleeding money before we decided to acquire them.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” I said, pulling up the financials and beginning to draft the email in question, running the encryption to ensure that none of the delicate financial information leaked. It was a firm policy that any time we sent

e-communication with sensitive information, it was encrypted.
“Do you want to meet at the office to debrief about London?”

“No. Alex and Bree are having a barbecue, so come straight there, all right? Wendy should’ve gotten back to us by then anyway, so it’ll all be figured out.”

I did my best to ignore the familiar swooping in my stomach at the notion of who I’d be seeing at the friend’s house whose job I’d taken over. “They’re having a barbecue?”

“Yep, something for the twins. Don’t worry, it’s nothing formal, but their godparents will definitely be there, Sexy Spence.”

I groaned when I practically heard the smile in his voice at the nickname that Natalia Hoover had given me years ago at the time of our unfortunate hookup.

I’d not thought about Nat since I ran into her at Cornerstones in Los Angeles after she’d given an ear full to Polly Koker. I’d dismissed images of her svelte figure and any passionate ideas about her directly after her sexy ass left my presence that night.

Natalia was hot, to be sure, but a catch I wasn’t willing to exhaust myself over. She had her ways, and I had mine. It was unfortunate because I’d like a second try at proving myself to her in bed, but those weren’t points I cared to score for my confidence. I didn’t need to prove shit to Nat or anyone lucky enough to land my ass in bed. So, of course, it irritated me when anyone had to bring up my failures between the sheets, even as a joke that should be dead and buried by now.

“Do you have to—”

“Yes,” Jim said, not letting me finish. “I’ve had to ever since I first heard about your fuck up in bed.”

“I’m probably not going to make it,” I answered truthfully, not wanting to take risks with my ego around the stunning woman. I did fine with quick interactions and small talk, which made it easy to dismiss any fantasies. But hanging at some backyard barbeque with her sexy ass, likely wearing a bikini? I’d be fucked all day. That was a fact, and I wasn’t about to put myself in a vulnerable position like that.

“Before you try to weasel out of this, don’t. We’re all going to be there, and the kids have been told about it already, so just be a fucking adult. You and Nat need to find a way past this game you’re both playing.”

“There are no games between her and me, I assure you of that,” I answered, feeling my dick throbbing at the image that flashed into my head just now of Nat in a skimpy bikini. “I’m not going.”

“You need to level with me. What does this woman have over you? I know it’s not your fucking dignity. So, as one of your best friends, tell me what she’s done to make you dodge her and her dodge you. I only know this stupid nickname, and I still have no idea what the hell it means.”

“If you *have to fucking know*, I walked in the same bridal party as her.” And it had taken everything in me not to continuously look over my shoulder to stare at her stunning body draped in swaths of emerald green silk, making me think of the curves I’d seen and touched only once, too briefly. And, like a fucking idiot, I’d pulled out of her in the middle of our mind-blowing sex to pick up a *business call*?

Jesus. Now that I was resurrecting this shit, I had to admit I could be a fucking dumbass. But I’d especially been a dumbass who couldn’t have predicted that the woman’s best friend would melt the only heart colder and deader than mine

—that of one of *my* best friends, Alex Grayson. If Natalia Hoover weren't best friends with Alex's wife, I probably would never have seen the woman again.

“And that's how you got this name?” he asked, confused.

“Yep,” I wasn't giving this shit up.

I'd dwelt on this shit for too long in the last ten minutes. It was time to shut this door and move on to a better subject.

“Then you won't have a problem showing up, that is, unless the woman is mocking you or something?”

Either Jim was fucking with me, or he really didn't know. His wife and all those women talk, and I knew Nat wasn't keeping jack shit a secret.

Who gives a fuck? I'm done with this conversation and revisiting failures in my past.

Time to concede and just show up so Jim will shut up, and I can get back to this damn email.

“Okay,” I checked the Patek Phillipe watch that had belonged to my father, which I always wore, “I'll see you at Alex and Bree's house in five hours. I'm tired as fuck and jet lagged, but whatever, right?”

“Make sure you get that beauty sleep, Sexy Spence.”

“Right after I send the email you just put my ass to work on, Jimbo?”

“See you there. We'll discuss additional details about London while everyone is entertaining themselves.”

“And I'll be entertained as I watch Avery kick your ass for working at a family shin-dig.”

Jim laughed, “She'll be happier that you showed up.”

“I’ll see you in a bit.”

We hung up at the same time, and I hurriedly put the thoughts of Nat Hoover out of my mind for approximately the hundred thousandth time over the last few years. I’d done it so often that it had practically become second nature. If I let the memories of her stay there as often as they entered, I’d never get anything done.

So, I hurried to think of other things, cracking my neck as I wrote my email to Wendy Lieden, barely hiding my identity as Mitchell and Associate’s attack dog.

CHAPTER

Two

No matter how many Malibu sunsets I took in, the experience never seemed to get old. The colors blazing their way across the sky, the fresh, briny smell of the ocean, and the sound of the waves were somewhat diminished, however, by the sounds of seven young children and the single teenager running around the pool deck, screaming their heads off in delight. It wasn't that I was explicitly opposed to the kids themselves, though. On the contrary, I truly loved them and enjoyed being around them much more than I thought I would.

Before Bree got together with Alex, my life had been entirely consumed by work, friends, and the sex that relieved the stress of my days way more than yoga—which my *short-lived* therapist had suggested I try—ever had. I suppose the yoga had been helpful, at least in part, but nothing could ever be as good for my mental health as a good old-fashioned, toe-curling orgasm.

So, one could easily understand that when I was around a horde of screaming children, I was less than zen. Still, the shrill sounds of some happy kids were worth it if I got to hang out with Bree, Alex, and the rest. I had to admit, I loved the bachelorette life, but I also loved the entertainment of being around healthy family relationships and watching them constantly blossom. It was lovely, but don't get me wrong, I

could only do these gatherings with children running around screaming in small doses. I loved them, but when my time was up, it was up, and I needed some peace and quiet.

A soft little groan from the warm, sleeping bundle in my arms got my attention, and I looked down at where little one-year-old Albert's head was squirming around on my shoulder, making its way down to my chest in search of a snack.

I chuckled, bringing my hand up to rub my godson's back. "Nothing there for you, buddy."

He gave a little baby yowl and rubbed his forehead against my shoulder as he blinked his dark green eyes up at me.

"I know; damn shame, isn't it?" I pressed a kiss to the soft skin of his forehead, closing my eyes as I basked his delicious baby smell. This was one kid I could see myself getting used to having around: him and his identical twin, Logan.

"What the hell are you telling my kid, Nat?"

I turned to face my best friend's husband, whose smile matched mine, the expression lighting up his handsome face.

"Nothing not universally known and acknowledged," I said, cuddling Albert closer. "I think this gorgeous kiddo is getting hungry. He's been rootling around for something I definitely can't give him."

"Rootling?" He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Rootling," I said.

"Is that even a word?"

"Of course it is," I said. "It's in the Oxford English Dictionary. That comes from your neck of the woods, right?"

He chuckled a little bit before reaching his arms out for his son, and I handed the baby over without an argument. I'd gotten used to holding Al's soft baby weight against my hip, but he was getting heavy, and I felt an instant sense of relief as soon as he left my arms.

"C'mere, big guy," Alex said, rubbing his hand over the back of his son's head. "Let's go see Mama and give Aunt Nat a break so she can find her main squeeze for the night."

"What the fuck are *you* telling your kid, Alex?" I said, the corner of my mouth turning up in a curve as I acknowledged the truth of his statement. There certainly had been a part of me thinking about who I would be calling for a tryst later that night, but I had been doing my best to keep my thoughts pure in the vicinity of the baby.

He shrugged one shoulder as he bounced the baby in an effort to keep him calm. "Just trying to make sure he knows exactly who his Aunt Nat is."

I rolled my eyes. "Sure."

His smile softened as he turned toward where Bree was sitting on one of the lounge chairs with Logan, the older of the twins. "Just making sure he loves his godmother for exactly who she is."

I bit down on my lip, swallowing hard to keep from reacting to the emotions his words had brought up in me. I wasn't given to big emotional displays—never had been. It was one of the reasons why I'd been able to make such an impact as one of the top women working in real estate in California. I had one of the best poker faces on the West Coast, honed through late-night poker games in basements at USC frats and the beautiful, cold house where I'd suffered through my childhood.

All this to say that I wasn't here to make a big scene, ever. The only time I'd ever cried in public had been at Bree's wedding when I positively lost my shit at how beautiful and happy she looked. The look on Alex's face when he saw her was enough to melt even the iciest heart. It had been such a touching moment that I forgot about the boundary I'd set for myself and accidentally met Spencer's eyes across the aisle. The swooping sensation in my stomach had taken me by surprise, but I don't know why. After all, it wasn't like Spencer Monroe and I had shared more than the typical superficial sexual exchange.

Actually, what I'd shared with him had been even *less* than usual since no one had ever, *ever* interrupted sex to get up and answer a phone call.

Looking across the beautiful, well-appointed pool on the deck of Bree and Alex's Malibu house, I bit my lip in annoyance when my eyes landed on the dark-haired, dark-eyed man in the bespoke Zegna suit that would've set him back a good five thousand.

God, the run-ins I'm forever having with you, Spencer Monroe, I thought, studying the perfection that assaulted me from the man who'd insulted me in every sense of the word.

He had to have come straight from work, and it was clearly the most prevalent thing on his mind since he hadn't bothered to set his computer aside for long enough to head upstairs and raid Alex's closet for some swim trunks to at least *try* and fit in with the rest of us. Bree said that he'd gone to London to work on acquiring a deal, and he probably wouldn't even be at the cookout. So, why the fuck was I looking at this man? Again? God, I'd just gotten his arrogant, insulting ass out of my head

from seeing him at that stupid cocktail dinner with Polly Koker.

I hadn't asked, but that didn't stop Bree from offering the information the last time I'd gone into the Brooks and Stone offices to meet with their real estate team. We'd taken the twins with us when we'd gone to The Henry for lunch after our meeting. Thankfully, the boys had calmly settled into their double-sleeper carriage, curling around each other the way they always did, and allowed us to go over the notes from the meeting and to catch up.

I asked her how Alex was treating her and his sons, and the pretty blush that flooded her cheeks told me everything I needed to know. It was just like it was after she and Alex first slept together, and I'd been able to tell from a mile away that she'd been laid better than that asshole ex of hers had ever managed.

Still, no matter how much I pressed, she didn't reveal any details. I knew my questions were making her uncomfortable, so she pivoted the conversation in that expert way she'd perfected in the years when she'd been running her dad's business with no help—and without letting any of us know what was going on—and had lost everything while keeping her fierce, stubborn exterior. She was a tough nut to crack sometimes; God love her.

“Are you coming to the cookout on Friday night?” she asked, leaning over to make sure the sheet tucked around Logan wasn't obscuring anything important. “We'd love to see you. It's been so long since you've come out to see the others.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I've been trying to acquire this property for another client. It's a huge job with another major

commission on the line.”

“What are they looking to build? Did you land the Kirby deal? Alex said he met with Richard, and it seemed promising.”

“Kirby and I have one last meeting with our broker, but whatever magic Alex used actually worked. The man can’t seem to think past this *investment of a lifetime*,” I laughed, knowing that Alex was my guy when it came to turning water into wine with clients.

“Well, you know Alex, he makes shit smell like roses sometimes,” she laughed. “Do you think Kirby and Polly are still having an affair?”

“God, who knows? I pulled myself out of that personal nonsense once Alex showed me commission numbers. That’s not a fire I want to play with, especially when I reminded myself that I couldn’t care less what happens to any of those wretches. I’m more concerned with this new property now, and I think you might be interested in it, like the Kirby deal. There’s a lot of good potential here for you and Alex.”

“Which property? You certainly seem excited about it,” she laughed.

“A luxury spa,” I said, my eyes sparkling as I picked up my glass of Sancerre and took a sip of the crisp white wine. “I’m guaranteed a lifetime guest pass whenever I want to go once the place is built. Want to come with me? Maybe we can land you that pass, too,” I winked, trying to bribe her with the good stuff.

“I don’t know if I can wait for this spa to be built,” she said. “But speaking of a spa day, let’s go to Burke Williams next week, okay?”

“Deal.”

“Regardless,” she said, “you haven’t told me whether you’ll be at the cookout.”

“I guess it depends,” I said, resting my chin in my hand. “I have to see whether this deal closes before Friday or if it’ll take a few more days.”

“I think you’re avoiding the barbeque because of Spencer,” she said.

“I couldn’t give two fucks if Spencer is there. You should know that by now,” I answered her.

“Well, I can hear the tone in your voice, and it sounds like you’re avoiding going for some reason. And that reason could only be Spencer.”

“I don’t want to see the man if I don’t have to,” I answered truthfully. “But I’m not avoiding him.”

“Well, I’ll set your mind at ease, then. Spencer’s going to be in London on business, so if that’s what you were worried —”

“Breanne,” I said with a sigh, annoyed that this was a topic of conversation as if I were in high school, “when have you ever known me to be worried about seeing someone I’ve slept with?”

“Literally never,” she said, “but even you must admit you’ve been a little strange around him. That’s my point. I’ve never known you to try to avoid *anyone*, and yet you’ve been treating Spencer like he’s carrying the plague. It wouldn’t be weird for anyone else, but it’s weird for you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I haven’t been acting any differently around him than I

ever have. If he speaks to me, I put him in his place, and then I move on like any other day. You just saw me do that at dinner with Polly.”

“Great. Then you’ll be fine coming to the cookout whether or not he’s there.”

I stared hard at my friend, who looked at me with the smile that she’d taken to fixing on me whenever she threw down a challenge.

“If—” I said, eyeing her, “I get this deal in time.”

“Exactly,” she said. “If you get the deal in time. And then it’ll be a double celebration.”

“Good God.”

I wasn’t lying about having a massive project I’d been working on. On the contrary, it kept me in the office for twelve hours a day.

All of that was worthwhile when I finally got the contract back from my client with a notarized signature. A half-hour after that came the basket with Bartlett pears, a bottle of Sangiovese Reserve wine, and a few other delicacies I hadn’t bothered to investigate yet.

I gathered the basket to bring to Bree’s house, barely saying goodbye to my colleagues as I took off from my Beverly Hills office as fast as possible. As soon as I’d gotten onto Pacific Coast Highway, I lowered the roof of my car, blasted my music, and belted Fleetwood Mac all the way to my best friend’s house.

I met her eyes as soon as I'd walked in, and she grinned widely before sending me to change into my bathing suit.

Now, as the sun began to set fully and the breeze started coming in colder over the Pacific, my wine-red bikini was feeling less like a fashion statement and more like death by exposure. I unknotted the sarong around my waist and wrapped it around my shoulders before sitting on the lounge chair where I'd placed my margarita and pulled out my phone.

The ice in my margarita had melted, but it still had the perfect amount of tequila, so I sipped at it as I scrolled through the texts I'd received over the last few hours. Some of them were from coworkers asking if I would look over some of their contracts (at five on a Friday, idiot?). There was also a congratulatory message from my boss about the deal I'd closed, and a few were from some of the conquests I'd been ignoring over the last week to focus on work.

I contemplated the names as they popped up, thinking of each of them in turn and debating the merits of giving them each another go. I was too tired to go out tonight and find someone new, but it went against the grain to give any of the people I hooked up with the impression that I was overly attached.

“Aunt Nat?”

I hurriedly shut down the screen on my phone and looked up at John, Jake and Ash's little four-year-old. He was just as handsome and charming as his dad, with his mom's open heart, and it had taken no time at all for me to fall in love with the kid.

“Yeah, honey?”

“Jackson and Addy went to watch a movie, and they said we’re too little to watch with them. Tell them we’re big kids!”

I bit down on my lip, trying not to laugh at the little boy’s indignation. “What will Mom and Dad say?”

“They’ll say we’re too little.”

“You wanna know what I think?” I leaned in, smiling like I was going to tell him a grand secret. “I think you, Izzy, and Kaley should watch a different movie and make the bigger kids jealous. What do you think?”

The way John’s big, brown eyes lit up told me he’d inherited his dad’s sense of mischief, which was legendary. As I watched him shuffle away, I thought that maybe—*maybe*—I should’ve felt bad about the glint of vengeance I’d unleashed, but I just couldn’t bring myself to.

“What kind of monster did you just create?”

I looked around, feeling everything in me curling at the sound of the rich, smoke-filled voice approaching me, and I looked up at Spencer.

“The kind that gets what they need,” I said, raising my eyebrow as I stood from the chair and looked at my phone again. I opened a new text, focusing all my attention on my reply.

The need to make a quick choice had pushed me to decide on Conner. We’d met about two weeks before at Perch, and his rich, bronze-colored skin and stunning teal eyes had drawn me to him. It had been one of the better nights I’d had in a while, and as far as last-minute choices went, he was a really good one.

“You’re pretty attached to that phone, aren’t you?”

I raised my eyes to him, narrowing my gaze to a focused point. “Seriously? You’re going to call *me* out for an unhealthy attachment to my phone? Shall we revisit *your* extremely unhealthy attachment to *your phone*, Casanova?”

“Are you going to hold that over me for the rest of my life?” he asked, leaning back and crossing one leg over the other in such a way that it drew my eye like a magnet to that spot between his legs, where, unfortunately, I knew exactly what he was packing.

I crossed my arms and let my fingers settle on my biceps as my other hand cradled my phone. “I think I will. That was an entirely unique experience; at least, it was for me. Who knows? Maybe you answer the phone in the middle of fucking *every* girl you get into bed.”

I turned away from him, thinking I would just walk away and be done with this whole thing.

“Nat, wait—”

I hadn’t been expecting him to reach out and make a grab for my arm; unfortunately, it was a true miscalculation on his behalf since he’d grabbed ahold of the arm holding my phone.

“Fuck!” I yelled as I watched my phone go flying in a spectacular arc before it made a splash, landing in the pool.

CHAPTER

Three

“Shit,” I said, hurrying to the edge of the pool. “Goddammit. Fucking mother fucker!”

Thankfully, no one had appeared from the corners of the deck to tell me to watch my language around the children. I would’ve let off a round of swears that’d make a sailor blush if they tried to tell me not to cuss when my phone had been destroyed by Spencer, acting like his usual dumb-fuck self with me.

This was another prime example of why I hated interacting with this man. Stupid shit always happened, and now, my fucking phone was paying the price.

I felt myself beginning to seethe as I raised my eyes from the pool. “Are. You. *Kidding*—”

I didn’t manage to get the rest of the words out before Spencer suddenly disappeared from my line of sight. I blinked, thinking that maybe he’d vanished when he realized that he’d knocked my phone into the pool like a buffoon, but the sudden, enormous splash pulled my attention back to the pool, where the last thing I would’ve expected to see was unfolding in front of me.

I couldn’t pull my eyes away from where Spencer, VP of Mitchell and Associates, whose dark espresso eyes could

instantly freeze anyone trying to pull one over him, had dove into the Graysons' saltwater pool in a Zegna suit.

"Aunt Nat?" John came over to me, tugging his baby sister by the hand. Baby Kaley looked even more confused than her brother, and she grabbed onto my leg as she watched the events transpiring in front of us.

"What you doing, Unca Spenca?" Kaley asked as she wrapped her little hands in my bathing suit strap.

"Uncle Spencer accidentally knocked my phone in the pool, so he's getting it out for me."

"He's in his work clothes," said John, holding onto my leg. I reached down and ran my fingers through his silky soft curls.

"He is," I said, unable to take my eyes off the scene before me.

"Dat's silly," Kaley said.

"It is," I replied, "but don't forget, Kaley, that the good ones will jump in a pool for you whether they're wearing swim shorts or not."

She looked at me in confusion. "You silly too, Aunt Nat."

"Can't argue with you there, honey," I said, kissing her forehead.

I was momentarily touched by the sentiment of how Spencer had reacted. What a bizarre feeling of fascination I was experiencing. It was so unlike me to get caught up in a moment, especially with the man I deemed the biggest asshole of them all.

"Got it!" Spencer rose out of the water, holding my phone over his head, splashing a bunch of water around the beautiful terra cotta tiled floor surrounding the pool. He ran his hand

over his face and pushed his fingers through his hair, shaking out the water like a chocolate Lab. “I got it.”

He made his way to the side of the pool and put the phone down before setting his hands on the edge and effortlessly lifting himself out in one fluid motion.

I felt my mouth dry out as I saw him unbutton the navy-blue suit jacket, which was a soaking wet mess, and drape it over the lounge chair I’d been sitting on, leaving his perfectly cut abs on full display in the white button-down that had become transparent. I immediately started thinking filthy thoughts about how he wasn’t the only one dripping wet and how it was extremely indecent for anyone to look this good while they were getting out of a pool.

I set Kaley down on the ground next to her brother. “Go to Dad, guys,” I said, gently pushing them toward where their parents, along with most of the other adults, had gathered at the other end of the pool to take in the scene. My eyes sought out my best friend and saw her under her usual cabana. A small modesty sheet was draped over her chest to protect her and whichever twin she was currently feeding, and her eyes were wide as she watched Spencer and me at the other end of the pool. I looked at her as she waggled her eyebrows at me, nodding over at Spencer and mouthing the words, ‘*Oh, yeah.*’

I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t so easily won over. And since when were eyes on me to be desperate for a man who fucked it up in bed the first time?

Bree most likely caught me while staring at Spence becoming a hero, trying to rescue my damn phone. I shook the sentiments away, knowing these emotions and I didn’t operate well together. I was *not* setting myself up in some emotional place to be insulted in bed again.

In the graceful art of pulling myself together, I smirked at Spence while appreciating his robust frame and flawless appearance, which would've sent any helpless woman into a hormonal frenzy. I, however, was far from helpless.

This man could free-dive a thousand feet to the ocean floor to gain my attention, and it wouldn't impress me. The walls that I had up to guard my heart against *all men* would never be penetrated, and that was the end of it.

Spencer handed me the phone, a look of concern on his face. "Did I save it?"

"You mean after you *drowned* it?" I said dryly.

He flashed a fucking gorgeous smile at my response as he began loosening his soaking necktie and undoing the top button of his shirt. I ripped my eyes away from him and examined my phone, pushing aggressively on the power button.

Nothing. No matter how many times I tried to press the side buttons or tap the screen as hard as I could, not one single blink from the screen.

"Nothing," I said, biting down hard on the inside of my cheek. Now, my heart was fucking racing.

My phone was my lifeline. It was how I maintained the quality of my work when I was away from my desk and how I'd been able to rise in my industry since I graduated from college. Being able and willing to take calls from my clients at every hour, doing everything possible to make sure that they could close on the homes of their dreams, had set me apart.

Even if my phone chained me to my job, it was also the thing that freed me from it and linked me to all my connections to the outside world. It was also the only thing

that connected me to my brother, Shane, and my sister, Liz, whenever she felt inclined to get in touch, which was almost never.

“Hey.” A soft voice came over my head, and I looked up. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” I cleared my throat, nodding at Spencer as I blinked quite a few times to refocus.

I was nothing if not a problem solver, and thanks to technology, phones were easily replaced. Of course, drowning the man who’d ruined the phone and ending up in a lengthy murder trial wasn’t a problem so easily solved, so homicide was out of the question. I suppose I just had to deal with the phone, then.

“I have an encrypted iCloud account,” I said, reassuring myself more than informing Spencer. “Everything on this phone would’ve been uploaded to the cloud. It’s just a matter of getting a new phone.”

I shut my eyes as I groaned internally, thinking about the time, and how none of the nearby Apple stores were likely to be open.

“Listen,” he said, “my place is two houses up the beach, and it’s just past seven. The Apple store in Topanga closes at nine. So, if you come with me and give me a minute to change, we can go straight from there. I’ll take you to the store and replace the phone for you.”

I heaved a sigh as I shut my eyes tight, debating the wisdom of this plan. Biting my bottom lip, I tried to measure the pros and cons of going to Spencer’s house while he was dripping wet. I needed to put a cork in my irritation and plans for pre-meditated murder and go into damage control mode to

fix this issue, square away my phone, and get my ass back on the grid as soon as possible.

“Time’s a ticking, Nat.”

That sealed the deal. “You’re goddamn right you’ll replace the phone for me,” I answered, feeling my no-bullshit mood surface and take over.

He grinned at me. “Glad you see it my way.” He reached out and took the phone from me, tucking it into his pocket.

“I only see shit *my* way.” I leaned down to pick up my pale-blue Longchamp bag from where it sat in front of the lounge chair before I turned back to Spence. “And don’t get cocky on me, Monroe. My mood is not to be borne,” I said with a threatening arch of my eyebrow.

Spencer’s eyes bore through mine in this standoff between two powerful minds that never bent to anyone’s will or protest. I didn’t give a fuck what he said, thought, or did, and his flirty yet challenging grin no longer amused me.

“You are a mystery,” he said, and if anyone on this deck was trying to get our attention, neither Spence nor I could hear them.

“To be sure,” I answered. “Now, let’s get my phone fixed.” I paused and cocked my head to the side, eyeing him. “What the fuck is your deal with phones anyway?”

“Huh?” he asked, his stern expression replaced with a look of confusion.

“Yeah,” I arched my eyebrow. “You know, answering calls whilst fucking, and finding a way to destroy mine in less than a hot second.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Natalia,” he said, scraping his nails through his hair. “Let that shit go.”

“How can I when all I seem to experience is a fucking disaster with you and fucking cell phones?” I said.

“One day,” he smiled and softened up with his flirty eyes, “I’ll prove why you should *really* be pissed off that I was distracted by my cell phone ringing while fucking you.”

“Wouldn’t you love that opportunity?” I teased. “Let’s just go get the replacement phone before I end up in prison.”

The look on his face, not having the first clue what I was talking about, was priceless and enough to shut me up. For now.

The two of us walked to the other side of the deck, and I did my best not to pay attention to the others as we headed for the steps that led down to the beach.

“Hold up, Spence!”

We both looked up to see Alex approach, holding Spencer’s laptop bag. Spencer sighed in relief, and his face broke into a grin as he reached out for the bag.

He took a minute to look back and forth between us, and then a wicked grin spread fully across his face. “Have fun, kids.”

He ran back up the stairs before I could say anything in response. So instead, I sighed and shouldered my bag, holding my sandals in my hand and allowing my feet to shuffle through the soft, white Malibu sand as I walked down the beach, Spencer at my side.

We didn’t say anything for a while, simply taking in the beauty of our surroundings as the waves continued to come in,

filling the silence with a soothing sound. This was nice. Who knew I could use a lovely stroll on the beach this evening? I was nearly fully immersed in the splendor of this, but the distraction of Spencer and me being alone for the first time since he insulted me during sex was what pulled me back to the reality of taking an unexpected walk on the beach. Fuck. God only knew where this would all lead.

I tried not to think about anything but getting the replacement phone and heading home soon after to do updates and transfers all night. Jesus, I did *not* have time for this crap. While pitying myself, I heard the squelching of Spencer's feet in his expensive, likely destroyed, leather shoes.

"Are you okay?" I asked, breaking the silence between us. "You must be miserable in those wet pants and shoes."

"I'll be fine until we get to the house," he said, smiling charmingly at me. "I'd take off my shoes, but I don't feel like carrying any more stuff."

"Fair enough."

Strangely, the feeling of being at war with this man had temporarily faded. My tone and his both had changed. It was as if, for the first time since he fucked up, I was possibly willing to finally let this shit go. If I were honest, the grudge I'd been holding onto with this *sexy as sin on a Sunday* man was pointless and truthfully served no purpose.

"I really am sorry," Spencer said, tucking one of his hands into his pocket as he reached his other hand to the back of his head. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"Are you sure?" I looked to the side, biting down on my lip as I took in the gorgeous man and his wet clothes. "I

figured you were jealous about me making plans for tonight and decided to overreact by destroying my property.”

My mood had changed entirely, burdens lifted, and my daring, challenging, and flirty nature returned gloriously.

“You were making plans with someone for tonight?” Spence asked curiously.

“Yep,” I said with a smack of my lips. “Nice guy. You’d like him. Really knows how to be present; you know what I’m saying?”

I may be letting shit slide internally about Spence insulting me in bed, but there was no way in hell I’d let that show on the surface. Spencer would hear about this until I decided I would allow him to make it right. You know, the second chance stuff?

He blinked at me a few times. “So, you’re saying this guy never has—”

“Checked his phone while fucking me?” I tilted my head to the side, giving him one of the half smiles I’d fixed on him the night we met. “Nope. To date, you’re the only one who’s had that dubious honor.”

“You realize that I was trying to close a deal you were asking me about, right?”

“And you had to do it at that exact moment? Mid-thrust?”

“God, you’re annoying,” he said with a sigh, and I couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped me as we came up to the little door that sat on the beach, preventing passersby from walking up the steps onto his private property.

Walking up to the back door, he typed in the code on the keypad and held up his thumb, which he pressed onto a little panel to be scanned.

“High-tech,” I murmured as he held open the little door for me, letting me walk up the steps ahead of him.

“Thanks,” he said. “Security was important for me when I bought this place, given that it had beach access.”

“I’d imagine that it would be a concern for many residents,” I said, my real estate mind already turning and thinking about how I could make security into a high selling point for the homes that ran up the coast.

I was so lost in thought that I’d barely noticed Spencer had paused at the glass sliding door that led to his pool deck and was taking off his wet shoes and socks. As soon as he’d rid himself of the footwear, he gave a sigh of relief as he flexed his toes back and forth and then proceeded to take off the soaking-wet shirt.

I opened my mouth to tell him something before I lost complete control of my thoughts, watching Spencer unbutton his pants and shuck them off, draping them over the lounge chair that sat closest to the back door.

I had to take a second to gather my thoughts as I took him in, doing my best to swallow as I scoped out the perfectly-cut frame that stood in front of me, clothed in nothing but a pair of slate-gray boxer briefs.

I might’ve done my best not to think about him since we’d hooked up, but there was definitely a reason why I’d nicknamed him Sexy Spence and referred to him as such ever since. Insult or not, he was sexy as fuck.

All the guys in this little group—otherwise known as the Billionaires’ Club—were gorgeous, and when I said gorgeous, I meant legitimate showstoppers. Every single one of them looked like they could’ve either been a movie star or on the

cover of a romance novel, but there was something about Spencer that managed to kick my hormones into overdrive every time I saw him. It was something I'd done my best to ignore since the last time I was thrust into his presence. My policy was always to maintain a standard of self-respect and to never fuck anyone who showed me less respect than I showed myself, which eliminated the possibility of us fucking again.

It might not be as big an insult to other people, but it had been enough for me to say never again.

Fuck, why was I being so wishy-washy with this asshole? One minute I'm down for giving second-fucking-chances, and now I'm standing my ground again?

Jesus, what the hell was going on with me? I was spinning out, losing my grip. And why? I knew exactly why. *I was alone with this man*, and I was practically being thrown into menopause with constant unexpected emotional hormone swings.

Is it warm out here? I thought, feeling a hot flash coming on while the crisp beachy air blew against my face.

“You okay there?”

I blinked a few times, looking up at Spencer. He was watching me from a wooden cabinet beside the pool, where he'd pulled out a towel and started running it all over himself.

I'm so fucked! I thought, feeling like I was freezing. Is this shit normal? Am I fucking dying or something?

Stop thinking, Nat, I ordered myself while working on getting a stronghold on my emotions.

“Yes, I'm great,” I lied, knowing that I was falling apart from the inside out.

This is *precisely* what I get for thinking I could hold my own. I do give him credit, though; it only took his ass stripping in front of me to drive me into a frenzy. I would never forgive myself if I didn't hang on *just a little* to my last shred of dignity with this guy.

Spence held my stare over the few feet that separated us before walking slowly to where I stood in front of the door. "Are you cold?"

"No," I said, despite the goosebumps that had risen all over my arms. "No, I'm fine."

Pull it together, Nat! I demanded as my hormones officially conquered the last of my will. He saw right through me, and it was like the devil himself winked at me as I fell to the mercy of this man.

"Uh-huh." He grinned at me wickedly. Yup, I was fucked. "Come on inside," he said, nearly sounding like the big bad wolf. "I'll show you where you can grab something to drink."

He slid the door open, and I followed him inside after wiping my feet carefully on the mat and setting my bag down beside the sliding door next to my shoes.

"Kitchen's through here," he said, draping the towel over one of the stools beside the bar as he led me through the beautiful, open-floor plan loft that made up the ground floor of his house. I had to suck in a breath when I saw the back wall of the house, which was entirely made of glass, and looked out across the ocean.

"What does the expert think?" he said from behind me. "Did I choose a decent property?"

"Referring to this property as *decent* would be an understatement," I said, exhaling softly as I admired the

extraordinary view. “This house is incredible.”

I meant every word I said. If I could’ve, I would’ve bid on the property myself.

I turned around and looked at him once again, where he stood taking me in, wearing nothing but the designer briefs that were still wet, his hair dripping with water from Bree’s pool onto his shoulders.

The trickling of the water reminded me of the train of thought I’d taken earlier when I’d first seen him climbing out of the pool. This time I managed to balance and appreciate these feelings instead of fighting them off.

“Seriously, are you okay?” he asked, raising his eyebrow while he grinned mischievously at me. “You keep looking like you’re about to have a seizure.”

I eyed him, “Your sexy ass is standing in front of me half-naked, so what the fuck do you expect me to do?”

“Appreciate it, want it, and of course, give me a second chance at proving I’m the best fuck you’ll ever have,” he answered, his eyes darkening with the same sudden desire I was feeling.

I should’ve never been left alone with this man, especially with him standing in front of me with soaking wet boxers, reminding me of his length and size.

“You’re very confident,” I said, eying him provocatively.

“I get what I want.” He crossed the small area in his kitchen and instantly closed the space between him and me. “And I want you,” he said, his hand snaking up and fingers caressing the side of my neck.

My head instantly rocked to the side as his hands cradled my neck. My opening was throbbing and growing wet with extreme desire to have him inside me again. Here and fucking now. No regrets. Just a beautiful specimen of a man inside of me.

“Give me another chance, Nat,” his deep voice nearly growled with his lips inches from mine.

I softly moaned, “Wouldn’t you love that?”

His eyes met mine like he could see straight into my soul.

“More than you know,” he answered, his lips pulling up on one side as he withdrew some to beg me for permission and access to my body.

His other hand came up, and with a firm yet gentle grip, he pulled me against his hard cock. There was no turning back or making this man suffer any longer. I wanted the second chance he was after more than he wanted to prove what kind of fuck he was.

“You answer a damn call this time,” I reached into his boxers and firmly gripped his hard shaft, “I’ll rip your dick off.”

Without any kind of warning, I was in Spencer’s arms as he marched up the steps to the second floor of this home. His lips crashed into mine while I ran my fingers through his thick dark hair. Just by the force of this man’s kiss, I knew I was about to get fucked in the best way possible, and I wouldn’t regret one second of it.

CHAPTER

Four

SPENCER

Usually, I would curse the ground I walked on for entertaining the idea of someone thinking they were giving *me* a second chance or allowing someone to think they had *me* in a position to prove myself to them.

I knew that's what Natalia was after. No connections, no strings attached, no behavior that naturally would put me on high alert to run in the other direction. No, this was her *testing* me, and I didn't bend the knee to any woman when it came to sex. I never felt the need to prove myself to anyone. I already knew how good I was; more than that, I knew they were the fortunate ones to be in my arms and for me to pleasure them.

Something was different about Natalia Hoover, though. Everything about me seemed to crave this woman on some other level. Shit, could people have sexual soul mates? Was that even a thing? Who knew? I didn't care. I was just driven to desire after being alone with her in my beach house, and I was taking advantage of her softening up for the first time.

Having her in my arms, I had to admit that I fucking craved this woman. Everything about her seduced my senses. The honey blond of her hair and the rich, floral, salty scent of her skin was even more intoxicating than I remembered, and my memories were impeccable.

The feeling of those velvet-soft lips against mine, moving in a rhythm that felt like we'd done this a thousand perfect times rather than just the one I'd fucked up.

I dragged my hand up the delicate column of her neck and threaded my fingers into the twist she'd tucked her long, soft honey hair into, fucking up the perfectly pinned-up locks.

She groaned as I gave her hair a sharp tug, pulling her head back so I could get better access to her mouth, which I opened with a few teasing maneuvers of my tongue. God, she was...

"You taste even better than I remember," I said, my words muffled against the lips that opened to me with none of the hesitations I expected. "I have to wonder whether you still taste that good all over—"

"Did you even get around to that part last time?" she asked, sucking in a deep breath as I moved my lips down the silky skin of her neck. "I don't remember if you did."

I paused mid-kiss, pulling my lips back from her and raising my eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"I think after two Cosmos, all I was thinking about was riding your dick into the next century. It's not like I was opposed to the idea of you tasting me."

"Good," I said, holding the stare of her clear, sapphire eyes as I backed her up to the dresser that sat flush against the glass wall of my room. I brought her hands up so that they framed her head and then threaded my fingers through hers as I dragged my mouth down her neck again. I allowed my mouth to linger over the perfect skin that I'd barely even allowed myself to fantasize about in memory, thinking it would be too painful to think about her in that way if I couldn't have her again.

“Are you planning on keeping it rated PG all night?” she asked as my hands drifted down to her waist, playing over the delicate curves of her breasts and hips, relearning the body that had turned me on so much that night.

“You’re wearing too much,” I said as I slipped my finger under the strap of her bikini top, which she wore with a sexy skirt that’d tempted me from the moment I arrived at the barbeque.

“You’re probably the first person who’s ever said that when I’ve worn this bathing suit,” she said on a rich exhale, the breaths beginning to come harder and faster as my lips latched onto the warm swells of flesh, pausing now and then to luxuriate in the sun-touched flavor of her skin.

Something about her reminded me of the mesmerizing blossoms that covered all the lemon trees near my family estate in Northern Italy, where I’d spent my childhood.

Every fall, when I’d gotten sick of the shit that accumulated in the house, I’d run out to the orchard, where the trees would be covered in so many flowers that it looked like snow had come early. I would tuck myself under one of the trees and hide until my brother, Stephen, or my dad came to find me.

It was never my mom.

The soft warmth that clung to Nat’s skin—smelling of sunshine and white flowers and the warmth that came from Limoncello—reminded me of the freedom of those moments rather than the loneliness. These intoxicating sensations spurred me on in the desire to spend hours losing myself in the secret nooks and crannies of this woman’s body.

“Fuck,” I growled, feeling a hunger for more.

I slid my hands down to cup the full, perfect halves of her ass and lifted her in a quick, fluid motion, swallowing the shocked gasp that escaped from her in another kiss as I placed her on the long credenza that sat flush against the glass wall.

“Interesting that you’ve been taking your sweet time with this for about fifteen minutes, and I’m not any more naked than I was when we started.”

I backed away a little to look into her face and couldn’t help the laugh that came out at the sight of her expression; it was a mixture of arousal and annoyance that I’d never seen. It pulled me out of the trance I’d fallen into and back onto my game. Shit, I forgot how sexually challenging this woman could be.

“If you want to be naked, I can make you more naked, Gorgeous. I’m just trying to give you some idea of what you’ve been missing out on the past couple of years.”

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted you.”

I could tell she hadn’t meant to say the words when she bit down hard on that perfect bottom lip; they’d slipped out of their own volition. Figuring the least I could do was ignore her embarrassment and the admission that she clearly hadn’t meant for my ears, I slipped my hands to her back and undid the clasp of her bikini top, peeling it off her and tossing it to the side without another word. I sucked in my breath at the sight of her perfect tits and how the round fullness would soon fill my large hands.

“Regardless,” I said, doing my best not to come just at the sight of them and feeling my cock straining uncomfortably against the silky fabric of my briefs, “now that I have you here, I’m finally going to make up for that damn phone interrupting me the last time.”

She groaned as I let my mouth draw a careful line down her center, never letting my lips leave her skin for more than a second as I made my way to a very specific goal. Then, without my prompting, she parted her legs, offering me access to that sweet center of hers that I'd been aiming for.

I removed her bikini bottom in one quick tug, tossing it aside to join her top on the floor and kneeling in front of her so I could drink in that rich scent of hers from where it was most concentrated.

Pressing a kiss to the soft skin of her inner thigh by her knee, I dragged my lips up the length of her leg so that they stopped just south of her perfectly groomed pussy, which had begun to glisten with obvious arousal. Moving my finger up to the cleft between her legs, I slid my finger up the damp slit there, feeling my heart start to race at the sound of her sharper gasp.

I looked up at her face, gratified to see how the blush had risen and how she was biting down hard on her lip.

“You’re at my mercy now, my fucking sex goddess,” I stated.

“We’ll see about that,” she challenged back in a delicious moan.

I raised my eyebrow before slipping my finger inside her, tilting it up on instinct and groaning with her as I found that delicate spot on the front wall of her pussy and pressed in. She was so incredibly tight that I couldn’t resist inserting another finger as I braced my other hand against her other knee and leaned in. “Fuck my fingers,” I said in almost an order.

“Fuck,” she whined and held onto the word as I slowly pulled down on her G-spot. “Fucking hell,” her hips moved

with my hands pumping into her and pulling hard into her spot.

“That’s it,” I whispered, my dick throbbing and dripping, needing her tight wet pussy around it. “Damn, you are so fucking sexy,” I stated that fact while I watched her body fall to whatever I wanted. Her eyes glazed over in ecstasy, and nothing but moans fell from her lips.

I licked my dry lips, watching her with utter desire and knowing I would fuck this woman into paradise after she gave me the orgasm I neglected to achieve on our first and only night together.

Just when I thought I had the upper hand on this woman, I swiftly fell under the same sexual spell I’d placed her under. I’d had enough. I needed to taste her, and now.

Her thighs quivered at the first swipe of my tongue up her drenched center. The little sigh that she gave at first contact gave me all the encouragement I needed to continue.

“You taste,” I said, not lifting my mouth away from her swollen sex, “even better than I thought you would.”

“Stop talking,” she said with a sharp inhale.

She laced her fingers through my hair and gained the control that I thought I once had. How this switched, I had no idea, but she tasted so fucking amazing that I moved my tongue and then surrounded all of her entrance with my lips. My entire mouth was twisting and pulling at her clit while Nat’s firm hand guided my face hard to please her in the exact way she wanted.

With Nat in control, I delved deeper into the rich taste of her, hitching her leg up over my shoulder so that I could get better access. While my tongue worked, practically drinking

down the taste of her, my fingers kept their steady rhythm, encouraged by the fluttering of the delicate, powerful muscles that were now working even harder against my fingers.

“Don’t stop,” she said, the words pitched higher and sweeter than before. “Don’t stop.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” I said, pausing only to press a kiss to her clit before continuing the steady, circular motion of my tongue.

“Spencer,” she said, and the sound of my name on her sigh of arousal made me even harder.

“That’s right, Natalia,” I said. “Come all over my tongue.”

Taking back my control, I watched her fall mercy to my instruction.

“Come on, kitten,” I coerced and teased.

She writhed and moved while I watched her grip her tits, playing with her nipples and nearly making me come on myself as I watched her ride this into ecstasy.

“Spence,” she cried out. I watched her drink in the euphoria her body gave her as she climaxed. Fuck, she was perfect. “I—”

No other words escaped from her as that beautiful sex of hers constricted around my fingers, gently squeezing down on my knuckles as the groan that signaled her orgasm seemed to emerge from every part. Her legs clenched around my neck as if she wanted to chain me there permanently, a state of being that, to be honest, I wouldn’t be opposed to.

“Oh. My. God,” she said, dragging her long, dark-red nails through my hair as the tremors in her legs began to subside. “That was—”

“Don’t get too relaxed,” I said, unhooking her legs from around my neck and rising to my feet in one fluid motion. “I’m not done with you yet.”

I looked into her lovely face. The tension was gone, but there was even more mischief in it than before we’d begun.

The power struggle between us in claiming each other’s orgasms was intoxicating. I’d never given a fuck to watch a woman come like I just had, but something was different this time. Maybe it was because I’d waited an eternity to prove my point to her, or perhaps she was just a sex goddess that could be my other half when it came to fucking. Who knew, but this night just got fucking started. I wanted more of her, and I would get it too.

“I think you have that backward,” she said, sliding down from the credenza. “I’m nowhere near done with you.”

“Fuck yes,” I said, biting my bottom lip and meeting her smile with a challenging one of my own.

She pulled me down to her, pressing her mouth to mine as she dragged her fingers down my chest. She practically drank herself off my bottom lip as she pulled it between her own.

“My turn,” she said, grinning as she ran her tongue over her full lips. She pressed her teeth into my neck while my body shuddered in response. I closed my eyes in anticipation of what Natalia had planned next.

I shoved my hands into my hair, doing my best to think of anything but the myriad sensations from the teeth grazing over my chest to the hand that had run down along my ribs, where Nat efficiently removed my briefs without effort. Fuck, she’s good.

“Jesus,” she said, wrapping her hand around my cock as she dropped kisses down my chest, “you’re even bigger than I remembered.”

Suddenly, there was nothing; no contact, no speaking, no soft grip of her fingers that barely reached around me. My eyes snapped open, and I looked down to see her poised on her knees, staring at me like the true goddess she was.

“Damn,” she said, the breath from her words dancing across my sensitive tip, sending a jolt of energy through me. “Where do I begin?”

“You going to do something with those lips or tease me with words?” I responded, my dick practically jumping in her silky-smooth hands.

Without another word, I was entirely enveloped in the warmth of Nat’s mouth.

My eyes drifted down to where I watched her, mesmerized by the look of her mouth around my dick and how she appeared to be devouring me like I was the rarest delicacy. She paused now and then, pulling me out of her mouth to run her tongue up the underside of my cock and carefully lick up every drop of precum like it was a sin to let it go to waste.

When she opened her eyes and looked up at me through heavy eyelids, I knew I wouldn’t fucking last and that her mouth wasn’t where I wanted to finish.

I reached down, pulled her to her feet, and spun her around quickly.

“That’s not where I’m going to come,” I said, climbing up my bed so I could face her. “I’m not going to pump all of myself down your pretty throat.”

“Not now, at least,” she said, pulling me up and catching my lips with hers, and I dove into that kiss, pressing against her body with mine. I reached down and caught her around the knee, bringing it up so that her leg was wrapped around my hip.

We both groaned as the adjustment brought us into perfect alignment, and my cockhead slipped up against her perfectly slick entrance.

“What do you want, Gorgeous?” I asked, leaning down to kiss her delicate neck. “Where do you want me?”

“Stop fucking around with me,” she said, the annoyance in her voice tempered by her breathlessness, “and fuck me. Immediately.”

I plunged in, almost losing my mind at the perfect tightness of her. I kept going until I was seated to the hilt, reaching down for her hand and bringing it up, so I pinned her wrist above her head. I shook from head to toe as I tried my best not to shatter from the initial contact.

“Fuck,” she said, bringing her foot up so her toes danced along my ass. “Yes,” she whispered, turning her head to the side as I moved in deeper.

“That’s it,” I said, emerging from her and plunging forward, satisfied when I saw her eyes roll back. “Goddamn, Nat. You’re so tight.”

I barely knew what had happened when, all of a sudden, I was on my back, and Nat was moving above me. Her perfect breasts bounced as she moved up and down on my cock, her eyes shut as she lost herself in the movement.

I felt the soft movements of her pussy and knew that she was close, so I moved my thumb down to her clit and began to

massage it to help her get where she was going.

“Oh, fuck.” Her eyes flew open, and again, there weren’t many more words that escaped her as she froze on top of me, the orgasm running through her, her pussy massaging my cock as she came spectacularly.

“Nat,” I groaned, thrusting up into her, “I’m not going to last much longer—”

“Then don’t,” she said, leaning down and letting her nipples brush over my chest. “I want to feel you come inside of me.”

Those words were my kryptonite, and I reached up into her hair, bringing her mouth down to mine before I flipped her onto her back and thrust into her deeper than I had before.

The orgasm broke over my head like a wave, shaking through every muscle. I froze inside her, feeling her pussy fluttering around me in a final, surprising climax as I flooded her.

“Holy shit,” I said, smiling and allowing myself to linger inside her as I moved to my side. “That was—”

“Insane,” she said, finishing my exact thought and reaching up to run her nails through my hair. “You were good the last time, but I was not expecting *that*. I think I’ve lost all the power in my legs.”

I chuckled. “Well, good thing you don’t need your legs to keep doing what we’ve been doing.”

“No, but I do need them to go to the Apple store.” She turned to look at the clock on my bedside table. “Which we’ve missed, by the way.”

“We’ll go tomorrow,” I said, leaning down and kissing her collarbone.

“Tomorrow?” she asked, her voice taking on a playful, Marilyn Monroe-like tone as she ran her fingernails through my hair. “I hope you have enough energy to keep this going all night because I’m not the type to curl up and cuddle.”

I arched my eyebrow at her. “I was just about to say the same,” I said, feeling myself harden again, still inside her, as I leaned forward. “And I should probably warn you, my cock is ready for round two.”

“Trying to scare me, handsome?” she said with a laugh.

“More like preparing you for the night ahead,” I smirked, then my lips found hers while we both moaned, knowing this night was just getting kicked into the right gear.

CHAPTER
Five

When my eyes fluttered open the next morning, it took a moment before I was able to fully comprehend where I was. The stunning, glittering pattern cast over the water reminded me of the diamonds that might be scattered over a jeweler's felt, adding sparkling dimension to the ocean that spread out beyond Spencer's bedroom.

Right. *Spencer Monroe.*

I stretched out in the enormous Alaskan king bed, luxuriating in the feeling of the Egyptian cotton sateen against the skin that had been kissed, licked, and touched in every conceivable way the night before.

I should say, throughout the whole night before. I don't think there was a spare moment where he wasn't touching me, or I wasn't feeling him, or we weren't running our tongues over each other, or some part of him wasn't inside me in some way. I was overly impressed by Spencer's stamina, and because I was highly critical of anyone who attempted to satiate my sexual needs, it wasn't easy to impress me.

All that said, that's what I was taking away from this experience: great sex and the possibility that I wouldn't reject another offer of a night like that with him. Was I going to

attach myself emotionally? Fuck no. It was off-the-charts sex, and that was it.

I smiled as I sat up, letting the sheet fall and exposing my skin to the chilly air of the room, indulging in the feeling of goosebumps as they came up all over my body. I wove my fingers together and stretched them out, leaning into the stretch before I thought to check my cell phone. I nearly lunged over to the bedside table, but there was nothing.

Shit, that's right. My cell phone was submarined yesterday in the pool, which was why I'd come over here in the first place. Strangely, as my eyes singled on the bedside table, I wasn't nearly as stressed out by the idea of my phone being unusable now as I'd been last night, but that was probably because all the stress had been worked out of me in my favorite way.

“Hey.”

I looked up to see Spencer standing in the doorway, looking sexy as fuck, wearing nothing but a pair of dark trousers, and holding a tray.

Shit, this man had abs of fucking steel that reminded me of feeling and licking every hard ridge of his body.

“Please tell me that that tray has something I can lick off your body,” I said with an eyebrow arch.

He grinned at me. “Just coffee here, but there's Nutella in the kitchen. Would that suit your needs?”

“Perfectly,” I said. “I hope you know that I'm particular about my coffee and—”

“You like a semi-dry cappuccino with macadamia milk and an extra shot?” he said, leaving me to study him in silence. “Way ahead of you, my little vixen.”

“First of all, no more silly pet names. They turn me off.”

He raised his eyebrows, “We have rules for fucking now?”

I met his sexy, challenging gaze with one of my own, “When it comes to sex, I pride myself in breaking the rules, Spencer Monroe.”

“Excellent,” he answered, walking over to me. “I, too, pride myself in breaking the rules, even your petty ones.” I realized then that I probably should’ve never mentioned that the pet names turned me off. Mainly because they did, and now this guy would likely use them, believing he was *breaking sex rules*.

Oh, what-the-fuck-ever.

“How do you know how I like my coffee?” I questioned, more concerned about that than goofy names.

“I have my ways,” he said, setting the tray down on the bed and handing the coffee cup to me.

“Nice try, Casanova. You texted Bree and Alex.” I sipped at the coffee, keeping a perfectly straight face, refusing to let on that the coffee was perfect. “I hope they gave you shit for it too. I certainly would’ve.”

“I’m sure you would’ve. Oh, speaking of texting,” he held out a small rectangular box. “You’re back on the grid,” he said as I took the box from him.

I raised my eyebrow before lifting the cover off the plain black box and sucking in a breath.

It was a brand-new iPhone, so new that I didn’t think this model was even commercially available yet, and the back was in a beautiful slate blue that I hadn’t seen before.

“All your data’s already been transferred,” he said. “It needs you to set up your face ID and a few other incidentals. After that, it should be just like having your old phone back.”

“And with the added luxury of a new model,” I said, pressing the power button and going to the settings. I quickly did the last few personal housekeeping things, and the phone was ready for use. To my surprise, a text from Breanne was already waiting for me.

Bree: Of all the times you have no phone to communicate, it’s when you go home with Spence. Text me when you get this. ;)

I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face at that and quickly typed back.

Nat: Back online, sweetheart.

It wasn’t a second before I saw the three dots showing Bree was texting back.

Bree: Well?

Nat: Well, we fucked. What did you think would happen? We’d fall in love?

Bree: What am I going to do with you?

Nat: Nothing.

Bree: So, what now? You guys have been enemies since forever. I’m thinking make-up sex.

I rolled my eyes at her adorable, romantic heart.

Nat: This conversation can wait until you and I have lunch at The Ivy. Not with Spencer sitting next to me on his bed.

Bree: Oh, shit!

Nat: *Go enjoy your husband and kiddos. I'm just getting my order in for breakfast.*

I chuckled softly at Bree's eye roll emoji. Then I rolled my own eyes at the thought of what Spencer and I left everyone to *discuss* at the party when we exited unapologetically.

I couldn't give half a fuck about them talking about us fucking, but I drew the line at them expecting it to end in a love story. Don't get me wrong, I loved this group of friends, but their cute little romantic endings weren't my style. They just weren't, and I could guarantee all their little *happily ever after* asses believed that this would lead somewhere. The thought of that alone irritated me. Good fucking luck getting me to settle down and pop out a handful of kids. Not in a million years.

"You work fast," Spencer said, and I looked up to where he was sipping on his coffee and watching me with an amused look.

"Extremely," I said. "You know, doing the critical work of texting my best friend."

He chuckled. "Fair enough."

I set the phone down on the side table, suddenly spotting a problem. "I will need a case, and they probably don't sell them in stores yet."

"There are a few downstairs for you to choose from whenever you want."

"Well, well, well. Look at your spoiled billionaire ass. You think of everything, don't you?" I said, pushing off the sheets and doing a quick stretch.

"I wouldn't be where I am today if I didn't." His eyes ran down my body with enough force that it felt like a physical

touch, grazing every part of my body where he'd been the night before.

"I'm starved and need something to eat," I said, realizing this coffee wouldn't settle well without some food in my system.

Spencer's eyes lit up with a fire I'd seen multiple times the night before. "I know what I want to eat," he said as his tongue teased me, gliding over his bottom lip.

I felt myself heat up between my legs in anticipation, and my toes curled as he gently pushed me back into the pillows and began to feast on me like a starving man at a banquet.

Breakfast could wait.

I don't know what private chef Spencer contacted—or when—but by the time we were done and headed downstairs for food, there was a massive spread of pastries, eggs, bacon, and other breakfast foods.

"Holy shit, this is exactly how I expect to be treated after pleasuring a man beyond his greatest fantasy," I stated, taking in the five-star feast in front of us.

"I figured you'd need the calories after last night," he said, slipping his hands into his pockets and looking like a fucking snack on the beach.

"I won't argue with you on that," I said, snagging a piece of bacon and nibbling on it.

"Speaking of which," he said, looking at me with those fuck-me eyes of his, "I don't know about you, but I've never

spent all night fucking like we did. You, Natalia Hoover, are quite the woman to have in bed.”

I’d had plenty of nights like last night, but when I thought about it, I’d never had anyone make me feel like Spencer had in more ways than one. Something about the feelings I was uncovering here, with him, was making me intensely uncomfortable suddenly.

Since college, I’d managed to keep sex and feelings neatly in separate boxes. After my high school boyfriend—a cute football player who fumbled his way around my pussy clumsily and had absolutely no idea what he was doing—I decided that I would be in control of who I let into my bed. I didn’t need any of the damage brought on by feelings. It wasn’t to say that there hadn’t been anyone who didn’t want more with me or anyone who hadn’t made me wonder what it might be like to pursue something beyond a few trysts; however, I inevitably remembered just what kind of a mess could be caused by feelings, and that put an end to those fantasies.

I found myself thinking of Spencer in ways I hadn’t thought of anyone in years, seeing him in ways I thought I’d dismissed decades ago.

Now that I was presented with these *feelings*, I had no idea what to do with them or myself or Spencer other than simply dismissing them. I’d had a lot of great sex in my life, but I never had anyone quite like Spencer.

I was losing my appetite with these thoughts and needed to shake them. Getting away from Spencer for a moment would help clear *that energy* so I could reset my mind and get back to what I enjoyed—if we were to play a little longer before I left—which was fantastic sex. But there was no way in hell I was

jumping straight to that while seeing this look in his eyes and feeling these emotions. Fuck that shit. This wasn't me, and I needed to clear my mind.

“Where’s the shower?” I questioned, causing a much-warranted look of confusion on his face.

“The best one is in my room. I’ll take you to it.”

The water in Spencer’s shower poured out of several jets on the ceiling, coursing over my head and body. I luxuriated in the feeling of the heat as my muscles slowly unkinked, and I rinsed out my hair in the heat of the overhead jet. The floor of the shower was a beautiful, dark marble, and a small window at the back looked out where the tide came in over the rocks. The sounds of the shower seemed to combine with the waves, and all of it relaxed me in the most perfect way.

I nearly jumped through the clear glass of the shower when a set of large, tan hands settled over my belly. I looked over my shoulder to see that Spencer was in there with me, aligning his body perfectly with mine.

“Mmm,” I moaned as his damp hands slid over me, pulling me flush against his perfectly toned chest. “That feels good. Another round, eh?” I said, my mind reset and ready to go again.

Spencer picked up a washcloth, soaping it thoroughly before dropping to his knees and running the soapy cloth up between my legs and over the backs of my thighs before spreading me out.

“I want you to stand,” he said, looking up at me, “while I make you come.” He used that dominant voice I would only allow if it meant I was getting pleasure from it.

“Yeah, you will,” I said, meeting his dominance with my own.

“I’m going to bring your gorgeous self,” Spencer leaned forward and applied his tongue in that expert way that he knew would drive me insane, “to your knees.”

I was thankful that he was holding me up because if his hands hadn’t been there, I might’ve already gone to my knees. I put my hand out to grip the tiled ledge next to me, grasping the cool wall as his tongue began to move in tighter and tighter circles.

“Hang on,” he said before suddenly lifting my foot and hooking it around his neck, draping my lower leg over his back. “I need better access.”

I almost melted when he dipped his tongue inside me, tasting the very center of me as he stripped me down to my most basic, fundamental parts, and getting me to practically forget my own name, to forget everything but my desire for him.

“Holy shit,” I said, feeling my breaths coming sharper and sharper. “Spence—”

“Come for me, Nat,” he said, the vibration of his words stimulating me even more. “Come in my mouth. I want to taste you.”

“I—” My thighs began to shake as he slipped his finger inside me, pressing it against my G-spot. “Shit, yes.”

The gasp that emerged from me dissolved into the sounds of my orgasm as I shattered, feeling the tension unspool from

the base of my spine and flood from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

I almost collapsed on top of his head. I'd barely been given a second to absorb my orgasm before I was backed toward the slate wall, my hands braced on the ledge, and my legs parted with a gentle nudge of his knee.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked, pressing his lips gently to the pulse point on my neck as he brought his hand up to wrap around my neck, pulling it gently up. "I need to be inside you."

"Good," I said, reaching back to thread my fingers through his silky dark hair. "Fuck me."

He lined himself up with my entrance and pushed in so slowly that I thought I would go insane, waiting for him to insert himself fully into me. His legs shook as he fit into me so deeply and tightly that I felt myself beginning to clench around him as soon as he was inside.

"God," he hissed into my ear, the word coming in low and deep. "Squeeze my dick with your pussy."

I tightened my pussy in movements that nearly made Spencer's legs buckle.

"You're so fucking tight," he groaned.

I moaned as he wrapped a gentle hand around my neck and plunged so deeply into me that I thought I'd take him in at the root. I tightened my pussy as if trying to hold him there, massaging his cock with my internal muscles.

"Holy shit, Nat," he said with a gasp. "What the fuck was that?"

“Exactly what you asked for,” I said, tilting my head back on his shoulder with a grin and doing it again.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to hold on,” he said, starting to pick up his rhythm as he dipped his hand between my legs and made his way steadily down to my clit. “And I want to get you off one more time before I go.”

“Very—oh, God,” I gasped as a sudden spasm of pleasure flashed through me while he fucked me deeper. “Very generous of you.”

“I try.” His teeth grazed against the side of my neck, raising goosebumps all over my body. “Come on, Nat,” he said. “Let me feel that pussy come one more time.”

One more flick of his fingers sent me careening over the edge, and the spasms from my previous orgasm rippled through me, extending the pleasure of my climax as I came apart in his arms, practically shattering on his cock.

The groan he emitted into my ear was the only clue he gave before his enormous cock plunged even deeper than before, nearly splitting me open before I felt the warm flood of his cum spilling into me.

Reaching up, I pulled his face down to mine, dipping my tongue into his mouth as I tasted him once more, luxuriating in his kiss.

That evening, as the sun was setting, I was sitting on the couch and thinking about how long it had been since I’d spent a weekend doing no work at all. Even on girls’ trips, I’d take a few work calls, answer emails, and do some commission work.

But never in my life had I gone an entire twenty-four hours ignoring my job in favor of sex. This was a new level of decadence for me, and I'd practically written the book on decadent sex adventures.

As I contemplated the ocean with wet hair, wearing one of Spencer's button-downs, I thought about how different this was for me and how this couldn't last beyond tomorrow. There was just no way I'd be able to see this through after this, even though I would definitely be missing this house.

And the sex. I would certainly be missing the sex.

"Hey," Spencer said, coming over and setting his face by my shoulder. I reached up, threading my fingers through his hair once more as I dipped my tongue into his mouth. Another *new* thing for me was this cutesy kissing and relaxing together with a man without a drive to just have sex. I would've naturally shoved all this away, but it was so damn comfortable that I would be a fool to run from it. So, I did what I always did when I found things relaxing and agreeable; I indulged myself.

"I hope you're hungry," he said, settling in at my side. "I decided to order Nobu to the house."

"To the house, huh?" I grinned. "You ashamed to be seen with me?"

"If I took you to the restaurant, you'd have to get more dressed than this, and that just wouldn't do for the plans I have about how we'll eat dinner together tonight."

"Well, I have plans *before* we eat dinner," I smiled as I leaned up on my knees to kiss him again. "How long till the food gets here?"

"About a half hour."

“Plenty of time for a warm-up round,” I said, turning and climbing in front of him.

Shit, I was enjoying this too much. I never believed I had a sex addiction, but I might have to question that after the last twenty-four hours. But that was for a different day. There was no way I would let that cloud my mind when I had only a few short hours left in this man’s pleasurable company.

CHAPTER

Six

SPENCER

I'd always been good at separating my life from my work. When I was back at the office on Monday, I was doing my level best to fall back into my usual way of working: looking over earnings profiles, finding where the flaws in certain businesses were, and ranking the pitches in terms of appeal. For the most part, I was doing a pretty good job, finding the gaps in Mitchell and Associates' crown and earmarking the proposals that I felt would fit in those empty spaces as the jewels we needed.

It would be a full slate of meetings for me leading into next year, and I wasn't mad about it.

What threw me off, though, was the sudden intrusion into my mind's eye of a perfect pair of tits and the way they looked yesterday in the dawn light. Or the memory of the heavy scent of white flowers and musk and how it seemed to wrap its seductive tendrils around me.

Or a pair of ice blue eyes staring up at me from where they were poised above my cock, merging a look of innocence and daring that, combined with her skillful mouth and tongue, was undoubtedly more than I expected from Natalia Hoover.

I was not, and never had been, the person to lose time thinking of a woman once I'd enjoyed her. Maybe it made me

a shit stain, but my life had suited me to the ground so far, so I wasn't sorry for it. I wasn't exactly the type to get chained down to any woman, physically or mentally. Period. That was exhausting to even think about. I still had no idea how my closest friends handed over their freedoms to their wives as they'd done.

Alex, Jim, and I had all run together at Oxford, and not one of us had a lasting relationship the whole time we were there. So, no one was more surprised than I was when I'd gotten the news about Jim and Avery, but like everyone else, I figured that hell would freeze over before Alex got tied down. He'd always been the first to say that his Johnny Depp-lookalike ass was incapable of loving a woman, and then Bree walked her dimpled smile into his life, and his determination to never be able to love another had gone up in smoke.

A consequence of Bree and Alex's relationship that I couldn't decide was unfortunate or not was Natalia's presence in my life, which had become more or less constant. I'd been prepared to write off our first interaction as an unfortunate blip in two active sex lives and was willing to put it behind me. That was until I discovered that Bree, Alex's business partner at the time, had become his life partner and that her best friend was the woman I still winced about when I thought of my most cringeworthy sexual experiences.

Once I started seeing Nat consistently, the thought entered my head unfailingly that I needed to make the last time up to her if only she would look at me longer than a second at a time. But if ever there was something to know about Natalia Hoover, it was that once she decided you were a waste of her time, you might as well consider yourself written off. She wasn't one to waste her precious, limited time.

That was partially why this whole thing sent me into such a tailspin. That and the fact that I'd had her in my bed all weekend—and my shower, and on my couch, and my kitchen island, where I'd licked a series of things off of her body, including peanut butter and chocolate ice cream.

Pull yourself together, I told myself sternly as I reached my hands up and ran them through my hair, practically pulling it up straight. *It's not like you haven't spent a weekend fucking the occasional girl here or there before.*

My phone buzzed, and I looked down to see that a text had come through from Jim with two screenshots of emails from Wendy Lieden that made me roll my eyes.

I needed this to get my mind off fantasizing about sex with that woman. Shit, if I weren't careful, I'd be chained to Nat mentally and totally fucked. I knew better than this. If I got caught up with her and lost focus of my job, I'd resent her for it. I was not known for breaking hearts because I enjoyed doing it; it was just a part of the cold-hearted bastard I was.

Jim: *I'm confused about why Wendy Lieden is still sending me emails without Cc'ing you. Especially regarding things that directly have to do with your expertise.*

I groaned audibly as I leaned back in my chair, bringing my hand to my chin and scratching along the slight line of scruff that had begun to grow over the weekend.

I reread Jim's text and then responded.

Spencer: Not sure why I'm not on the email string, but whatever the reason, I'll take care of it. I may just handle this shit in London instead of playing these stupid fucking games.

Jim: I'd rather you stay stateside, so I have you on the other deals that I'm not too confident about.

Spencer: You'll survive without me. Put Sophie on it if anything goes sideways. She's got enough spirit to keep things in check until I get back.

Jim: I guess that'll have to do. I hate to admit it, but sometimes I want the bulldozer around.

Spencer: Stop acting like a bitch.

I chuckled and leaned back on my chair, setting my feet up on the desk as I rubbed my hands over my face. The day wasn't going horribly, but I didn't have everything as under control as I liked to believe that I did.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

I opened my eyes again, wondering who was calling my cell phone in the middle of the workday. Taking my hand away from my eyes, I reached for it, figuring it would likely be Jim having the last word since I'd just teased his ass by calling him a bitch.

It wasn't. Shit, what the fuck manifested *this* phone call?

I cleared my throat before swiping my thumb across the bottom of the screen and raising the phone to my ear. "Hey, Stephen."

"Spence. How are you?"

My brother's smooth Oxbridge accent came down the line, colored with the slight hints of our childhood in Italy.

"I'm fine. I'm just at work. Where are you in the world right now, Steve?"

"Provence. Nadia and I decided to take a short, pre-wedding trip before heading to Sirmione."

"Right. The wedding." I kept the secondary groan inside this time, trying to make sure my brother didn't get any sense that I'd forgotten that he was getting married.

"You forgot, didn't you?"

"I forget nothing. Besides, the reminder is glaringly right in front of me on my computer's calendar," I said, which was true. I had added this date to my calendar when my brother told me he was marrying Nadia, whom I'd gotten along with every time I'd met her. I was excited for the two of them; they seemed perfect for each other. I was also thrilled to see my sister and her daughter, both of whom I adored; however, visiting my family estate in Sirmione was a bitter-sweet thought in my mind, and for good reason. The ghosts of my past were there and going to this wedding meant I had to face them. Something that, if I could find a good enough excuse, I'd definitely not choose to do.

"Spence, we're going to be doing a fitting in Milan for the suits the week before, so if you can be there three weeks before the day of the wedding, that would be ideal."

Fuck my life. This day was coming a lot sooner than later. My heart started to race as if I were a kid again, and my mother called my boarding school for a spontaneous visit home without telling me.

“Ah shit. Listen,” I started as I pinched the bridge of my nose, “I just can’t up and leave to another country for weeks at a time. I have a few critical meetings here that I can’t miss, and then I have to head to London on business.”

“Nonna’s been asking about you. She says that you haven’t called her in a while and that she’s going to die without ever speaking to her favorite grandson again.”

I chuckled. “Nonna invented Italian Catholic guilt, and you’re seemingly happy to be her messenger all of a sudden.”

“No, but I did inherit her talent for it. You might’ve gotten the Italian looks in this family, but I got our matriarch’s personality, so I’m here to reinforce that you should come and spend time with your grandmother, Sonny-boy.”

“I can agree that you certainly didn’t inherit the Italian looks, but that’s about it,” I said, chuckling again. “Listen, I really do want to see her and you. Not to mention Sloane and Becca; I’ve missed them a lot. But you already know what’s been keeping me back. It will take a lot more than Nonna missing me to get me to show up. I’m sorry, but it’s a fact.”

“Yeah, I know. I guess,” he said in defeat.

I hated letting my brother down, but he knew why I couldn’t be pressed to show up. The knowledge filled the silence between us the way the distance had for years that’d been rooted by the vengeful individual who took responsibility for our upbringing. All three of us children had tried to spend the last few years since we’d become adults making up for lost time. Still, the lingering presence of our mother hovering over everything we did had always prevented any real vulnerability. She weighed over us like a vicious phantom even though she was still alive and kicking.

I'd done my best over the last few years to become neutral toward my mother, but there was a part of me that still felt a seething, fiery ripple along my skin at the thought of seeing her again, and I was loath to admit that.

I couldn't abide that any person should have that kind of control over me, much less the woman who happened to give me genetic material and then take much, much more, but there we were.

Stephen must've known where my mind was because he said, "So that you know, she disapproves of Nadia. That shouldn't be a surprise to you, though."

"Why is the woman even going to the wedding, then? Her malice, spite, and diabolical way of doing things will forever be lost on me."

"The way I see it, it serves *her* purpose only. She's obviously still trying to wield control over Sloane and Becca. And through them, she works to control the two of us."

"How the hell does she manage to control them?" I questioned with annoyance and disdain for our mother.

"I'm not sure. I think it has something to do with Becca having UK citizenship rather than Italian, but Mum refuses to answer any of my questions about the matter. It's a giant mess."

"Sounds like her usual bullshit," I sighed, rubbing my forehead. I wasn't looking forward to seeing Heidi—our mother—again, not at all. She'd always enjoyed Stephen's company, though, given that looking at him was like looking in the mirror for her, but she'd barely been able to look at me without a grimace. Everything about being in her presence was

negative, and I'd rather not be a part of the *misery loves company* bullshit.

“By the way,” Stephen said, his voice taking on a more amused tone to counter my silence, “I figured you should know; we saved you a spot for a plus one if you want to bring someone.”

“Plus one? Why the fuck would you do that?” I asked, my tone dry as the Malibu hills in the middle of August. “When was the last time I ever brought someone home?”

“I can answer that exactly. It was Hillary. The girl who went fully mad over you in university. Mother really bonded with that one.”

“Yeah, of course, mother loved her. She was just as insane as she is.”

“Speaking of which, Mum keeps asking whether you're bringing her to the wedding. She says there's been no one since who's come close to her caliber and that she'd—and I quote—*‘like to see you happy once more.’*”

I burst out laughing. “Of course, our mother would believe the nutcase would make me happy. What a fucking insult. How unsurprising.”

“The way I see it, though, if you bring Hillary, she'll entertain Mum so you can enjoy yourself around those you actually want to see. Hillary is nuts, but she's cool enough.”

“I'm not using that woman to avoid our mother. If I show up by myself—”

“If you show up by yourself, you're just asking for more hell than you need. You *know* very well that if you show up *single*, Mum will be on a mission.”

“I fucking know that,” I said, frustrated I was forced into this bizarre corner of insecurity and doubt, all brought on by a woman who damaged me far worse than I gave her credit for.

“It’s honestly not worth it,” Stephen pressed while I went into damage control mode.

I hated that my mother was the *only* person in the world to make me hesitate. Perhaps a shrink could’ve helped me deal with those issues, but I didn’t have time for that shit. Fuck, I didn’t have time for *this* shit.

“Well? What should I tell her and Nadia about whom you’re bringing? Because I can guarantee that if you come alone, she *will* make a spectacle out of you. It’s not worth it.”

“Trust me, I know.” I sighed, wondering how I would pull this off and hoping the woman I had in mind would go for it.

There was no way I would completely abandon the idea of showing up for my brother’s wedding. Fuck that. I wasn’t as horrible a person as my mother. But there was also no fucking way in the world I was showing up weak and vulnerable for her to attack. I was *not* going to give this woman *anything*.

I stared down at my fingers strumming along the polished surface of my desk and smiled at the idea of Natalia Hoover arriving on my arm, knowing Nat had precisely what it took to deal with an evil bitch like my mother. Nat could hold her own; she was practically the female version of myself, which was *highly attractive* to a man like me.

She was in a separate class from anyone I could think to bring, and if I ever wanted to best my mother, then I needed to play the game on a completely different scale. If she wanted caliber, I’d give the woman caliber.

“Give Nadia my love and tell our mother that I’ll be there, and I’ll be bringing my wife.”

Probably a bit extreme but dealing with my mother brought everyone to extremes.

The silence went on for long enough that I thought the line had gone dead, and then my brother’s rich laugh came down the phone line. “Very well, then. This is one phone call I will be happy to make.”

CHAPTER

Seven

The blueprints for the new luxury neighborhood going up in some of the protected Malibu hills took my breath away as I went over them. I flipped through one after the other on my iPad, sipping on my second coffee of the morning as I lusted over Breanne's latest designs. My best friend had outdone herself on this latest project, a set of high-profile mansions slated to sell at upwards of twenty million dollars each before they were even built.

I couldn't lie; as I looked through the blueprints and the rendered images of the projected three-dimensional depictions, I was positively salivating over the homes. I'd been wanting to make the move to Malibu for years, feeling as though I was outgrowing the condo in Beverly Hills, where I'd spent my twenties and carved out my impeccable reputation over years of sleepless nights and high-dollar deals.

Over the last nine years, my climb had been meteoric, and I was thrilled at the idea of moving out of the city, at least on weekends. I'd built up a substantial enough nest egg that buying property in Malibu was a possibility by now, and I looked forward to being neighbors with my best friend, her husband, who'd become a brother to me, and my little nephews.

And yet, even as I went through the different properties, I couldn't settle on any house that felt right for me. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with the land or the potential houses. Breanne was a master of her craft, and she never would've let a single detail slip past her notice, at least not within the scope of design or engineering. The girl was on top of her shit, as her father had always insisted she be. She refused to build on flawed land or with shoddy materials, and what she built was as close to structurally perfect as possible.

The problem was what I'd seen several clients experience while house-hunting and what *Say Yes to the Dress* loved to make such a huge deal about; it was the glass-slipper effect. That indefinable thing one felt when something was exactly right for the person searching for it. If you didn't feel that thing, then it wasn't the right prospect. What was more, if it wasn't right, it didn't make sense to try to force it. Not with a wedding dress, and certainly not with something as crucial as a house you were planning to drop a six-million-dollar down payment on and likely live in for sixty-odd years.

Strangely enough, a week before, I would've jumped at the prospect of owning one of these homes. They were stunning, private, and exclusive, everything I would've picked for myself if I could've.

Now, though, when I thought about buying one of them, my mind was filled with thoughts of a stunning home built mostly on the water, made almost entirely of glass and stone in a range of beige and black. Whenever I saw the specs for the beautiful bedrooms with views that overlooked the canyons and eyelines all the way out to the water, all I could think about was that those bedrooms weren't built over the water itself. Whenever I saw the infinity pools built directly into the mountains, I thought of how it would be impossible for me to

walk from the pool to the beach. Whenever I looked at the drawings of the living rooms and kitchens, I thought of how none were the ones where I'd been slathered in ice cream and licked all over.

This was too much—all of it. Everything, from the fact that I clearly was not moving on from the weekend I'd spent with Spencer Monroe to the point that I was using his house as the barometer to measure my future, told me that I was in serious trouble where this man was concerned.

Yesterday had been abnormal enough: I'd woken up in his bed once more, and this time, I'd woken up before him, giving me the opportunity to wake him up with my skill below a man's waist. Then, after a few pleasant hours of eating a delightful breakfast, talking, and a last little bit of fucking, I put my bathing suit back on, unable to stomach the prospect of my work clothes and heels again after a weekend of wearing nothing but Spencer's shirt.

I pulled my ass quickly out of my fantasy when he offered to walk me back to Alex and Bree's. I was serious as a damn heart attack when I knew I had no business going *there* with him or with anyone. My first red flag was that I actually liked the feeling of the offer, and then I remembered *exactly* who was offering it. There was no way I was getting emotionally involved with Spencer Monroe.

When Bree and I did get around to talking about him, she only got my humorous side of things. She heard nothing about wearing his button-down shirts or anything to fire up the gossip mill that would land Spencer and me in the next *happily ever after* episode in the lives of my married friends. I had to repeatedly remind Bree that she had to stop comparing me to her or her married besties. I loved them all, but they were

worlds away from the type of person I was. It wasn't going to be a discussion, so I killed it the second I saw the hopeful look in her eye.

Sorry to dash everyone's hopes and dreams, but Natalia Hoover was *not* going to be *that* woman who found true love on the arm of a man. Instead, I'd find it where I felt I needed it, in myself. And yes, I truly loved myself more than any other person in this world.

She and I left the conversation at that, and I was, once again, back where I needed to be after sneaking off with Spencer for the weekend.

The sharp sound of my intercom buzzing got my attention, and I gasped as I almost jumped out of my skin. I leaned forward, pressed the response button on the box on my desk, and said, as imperiously as possible, "Yes?"

My door opened, and my assistant, Troy, looked in at me, a bit confused. "Is everything okay with you?"

"Fine as always, honey," I said, covering my iPad once more and crossing my arms over my chest as I stared him down. I liked Troy. He was intelligent and quick on the uptake but quite presumptuous. "Outside of your random concern for me, is there something I can help you with?"

"Nothing at all," he said, the edge of his mouth turning up in a bit of a smirk. "It's just that..."

He paused, and I eyed him with concern. "It's just that what?" I pressed, curious as to why Troy was acting like he was about to announce a surprise birthday party to me.

He shook his head, and the smirk became a full-blown smile. "Well," he sighed in what seemed defeat, then frowned, "your *husband* asked me to let you know he's here to see you."

“My *what?*”

“I know. I was pretty surprised when he told me the happy news too. Though I was more surprised that you hadn’t told anyone around the office.”

“Troy. Stop talking.” I set my tablet down on the desk, bringing my hand up and rubbing the back of my neck. “What does this *husband of mine* look like?”

“Kind of like Chris Evans, if Chris Evans had dark hair and brown eyes.” Raising his eyebrow again, he cocked his head to the side. “Honestly, you could do a lot worse. I’d marry him in a second.”

God help you, Spencer, I thought with a sharp inhale. Jesus, could this be any more of a Monday? “Bring in dark Captain America, and I’ll let you know if he’s single when I’m done with him,” I said dryly.

Troy stepped out, and within seconds a tall, extremely hot snack of a man entered my office. Spencer grinned at me, and his look was cocky enough for me to want to pull off my shoe and throw it at him. But, unfortunately for me, that would be a waste of a good Louboutin.

“Hi, darling,” the rich, deep voice with a hint of an Oxbridge accent said, prompting my eyebrow to arch.

“What did I say about ridiculous pet names?” I questioned without a smile.

“They turned you off,” he answered, sitting in the chair across from my desk. He propped an ankle up on his knee, fully relaxed and ready for whatever the bastard knew my response would be to him showing up here unannounced.

“So, *why* would you use a pet name directly after coming here without an invitation and, more importantly, stating

you're my husband?"

"Well, I—"

"Just what the fuck do you think you're doing, Spencer?" I decided to stop playing his games and figure out what had possessed this man. "I figured you were an extremely busy businessman, out trying to run the world."

"Not the world," he said. "Just Mitchell and Associates."

"Which might as well be the world," I retorted with a sigh. "Look, I'm also busy, so let me set the record straight. I had a great time, but the reality is, I'm at work and very well satiated in the sexual department. I do have you to thank for that. So, thank you, and goodbye."

"Before you kick my ass out of here," he said, holding up his hands, "hear me out, please?"

I twisted my Cartier watch on my wrist, glanced down at it, and up to him, "You have exactly one minute, go."

"What do you think about joining the mile-high club?"

My jaw dropped open. "Listen, dick-fuck," I said, "I may have seemed like a high school girl while riding your cock all weekend, but that doesn't mean I am one. Asking me to join the mile-high club is like asking me on a date to Chuck E. Cheese. I'm going to need your ass to grow the fuck up and be a little more direct with me about what you want and why the hell you came to my office today proclaiming you're my husband."

He smiled. "You are quite the woman, Nat Hoover."

"I know," I answered confidently. "You've officially wasted five minutes of my life asking a ridiculous question. Either leave or get to the point."

“Jesus. And Jim thought *I* was aggressive?”

“I struggle to understand why. Does he know you like propositioning women to join the *mile-high club* so you can fuck them on his private jets? Because I swear if he doesn’t fire your ass over that stupid shit alone, there’s something wrong with him too.”

Spencer’s eyes narrowed at me, and suddenly, I felt like I had just finished an interview and was hired for the job. What was this sneaky bastard doing?

“Clock’s ticking,” I reminded him, hoping he’d spit it out because I needed to get to work.

He sighed. “Okay, forget the mile-high club invite. How about this?” His wicked grin piqued my intrigue. “I’m curious about your bucket list.”

“My what?”

“Your sex bucket list,” he said.

“I swear I will never speak to you again if you ask me another childish question. Are you nervous? Seriously? What the fuck is wrong with you and these lame attempts to get me to fuck you on an airplane?”

His lips pinched together tightly, and his eyes grew darker, “What do you think about going to Italy with me?”

I waved my hand out to him. “You see? Now *that* is a language I speak. Not saying that I will go to Italy with you, but I appreciate the direct approach.”

Spencer smeared his hand over his forehead, and now I was confused more than ever, wondering why he was so *off*.

“Dear God, man, you’re a mess. I’m not sure asking me to go to Italy is quite what you’re after now, either.”

“It’s not. Well, not entirely.”

“Well, then, what *entirely* are you trying to ask me?”

“My brother’s getting married,” he said, “and like most successful men in my particular line of work, we have complicated family issues. Demons from our pasts, so to speak.”

“If you dare compare your life to Alex Grayson’s and his demons, I’ll hurl my shoe at your forehead.”

“I’d never,” he said. Now, he had a bit of sympathy from me because it was clear he seemed pretty disturbed by this wedding. “I’d like to invite you along with me. My mother is *quite* a singular woman. Well, without saying too much, I don’t want to show up as her billionaire bachelor son. I’d prefer to arrive married and for you to be my fake wife.”

I swallowed. “This sounds like a goddamn romance novel, which I dare say I would not read because it’s not my thing. I have no desire to be on the arm of a wealthy man in a suit, faking that I’m married to him because I’m some desperate fool.”

He rolled his eyes, “Do you insult everything or just things that I suggest?”

“Both,” I said, completely done with this conversation. “And, no. I’m not going to allow your rich ass to whore me out and pretend to play house for the benefit of your family, either.

“You’re impossible,” he said with rising frustration.

“Indeed, I am,” I returned. Honestly, I was more than a little surprised he hadn’t left yet. He sat there with a defeated look that made me feel almost bad for him. “However, you look like a lost schoolboy in desperate need of a friend, so I

might consider this just to prove I have a heart for people I enjoy being around.”

“Enjoy being around?” he questioned, more hopeful now.

“The sex was pretty damn good, Mr. Monroe, and I believe a lovely jaunt to the old world would give me just the excuse to indulge myself in it some more.”

“Well, shit. All I had to do was offer you sex?”

“You have met me, haven’t you?”

He laughed and let out a breath of what I assumed was relief.

“Listen, I’m not just doing this for sex,” I smiled at him. “I’m no fool. I saw a look in your eye at the mention of that mother of yours.”

His face darkened again.

“I’m guessing she’s a pretty awful woman if her son reacts like this without even being in her presence?”

“You have no idea. But, to be honest, I wouldn’t have you on my arm, pretending to be my wife, if I thought you couldn’t handle her.”

“Oh, honey, you have no idea how well I can handle women who seemingly ruin their families’ lives by being a bitch,” I stated.

“How could you tell she’s like that?”

“Wild guess with the help of a few hints from the spoiled, sex-crazed, heartless, workaholic rich kid sitting in front of me.”

“This may not be as easy as you think.” The way his mouth tightened whenever he mentioned his mother didn’t

escape me. “But I know how tough you are and that you won’t take any shit from her.”

“You’re just lucky the sex is good.” I winked at him, feeling a bit happy I could join in on some fun to ease the burden. Why the fuck not? I dug shit like this.

“Oh, the sex will be worth it. You can trust me on that.”

I crossed my legs tightly at the thought of what lay ahead in that department.

“I expect it will be,” I answered, taunting him.

“I’d like to fuck your sexy ass all the way to Italy and back.”

“Now, you’re just torturing me with the idea.” I couldn’t help the smile that spread across my face. “When is the wedding?”

“September twenty-fifth.”

“Shit,” I shook my head. “I’m going to be in London for meetings the week of October fourth. I can’t go to Italy right before. Well, damn. All of that just to reject your handsome, desperate ass.”

“Actually, that happens to work perfectly with my schedule. I’ll also be in London for meetings then,” he said, standing up. “Which means I’ll be claiming your ass all over London too.”

I clamped my lips together. “One last question.”

“Go.” He looked at his watch, then back at me. “You have less than a minute,” he teased, and I rolled my eyes.

“Why *exactly* do we have to be married?”

His face darkened again. “So my mother won’t try to get me to leave you at the risk of her financial stability.”

I sat back, studying him. What the fuck was I up against?

With the silence filling the room and Spencer clearly affected by his last statement, he nodded at me, buttoned his jacket, and walked out of my office without another word.

CHAPTER

Eight

I hit the buzzer on the intercom for the second time, tapping the toe of my Jimmy Choo heel on the cracked concrete, my arms weighed down under all the Korean barbecue I was holding and rapidly growing more and more uncomfortable in every way a woman can when wearing a tight skirt and heels, standing south of Olympic Boulevard as she waited for someone who clearly wasn't coming to let her in.

“Goddammit, Shane,” I murmured under my breath, wondering if my brother was passed out or screwing some broad and not answering the door.

I reached into my purse to pull out my keys, isolating the spare that my little brother had given me to his apartment. It had only been for use in case of emergency, but the last time I used it under the assumption that it was an emergency, I ended up walking in on my brother in the middle of fucking some random girl from one of his programming classes. Seeing my brother's naked ass wasn't an experience I was particularly interested in repeating. Still, we had plans, and I couldn't help feeling worried that something else had happened to keep him from coming to the door.

“Oh, hey, Sis,” a softly musical voice came from above my head. I looked up to see my brother's handsome face. His

beautiful brown eyes—which began taking on more than their share of exhaustion at much too young an age—were just as hazy as I’d expected, with even bigger pupils than usual. “I know you weren’t about to use the emergency key without permission, were you?”

“What the hell do you mean without *permission*?” I retorted. “When I’m stuck south of Olympic after nine, and my brother’s not answering, I’d say that that counts as an emergency, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m not sure. With those shoes, I’d say you have a pretty decent weapon on hand,” he said, holding the door open for me. “What’d you bring for dinner?”

“Korean barbecue,” I said, leading the way up to the second-floor apartment my brother had been living in since he graduated from USC by the skin of his teeth.

“Dammit,” he said. “I was hoping for pho.”

“If you’d wanted pho, you should’ve answered my text,” I said.

Aside from the cheap rent, one of the few things I could say about this neighborhood was the fantastic food that could be found nearby. Some of the best restaurants in the city were within a four-block radius of this apartment, as crappy as it might seem. The only problem was the vast majority of people who ran in *my circle* had a stick up their asses about any restaurant with less than the three-dollar signs icon next to the place on Yelp.

Then there was my brother and *his crowd*. I honestly couldn’t say much without getting upset or disturbed by his life choices. I’d probably never come here to check on him if I

did. Instead, I accepted it all for what it was when it came to Shane.

Since he was little, my brother had a different way of responding to stress than me. While my father's bullshit had simply made me shut down and turned me into a human ice sculpture, as he'd often referred to me, it had had the opposite effect on Shane. Unfortunately, our older sister, Liz, had more or less checked out by that point, so I never got a sense of how she responded to dad's antics.

When Shane acted like an asshole, though, I was the only one left to deal with his behaviors, and I quickly discovered that the only way to work with Shane was to make the whole thing into a game. Whenever I made him dinner as a kid, he'd tell me what I'd given him to eat wasn't what he actually wanted. The first few times, I tried to appease him, but it didn't take long before one day, I snapped and told him that he should've spoken up before I cooked. He blinked at me sheepishly and apologized before picking up his fork and beginning to eat with the best table manners I'd ever seen him use.

It was strange how silly things such as that forced us into a sibling bond while living in a highly toxic family. Of course, it was all nonsense, I see that now, but it helped us survive that home.

"Damn, you brought enough to feed an entire army," he said as I spread the food out on the table, going to get the mismatched plates from the kitchen. "I don't know if I'm hungry enough for all of this."

"Well, you'll have leftovers then," I said, not looking at him as I felt my stomach drop at the words. My brother had always had a legendary appetite, so hearing him say that he

wasn't hungry immediately told me everything I needed to know about his current state of sobriety. "Just eat what you're hungry for, and leave the rest for tomorrow."

"That doesn't seem very fair. You're the one who got it, so you should take it with you."

"If I took it, it would go bad. I'm going out of town tomorrow and won't be back for a few weeks."

"A few weeks?" A familiar pang entered my heart at how my little brother's face fell and how disappointed he seemed. He quickly blinked it away, fixing me with another charming smile, but I knew he must've felt many different emotions at the thought of me leaving. "What an exciting life you lead. Where are you going?"

"London, for work," I said. "The company is expanding there, and I need to be on the ground to secure a few deals before anyone else gets their dirty little hands on them."

"Oh, *shit*," he said, his face lighting up with the usual excitement I associated with Shane. "London is so sick. The music scene out there is wild. I'm jealous as hell. What do you think if I go with you?"

"Maybe next time," I said, smiling at him as I sipped my tofu soup. "But for now, I'm going to be so busy with work that I won't be around, and that will make for a dud trip."

"I can entertain myself," he said with a grin.

I rolled my eyes. "Sorry, not happening. Only because I have to go to Italy for a wedding before heading to London to work."

"Oh, cool!" He spooned some bulgogi onto his plate, and the fragrance of the marinated beef filled my nose and triggered my appetite even more. "That's a high-roller

wedding. Is Cass finally getting married? Did Mike finally propose to her?"

"Ha, nope," I said. I was entertained by the guess; he knew my friends well since they'd been a fixture in my life throughout his adolescence. He'd tried out his clumsiest flirting on Bree, and Cass had changed his wardrobe for the better. Sammy generally made fun of him in good spirits, and he'd been at both Sammy's and Bree's weddings. He was the only member of my family any of them had ever met. "You wouldn't know anyone in this particular wedding party. I was merely invited as a plus one."

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Interesting."

"What's so interesting about it? I met a man who invited me to a wedding, and I get a quick vacation in Italy out of the invite. So, it's nothing to brag about."

"Right," he said, digging into the sweet potato noodles he loved so much.

"Why do you act like there's anything more to this? You'll hurt your brain if you try to dig for something that's not there, Shane," I said, not wanting to explain the bizarre arrangement I'd made with Spencer.

"Because there is more to this, Nat. You're attending an event across the ocean with a man. Everyone who knows you knows it isn't your style to lock down like that with a man for any reason."

"Lock down with a man?" I smirked with confusion. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Put yourself in a situation where a man depends on you for anything. This sounds like there's more to the story to me," he said, eyeing me and believing he would actually get *the*

whole story out of me. “You’re the queen of the term *love them and leave them*.”

I stared at him. “Well, trust me, this one will be left like the rest of them. Just because I’m attending a damn wedding with the man doesn’t mean I’m planning on meeting him at the altar.”

“Am I wrong, though? There’s more to this guy if you’re doing something like attending a wedding with him.”

“Meh,” I said, tilting my head back to catch the last of the soup in my mouth. “Nope. Not even a little bit, actually. Nice try, though. How’s the bulgogi?”

He shrugged as he took a bite. “Don’t change the subject. Who’s this guy that you’re going out of your way for? What’s his name? What does he do?”

“Oh, my God. You are insufferable,” I said. “His name is Spencer if you must know.”

He shrugged. “All right,” he said. “I guess it’s an okay name.”

“That’s a ridiculous metric by which to judge someone,” I said.

“Well, answer the other questions, then. What does he do? Where’s he from?”

“Why, so you can Google him?” I asked. “No, I’m not going to tell you who he is. All you need to know is that he’s nice enough and invited me to a wedding.”

“Goddamn,” he said, fixing me with the world’s most obnoxious smirk. “The sex must be good if you’re sitting there looking like that.”

“I’m definitely not getting into that with you,” I said, looking over the damage he’d done to the plates of takeout in front of us. “You know, for someone who said he wasn’t very hungry, you sure put a dent in the food.”

He looked it over before he looked back at his plate. “I guess I was hungrier than I thought.”

“I guess so.” I leaned forward, putting my hand over my brother’s. “Shane, what *exactly* did you do all day today?”

He looked at me and shrugged. “I worked on some clients’ websites and did some stuff for that app idea I was telling you about last week.”

“I do still love that idea,” I said, thinking of the composition app for digital music he’d told me about while we’d been at dinner the week before, “but you know that’s not what I’m asking you about.”

He gave me a long look before looking into the corner of the room. “Nat...” He drifted off with a look of guilt I was expecting when I pinned him and forced some accountability out of him.

“What was it this time, Shane? Coke? Ketamine? I know it wasn’t heroin, or you’d be nodding in and out of this conversation, so—”

“Natalia. Please, just drop it.” He pulled his hand out from under mine and got up, going to the desk in the corner where his computer monitors were set up and hastily organizing the work surface. “You wanted me to let the Spencer thing go, right? And by the way, I do not buy that you don’t like him; you have that look in your eye that you always get when you’re leaning into a new adventure—obsession—or whatever the fuck you want to call it. So, if you want to talk about

whatever it was that I took today, then we're also going to talk about Spencer Smith, or Jones, or—”

“Jesus, okay,” I said, holding my hands up in surrender. “If I tell you his last name, will you let it go?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And you won't Google him?”

He shrugged, sitting at the table. “I'm not sure. I'm on something mind-altering, remember?”

“Have I ever told you how incredibly annoying you are?”

“Many, many times, actually,” he said with a smirk as he took another forkful of noodles. “So? What's his name?”

I sighed, putting my head into my hands. “Monroe,” I said. “Spencer Monroe.”

“Monroe, eh?” I knew my brother was brilliant, and I saw that brilliance playing out in his mind as he filtered through all the different potential contacts in his mind. I watched as the correct one clicked into place, and his head came out of its tilted position. “Wait a second—”

I held a finger up to my lips, shaking my head at him. “Not a word, remember? I told you his name, and now we move on.”

“To what?”

“I'd like you to stay at the condo while I'm gone. I think it would be good for you to get out of this dreadful space and out of your head for a minute.”

“You and I already discussed and agreed that you're not my parent or caregiver,” he said.

“I’m not trying to be either of those, Shane. I’m trying to be your big sister who’s always been there for you. I will *not* find you overdosed one day. I know you’re trying, but you live in this place filled with your addiction triggers.”

“Fuck that shit,” he said, irritated.

“You know it’s true. The two previous times you were sober hardly lasted after you came back to this place. I see that you’re drowning again, and I want you to at least change your surroundings, take a breath, and try harder than you’re doing.”

“Swear to God, Nat, every time you come over, it always ends like this. You’re not going to fix me, and therapy is not going to fix me.”

“I know that,” I said, my irritation matching my brother’s. “The only person who can fix you is you, and so long as you keep hiding in this place, you’ll never get into the mindset to fix yourself.”

Dammit, I didn’t want to leave him like this. I would spend my entire trip overseas worried about him, and I wasn’t about to do that. If I had to go abroad for a while, I wanted to leave on a good note. So, I did what I always had done. I stood and started to clean the place. I’d hopelessly leave this subject alone and deal with the heartache of not knowing how to help my brother break our toxic family cycle.

CHAPTER

Nine

SPENCER

Go figure, my nerves were shot to shit, and we weren't even wheels-up in this private jet.

Spencer: Where the hell are you? You know that private jets have to keep to a schedule, too, right?

I looked up at the tarmac from where I stood with my aviators dropping down over my face, thinking about how I would get through the next week of *festivities*. I was also feeling quite guilty over the fact that I was subjecting Nat to this bullshit, and yet, shockingly, she agreed to be a part of this whole charade.

My phone buzzed, and I looked down at my hand, where my screen lit up with a text from Nat.

Natalia: First of all, LAX can kiss my ass. Second, you and those pilots waiting on me can kiss my ass too.

I blinked at the phone, and surprisingly, a smile spread across my face in response to imagining Nat flustered and

pissed off while walking toward the terminal where she would be led out to the private jet.

Spencer: I'll let the pilots know they're on Natalia Hoover's clock and no longer answering Air Traffic Control.

Natalia: Good, I'll be there in a second.

Spencer: Just hurry up.

If I was honest, I was irritated to be boarding this aircraft in the first place. Of course, I was thankful for the luxury of being able to fly private, but that wasn't even enough to chill me the fuck out, knowing our destination.

“What's going on with you?”

I looked up from my phone's screen and felt my brain instantly snap out of the frustrated mood I was in three seconds ago and into a much more agreeable one.

Damn, I'm glad I practically begged this woman to accompany me on this trip.

My breath caught at the sight of Nat standing in front of me, dressed impeccably in a pair of black pants that looked like they'd been molded to her perfect ass. This woman was a fucking smoke show and would be mine for the taking all weekend too.

“Listen, asshole,” she said after she reached where I waited with the captain and his co-pilot for her to board. She greeted both gray-haired men with a smile, then looked at me. “I am

merely *pretending* to be your wife, which takes place once we arrive at this wedding. So, up until then, I'd appreciate it if you could keep your shitty mood and stupid demands about me being late off my text messages."

"Thank you," I said after one of the pilots stepped forward, took her luggage, and walked to load it in the plane's luggage compartment. Then, I looked at Natalia, "Sorry if I was abrupt, but seriously, you're almost an hour late."

"Perhaps you'd like someone else to play the role of Spencer Monroe's wife?"

"No," I answered, feeling slightly irritated that we were arguing in front of the captain. And hoping he wouldn't bring this gossip back to his crew when they were out together, enjoying their vacation in Italy and London.

"What the fuck is going through your head right now, Spencer?" she questioned as I started to question sudden insecurities, wondering why I would even give a fuck what these guys thought about me in their spare time.

I ran a hand through my hair and pulled her arm to encourage her to board the plane so we could get out of here.

"Listen," I started, my tone much lighter than before, "I'm sorry for being a dick. I'm just dreading this entire thing."

She patted my arm. "Trust me, you'll dread this much more if you keep taking your frustrations out on me." She stopped and turned to me as we entered the luxurious aircraft. "Look, keep me happy, and you'll be well taken care of. But piss me off, and I'll make your mom, whom you're dreading to see, seem like Mary Poppins," she said as the flight attendant greeted us.

We made our way to the heart of this stunning aircraft.

“I promise we will stick to the *happy wife, happy life* program,” I said with a smile, feeling her luxurious fragrance assault my senses.

“So glad we could get our first fight out of the way, darling.” Then, her eyes widened as she took in the newest jet Jim had added to the fleet of aircraft he owned. “Holy shit, this is like a fucking hotel. I swear, you men are more ostentatious than any woman could ever dream of being,” she said as the flight attendant returned with champagne on ice.

“Once we’re in the air, I’ll bring the rest of the food requested for your flight, Mr. Monroe.”

“Thank you, Katrina,” I answered and dismissed the woman with a nod.

After the flight attendant left us, Nat and I stood there in silence for a few minutes, unsure how to maneuver around each other in this new space. In my beach house, we’d very quickly stripped each other’s clothes off after years of dancing around each other, and in Nat’s office, the sarcasm had quickly taken hold.

Now, in this arena, I didn’t know what to do with her or with myself around her. This wasn’t like any other relationship or situation I’d ever experienced, and I was more at sea than I’d ever been with a woman.

“Umm.” She looked around, “Where should I sit? There are kind of a lot of options.”

“Wherever your dazzling ass desires,” I said, gesturing toward all the seats in a sweeping motion. “They’re all equally comfortable, and it’s really just about what you’d like to spend the flight doing.”

Thank God, I recovered my momentarily awkward moment and got back to the foundation of what I knew we both were—a man and woman fucking with no strings attached.

The side of her mouth quirked up a little bit, and she tilted her head toward the bag. “I have some work to do, so your horny ass may have to wait.”

I gestured toward the small table next to a bay of outlets, the window next to it letting in a reasonable amount of natural light. “Make yourself at home. There’s a private Wi-Fi network, and the password is written on the paper taped to the table.”

“Okay,” she said, setting her laptop bag on the table. “What are you going to do?”

I walked over to the couch across from the table, took my seat, and crossed my legs as I watched her sit. “I thought I’d just sit here and watch you while you work and imagine bending you over that table, too, of course,” I teased.

“You’re a little creep. You know that?”

She shook her head as she took her laptop out of her bag and set it on the table, along with a tablet and an Apple Pencil. It was clear that she knew exactly what she needed to be doing on the long flight ahead of her, and I appreciated her extensive organization. I’d never seen her work, but I knew her work was a passion of hers and always had been. So even though I was down for fucking this entire flight, it would be equally as enjoyable to watch this woman handle her business in the way that I knew she could.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Green tea is my favorite ice cream flavor,” she immediately responded. “Perhaps you can let that doll of a flight attendant know for our return flight home.”

I blinked a few times before I started to chuckle. “Seriously?”

“As a heart attack.”

“That’s weird as fuck.”

“What’s weird as fuck? Taking advantage of living like James Mitchell on this aircraft? No, that’s *smart* as fuck, and I’m enjoying this entire adventure to its fullest.”

“No,” I chuckled. “Green tea ice cream?”

She shrugged. “It’s my favorite. Now that I’m thinking about it, I’m annoyed that I didn’t give you a list of my demands for this flight.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s all straightened out,” I answered as she settled into the leather seat across from where I’d sat on the couch, facing her. “I wasn’t planning to ask you about your food preference.”

“Well, that was your next mistake of our fake marriage. First, an argument, and now you’re admitting you didn’t give a fuck about making me comfortable on the flight?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Nat.”

She grinned. “I know,” she said, pretending to be serious. “You keep fucking up like this, and we’ll be fake divorced before we show up at this wedding that we’re fake married for,” she finished with a sexy arch of her eyebrow.

“Well, we’re about to be fake divorced because you cut me off, and I didn’t get to ask you what I really wanted to know.”

She shrugged. “Fair enough. You can ask anything, but I can’t guarantee I’ll answer.”

“Already starting this beautiful relationship the right way, shitty communication, and a wife who’s very straightforward about it.”

“*Fake* wife,” she reminded me. “Now, what is this question that I may or may not answer, darling?”

I got up from the couch and made my way over to the table. “Why real estate? You’re smart and brilliant at business, but there’s something about how you approach real estate that’s so fascinating.”

“Why would you give two shits about why I chose real estate?” she asked. I could tell she was a bit perplexed because it was the first time she and I were about to have a substantial conversation.

“I’m just curious about what draws people to what they do,” I answered truthfully, not wanting her to think that I was interested in getting to know her better in such a way that would result in attachments.

She leaned forward, setting her weight onto her elbows and tilting her head so that her long, honey-blonde hair fell forward. She caught her chin in her hand as she thought through her answer.

“Part of it is that it’s just smart business. Like, there will always be brick and mortar businesses for one thing, and for another, people will always need homes.”

“Okay, that’s a generally decent answer for a college advisor.” I leaned forward also, getting a full-faced smell of her usual scent of white flowers, honey, and sunshine. “But I want to know why you do it.”

She bit down on her lip as the plane began to taxi up the runway, making its way toward its takeoff position. “My family had a beautiful house when I was growing up; I mean, it was gorgeous. But it was cold, and it always felt empty. Like, no good memories were being made in that house, and I hated that. Whenever I went to friends’ houses, they always felt warm, fun, and full, and mine was just...the opposite. So, when I went to college and got into the school of business, I decided to lean into the real estate track. I could help people find homes that would never be empty. At least, not because of me.”

As she spoke, I found myself leaning in and paying attention, even as the two of us were thrown back by the g-forces of the plane taking off. “I’ve never heard anyone talk about selling houses the way you just did,” I said. “But you’ve made it into so much more than that.”

“That’s what it is at its core,” she said. “It’s all about home. Whether someone wants to build a luxury hotel, a golf course, or a chain of boutique cafés, it’s all about creating an experience where people feel at home, and that’s what it’s always been about.”

I swallowed, leaning back and feeling my heart pound in my chest as I debated whether or not to reveal my truth to her. This thing felt so heavy and real in the face of the truth she had given me.

“It sounds like you and I grew up in the same house,” I said. “Beautiful, cold, and empty. Well, it was full of expensive stuff that I didn’t give a shit about as a kid.”

She nodded. “Yep, I remember that expensive shit.”

I unbuckled and stood up, feeling my heart in my throat as I walked toward her and perched on the side of the table.

“Speaking of expensive shit,” I said, reaching into my pocket, “I have something I was hoping you’d wear. And I think it’ll go well with your sweater.”

I set the box down on the table and saw her eyes pop again at the sight of the small black velvet box.

“Holy shit,” she said. “You’re really serious about this.”

“Open it,” I responded, smiling at her.

She did and gasped, holding her hand up to her mouth. In the box was a stunning emerald-cut diamond mounted on a delicate, thin band surrounded on both sides by small clusters of tiny diamonds. It was nestled into a wedding set that went with it perfectly, the diamond-encrusted band creating a perfect little nest for the engagement ring.

It was stunning, and the moment I’d seen it, I’d known that Nat had to have it. I didn’t know why; I’d simply known that that was the ring she would wear in Italy.

“Is something wrong?” I asked when she sat there staring at the ring, saying nothing.

“No, no,” she said. “It’s just...”

“What?” I asked, picking up her tiny hand in mine and pulling the ring out of the box.

“It’s the ring I would’ve picked for myself if I had the choice, and that—it just took me by surprise, that’s all,” she said, putting her hand up to her throat.

“Oh,” I said, blinking a little bit as I reached for her hand. “Well, it’s yours, even after this event is over. It seems I already know you more than I should,” I finished with a wink.

She stared up at me for a moment, and I held a flirty expression while I knew both of us were trying to ignore what

emotions were trying to take over. Emotions that we were both foreign to. Emotions that could get in the way and fuck this entire *show* up if we weren't careful.

CHAPTER
Ten

This fake engagement ring was one of the most stunning things I'd ever seen, and far from being fake in everything but the department of why I had it on my ring finger in the first place.

After Spencer slid it on, I couldn't help but feel *something*, even if it was superficial. I honestly didn't care about these sudden sentimental feels that'd slapped me in the face; I was rolling with it and enjoying it for the moment.

Who knew? It was probably the damn ring, combined with the luxurious nature of flying in Jim Mitchell's private jet, that had me acting like this, but again, I wasn't pushing these feelings away.

I stood up ever so slowly and walked back around the table, standing in front of Spencer so that we were practically nose to nose. In my tall Gucci boots, I was just a few inches shorter than him, and if I tilted my head up, I could brush my teeth against the ridge of his jaw by barely trying. I didn't know why I expected to be able to do any work on this flight; after all, I'd known ahead of time that I'd be alone in a confined space with Spencer for the first time since our weekend-long fuck fest.

“Before we go any further,” I said without removing my mouth from his jaw, “I’d just like to know one thing.”

“What’s that?” His voice was hoarse, and I looked down at his hands. I couldn’t help my smirk when I saw that they were clenched into fists, his nails pressed so tightly into his palms that they could very well be cutting into the skin.

“Which of the surfaces of this plane would you like to take your fake wife on first?”

His eyes popped open, and he grinned widely. He leaned forward and pressed me into the edge of the table so hard that it pushed achingly into my thighs.

He chuckled throatily before reaching out and running his thumb over my collarbone. I shuddered as the goosebumps erupted all over my skin in a single, rippling wave as though I were getting a preview of the pleasure to follow.

“I mean,” he said, reaching up to slip his fingers under the hem of my sweater, “I will gladly take your sexy ass anywhere on this jet, but—”

“No,” I said, reaching to hook my fingers through his belt loops, pulling him forward and pressing him against me, indulging in the hardness I felt straining against his pants. “No buts. Where are you going to fuck me, Spence?”

“Well, this *is* Jim’s personal jet,” he said through his teeth, and I couldn’t help but grin as I heard the strain in his voice as I moved my hands over the muscles in his jaw that were so tense, I thought they were in danger of snapping. “I don’t—well, I’m not...”

“You’re the one who opened this whole thing by asking me if I wanted to join the mile-high club,” I said, making quick work of the buttons on his shirt. “Isn’t that one of the main

draws of having a private plane? Being able to fuck without fear of the FAA?”

“It’s a bonus,” he said, shutting his eyes, “to Jim, I’d imagine. But—”

“In this entire time I’ve known you,” I said, flipping us around so that his ass was the one pressed up against the table and smiling when his eyes popped open in surprise at the maneuver, “I’ve never imagined you were afraid of Jim.”

“I never said I was afraid of that man,” he groaned as I slid my hand under his waistband. “Though, he did mention to keep the fucking on the plane to one confined space.”

“Well,” I said, backing away while keeping my fingers wrapped around the cock that had begun to throb and pulse, letting my hand move leisurely up and down his length, “you can just tell Jim that while he may have some say over where *you* have sex, he has no say over where *I* have sex.”

He narrowed his eyes and grinned before leaning down and pressing his lips to mine hard. I lost my breath in the kiss, reaching up to cup my hand under the base of his skull and drinking in his intoxicating taste. I let him bend me back, swallowing down the different flavors of him before finally pushing him back onto the table.

This was my opportunity to take control after all the moments he’d observed, felt, touched, and tasted me during that weekend.

I used my unoccupied hand to undo his belt buckle and hastily pull his boxers down, allowing his erection to spring free of the silky, navy-blue briefs underneath his expensive suit trousers.

My ridiculous brain very briefly thought, *Damn, I appreciate a man who values good underwear as much as I do* before I was distracted by Spencer's velvety-soft lips against my neck. I shut my eyes at the sudden influx of dampness that flooded through me at the feeling of his mouth on me, almost making me forget about the initial plan I had for him and his pleasure.

Forcing my eyes open, I pulled my hands away from his cock and set them on his chest, pushing him back so that he was sitting on the table, bracing his weight on his hands.

"Someone might walk in on us," he said, raising his ebony eyebrow at me as I knelt in front of him and set my thumbs in the dimples of his hips, licking my lips at the sight of the erect cock before me.

I glanced up at him and blinked a few times as I gripped his cock, and massaged my hand up and down his length once more as I squeezed gently.

"Do you think I have anything to be ashamed of?" I said, pitching my voice low as I leaned forward and pressed my lips to the small divot in his hip. "Because I don't."

"No," he said, holding my gaze as he twisted around to pull the intercom on the table toward him. "No, I don't."

My lips skated over his smooth, toned skin, chasing the kisses with a soft pass of my tongue.

"Katherine," he said, his voice hoarse and throaty as he bit down on the inside of his lip, "we're not going to need any service in the main cabin for a while. Ms. Hoover and I are in a meeting for the foreseeable future, so if you could—" He jerked suddenly as I took his velvety tip into my mouth. I grinned up at him as best I could with my mouth full of him,

even as I took him deeper. Hell, this man was so damn sexy, even his dick was beautiful.

“Yes, Mr. Monroe?” Katherine, the flight attendant, answered him.

“So,” he said, his voice shaky, “would you please hold back on the meal I’ve asked you to prepare until I call you in?”

“Absolutely, Mr. Monroe. I’ll keep the champagne on ice for you both.”

“Thank you.” He pressed the button on the intercom to cut the connection between us and the galley, and I pulled my mouth away from him, licking my lips. “I have half a mind to walk away from this now that you’ve made another phone call right as I started going down on you.”

He looked down at me, openmouthed in disbelief. “You’ve got to be fucking with me.”

I bit down on my lip as I rubbed the tiny drop of precum over the tip of his cock, moving my thumb in the slow, circular motions I used on myself when I needed to get off. “Oh, I am,” I said, leaning forward and dragging my tongue along his length in a slow, practiced motion. “And soon, I’ll be fucking you.”

He gave a shaky sigh of relief, bringing his hand up to his face. “Jesus, Nat. Holy shit.”

I was proud at the sound of tension that had filled his voice once more, and I took him even deeper. His enormous cock was brushing the back of my throat, and I might’ve gagged if I hadn’t been able to relax into the feeling. I’d had a decent amount of practice doing this, and the ability to do so practically made me high on the power of turning him on.

I shut my eyes, humming softly in enjoyment. I loved the salty taste of his skin and the dewy drops of fluid that emerged from the slit at the head of his cock. I caught each one on my tongue and drank them down, feeling myself growing more and more drenched by the moment.

He shook violently at the feeling of the vibrations from the back of my throat, and his fingers curled into my long, blond hair. I sucked harder, and his fingers tightened into the locks, looping them around his fingers so that he kept them out of my lips and teeth. “You keep doing that,” he groaned, “and I won’t last much longer.”

“Good,” I said around his dick, humming again and leaning into the feeling of fullness in my mouth. The power was a heady feeling, enough to make me want to come all over my own hand. I lost myself in the feeling of having him in my mouth, and my fingers crept down my front so that they slid under the waistband of my suede pants and found my clit, moving them in that familiar circle.

I was shocked when my hand was pulled out of my pants, and I looked up in surprise at where Spencer was staring down at me.

“No,” he said, his voice tight. “No. If you own my climax, I’m going to own yours. But don’t worry; you won’t have long to wait.”

The surprise dissipated, leaving me even hotter and wetter than before. The arousal settled into my groin like a powerful weight, leaving me almost in pain.

If he couldn’t last much longer, neither could I. I needed him inside me urgently.

“Nat,” he groaned, pulling his head forward so that his cock was brushing the back of my throat. “Nat, I can’t last—”

Good. I lifted my top lip from my teeth, allowing them to brush ever so softly over the ridges of his cock.

He jerked violently, emitting a moan that seemed to come from the bottoms of his heels. My throat was flooded with the hot, salty taste of his seed, and I relished the feeling for a moment before swallowing it.

He panted heavily as he stared down at me, holding my gaze as I dragged my tongue over my lips, catching every last drop of him.

He was still for so long that I half expected him to pull me back up to my feet so that I was face-to-face with him once more, but that wasn’t what happened.

Before I knew it, he was on the floor with me, grabbing my face and pressing his lips to mine, merging our breath. I sighed into his mouth, opening under him and accepting his tongue as it moved and darted in.

We didn’t disconnect as he bore me down to my back, moving his hands up under my sweater and the sheer lacy material of the bra I wore underneath it as he placed himself between my legs. I was amazed at what I felt there, opening fully to him and draping my foot over his ass. “No recovery period?” I asked.

“Don’t need one,” he said, moving down my body as he slid his hands under the waistband of my pants. “Not with you.”

I looked up at him, held his gaze as he took his turn moving his mouth down my body, shucking my sweater over my head, and exposing my skin to the cool air of the airplane.

Goosebumps rose all over my skin out of the combined feelings of cold and arousal.

He pulled the lace of my bra down, and my nipple popped out of the cup and into his ready mouth. I couldn't help the groan that emerged from the very base of my spine as the precursor to what was about to come because of his next few actions. I shut my eyes, losing myself in all the sensations of his fingers, tongue, and mouth as he went straight for my pussy. Unlike the last time, there was no lingering. There was none of the teasing, slow burn that there had been in turns over the course of the last weekend.

No. He was clearly on a mission, just like I had been.

My toes curled in my boots as soon as I felt Spencer's tongue grazing over my lower lips like he was licking up every drop of ice cream from a melting ice cream cone. I reached down to drag my fingers through his hair, but there was more that I needed.

I pulled him up to face me, and kissed him as deeply as he'd kissed me.

"Why'd you interrupt me?" he asked against my mouth. "I wasn't finished with you."

"You can always do more of that later," I said, practically devouring his kiss. "For now, that's not where I want to come."

"Show me," he said, tilting his head back to receive more of my kiss as he moved his hands down over my back, sliding them into the waistband of my pants to cup my ass. "Show me where you want to come. Show me exactly how."

"I just want you," I said, hooking my hands into his shirt collar as I fell onto my back, pulling him with me. "I need you

inside of me now.”

Both of us had forgotten that my boots were still on because it surprised the two of us when my pants didn't go down past my knees. We paused, breathing heavily as we stared at each other.

“Those boots are quite tight,” he said. “It might take some effort—”

I turned toward the table, and grabbed onto the ledge. “Problem solved,” I said, turning back to look at him. The grin he gave me was enough to make me convulse before he'd even touched me again, and he came up behind me, turning my face back to kiss him once more as he lined his cock up with my entrance.

Fuck yes, I mentally thought as I gasped when he entered me, stretching me out so slowly and exquisitely that I almost came apart in his arms.

He filled me completely as he wrapped me in his arms, clasping me around the chest with his strong forearm as his other hand slipped down my belly. The hand that wasn't playing with my clit thumbed my nipple as his mouth found its way toward the pulse point just under my ear, seeming to drink in the scent there.

It wouldn't be long before I would shatter apart in his arms, and I felt him straining toward his own finish inside me. The fluttering of my strong, delicate muscles around him told me I was inches away from a devastating orgasm.

“That's it, baby,” Spencer said, making my heart and stomach practically trip over themselves. “Come all over me, please.”

His use of the word *baby* took me sharply by surprise, and my eyes popped open as I turned to look at him. He captured my mouth again, and I let the kiss go as he plunged ever more deeply into me.

Suddenly, he drove into me and stopped, his tip brushing my G-spot as he rubbed against my clit in a tight circle. The blended sensations and the smell of his skin over my shoulder combined to send me soaring over the edge into a powerful climax that felt like it broke over my head like a tidal wave.

I barely noticed when he plowed into me with a final, devastating plunge, seeming to get even bigger as he froze, with his final groan reaching into me as if it had claws. His cock was softening inside of me, and the warmth of his seed was escaping down my thighs.

“Jesus,” he said, kissing me on the shoulder. “Why is it that every time I think it’s been the best sex ever, we do something that kicks that qualifier out of the water?”

“No idea,” I said, panting. “But now that we’ve gotten that out of the way—”

“Oh,” he said, pulling out of me and turning me around, so I was seated on his lap and kissing me deeply once more. “You don’t think I’m done with you, do you?”

I pulled back from him, narrowing my eyes at him.

“We’ve got another twelve hours of flight time,” he said, standing up in one fluid movement and pulling me with him. “I plan on taking advantage of every minute.”

He didn’t say another word as he carried me to the back of the plane, where he set me down on the king-sized bed in the luxurious suite. It seemed that was all we needed to get our little private jet party started.

“Hey,” he said, running his hand over my back as he leaned over to press his lips to my shoulder. “Are you hungry? I’ll have Katherine prepare our meal.”

I turned over, planting a kiss on him. “Starving, actually.”

He raised his eyebrow at me as he pulled me on top of him, “I could certainly satiate your appetite if—”

“For food,” I said with a tiny laugh. “And I need a shower.”

“Anything you want, baby,” he said.

I laughed. “Now we’re finally getting somewhere with this fake marriage,” I said with a laugh.

He tossed the sheets aside before getting up, the light from the airplane window coming through and shining on his perfect, soft skin. As he walked to the door, I felt that motion in my stomach once more as I thought about how he’d called me *baby*...again.

I never allowed anyone to use names like *honey* or *baby* with me, except for my best friends. Any time one of the guys I hooked up with tried to, I was quick to curb-stomp it. I had a visceral reaction to it, like a combination of wanting to throw up and freeze.

When Spencer used that word, which he’d used several times in the intervening hours, what surprised me wasn’t so much the pet name itself but that I didn’t mind it.

Not at all.

As soon as he'd used that word, I'd wanted to curl up in his voice and embrace him for the foreseeable future. I hadn't wanted to run away from anything about this; I wasn't getting the usual feeling I got after more than a few days with the same person, as if my skin was getting too tight for me.

I was perfectly comfortable continuing in his company, and that, more than anything else, was what scared me. I was never a person to get comfortable with someone or to...to fall in *like*.

"You doing okay?" Spencer said as he took a tray of food from the flight attendant. "You seem a million miles away."

Shit, I must've *been* a million miles away. I didn't even remember him calling for that food or dressing presentably enough to receive it from the flight attendant just now.

I need to chill the fuck out with this dreamy, romantic bullshit.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I'm fine." I crawled over the sheets toward him and reached toward the tray for an olive. "Just thinking about an email I need to send before this plane lands and business hours close on the West Coast."

He smiled a little as he picked up an olive and held it out to me. I ate it off his finger, sucking gently at his fingertip before we returned to our former position.

That's exactly how this needed to stay, sexual and not emotional.

Good God, the cabin pressure must be off in this jet or something. That, combined with the rock on my finger, would naturally throw me off my game a little.

I needed to eat and refocus.

“How much longer do we have?” I thought I’d break the silence by reminding Spencer about how this relationship rolled out—sex, smiles, and no sappiness!

“We’re landing in Italy in eight hours. Plenty of time for emails, showers, and sleep.”

“And other things,” I said, leaning forward to capture his bottom lip.

“Of course,” he said with a smile.

At the sight of his smile, I felt a second wind hit and was ready to take the elevation of this airplane to another altitude.

CHAPTER

Eleven

SPENCER

Flying into Verona always felt much calmer compared to the chaos of LAX, with its approximately twelve lanes of traffic. The mentality of Italy was “Basta e vaffanculo, tutti va bene” (*Stop it and fuck you—everything will be fine*), which drove my type-A personality up the walls. Even so, there was no place in the world like it, for better or worse.

As much as I wasn't looking forward to dealing with the dirt that was undoubtedly about to be dug up during the coming week, there was always something about coming back here that immediately calmed me down. From the soft sounds of gentle Italian to the green and gold fields that stretched out into the distance, I felt a sense of serenity as soon as I got there.

Although I wasn't sure that didn't also come from the woman at my side, gazing in wonder at the rolling hills toward the walled stone city in the distance. I did my best not to let her see me studying her or how shaken I had been since we woke up that morning.

I still had no idea how it happened, but something changed soon after eating and taking that shower together. We'd passed out in the well-appointed bed with one critical difference from the last time we'd fallen asleep together.

On the previous occasion, we'd crashed back-to-back, utterly dead to the world and replete with the satisfaction that only having sex for twenty-four hours could bring. The next morning, we woke up in that same back-to-back position. When we'd awoken, we turned to each other, drawn as if by a magnetic current, and proceeded as usual in the only way we could communicate that didn't end with an argument.

This morning, though, as we entered English airspace, I started to stir out of the jet-lagged sleep I'd fallen into with all the weight of a cannonball and was shocked to discover a delicate hand poised on my chest, her fingers draped over me. That beautiful hand—the texture of which I'd gotten to know quite well, particularly when it was gripped firmly around my girth—brought my attention to her face, which was more relaxed than I'd ever seen.

Her eyes, which I ordinarily saw sharpened into a glare or a dry smile given to quick sarcasm, were relaxed into a configuration that made her seem so much younger than usual. It was as if every piece of flame-tempered armor she used to protect herself had fallen away, and all that was left was the real her.

Given my knowledge of Nat and her compulsion to turn nearly each of our interactions into a fight, I did my best not to move. After spending a weekend with this woman in my arms, I knew she was a light sleeper. I also knew she wouldn't appreciate me watching her in a moment of vulnerability, so I kept myself as still as possible as she continued to breathe on top of me. I wanted to appreciate her beauty in this manner, curled into me, just for a little longer, so I limited my touch to a few soft grazes of her hair where it brushed against my chest.

Thankfully, she didn't move in response to my touches, and it was another few minutes—or it could've been an hour for all I was paying attention—until she finally stirred into wakefulness. I let my hand drop to the side and quickly shut my eyes, feigning sleep as I felt her moving around, her smooth skin brushing over my body as she pulled herself up from on top of me.

I thought she might 'wake' me up, but she didn't. She just let her hair graze over my chest as she moved toward the bathroom. Although a large part of me wanted to get up and go with her, to hold her hair for her as she let the soap rinse off her shoulders, I knew the quiet she was craving right now. It was the reason why I never allowed anyone to stay with me overnight.

I brought my hands up to my face, rubbing hard. I was looking forward to my own time in that shower, to have that time to clear my damn head.

Once the plane landed, the captain and crew offloaded our luggage into a Bentley, and the driver guided Nat and me to the back seat. After we were seated, I braced for what was to come while we began driving through the fields outside of Verona.

While in thought, I glanced over and watched as Nat's thumbs scrolled absent-mindedly over her phone, moving from window to window on the device in a more scattered manner than I'd ever seen from her.

I couldn't resist touching her, so like a fucking schoolboy, I reached over and gently squeezed her knee. She looked sexy

as fuck in the fashionable knee-length, belted, burgundy sweater dress she wore with her tall boots from the previous day.

I chuckled when she startled slightly, looked up at me, and gave me a strained smile. I tilted my head toward the window of the car as we rapidly drove away from the ancient walled city. “You’re missing it, you know,” I said.

She gazed out her window briefly before shrugging and turning back to me. “That’s why I have you, to let me know when there’s something to see.”

I eyed her. “If you want to convince me that you’re working, you’ll have to do a better job pretending to concentrate. I don’t think you’ve read through an entire email since we’ve gotten into this car.”

If I hadn’t spent so many hours concentrating on her face over the last few days, I wouldn’t have noticed the soft pressure she put on the inside of her cheek with her teeth. Finally, she locked her phone, tucked it away, and set her chin into her hand as she looked out the window.

“Hey,” I said, reaching up to drag my finger along her collarbone, “I don’t mean to give you a hard time.”

“For once?” A dry chuckle accompanied the question, but she still didn’t look at me.

“I feel like I should be asking you that.” I reached for her chin and turned her to face me, my fingers as gentle as I could make them. “You’re the one who hasn’t let up on me for a second since the first time we—”

“Screwed, and you answered your cell phone mid-thrust?” she said as if daring me to contradict her.

I rolled my eyes. “We’ve been over this. Yes, it was a shitty thing to do, and I’ve deserved every second of shit you’ve given me since.” I sighed, blowing a hard breath through my teeth as I wondered how to proceed.

Fuck it. She was in a weird state of mind. We both were, and right now, we were headed into a lion’s den. I reached down and threaded my fingers through hers, leaving the grip loose so she would be free to pull her hand away if she felt the need. “What’s going on with you?” I finally asked.

I couldn’t go into this fuckery without her head in the game. I needed her at my side and ready to roll with this shit.

Nat blinked at me, her blue eyes filled with uncertainty I’d never seen, before looking down at our hands. *Fuck*. Her silence filled me with trepidation, but I held off pressing her for more information, doing my best to maintain a patient front so she would confide in me.

I had to hope to God this wasn’t a mistake. In all of this madness of this crazy idea of mine, I never once thought I’d lose Nat before exiting the damn car.

“Real estate is all about dealing with curve balls,” she finally spoke. “You have to be able to contend with clients changing their minds at the last minute, property owners accepting a different bid, and any number of variables that change the equation.”

“Now we’re speaking my language,” I answered, running my thumb gently over her wrist. “Dealing with the unexpected is something I know all too well. Where you lost me is why you’re thinking about that now.”

She nodded. “In my professional life, dealing with the unexpected is everything I live and breathe. In my personal

life, though..." She bit down on her lip, tugging at the same lip that I'd sucked on eagerly the night before. "Well, my enjoyment of sex is not the only reason I *don't* keep people around for more than a few times. That's all, I guess."

"I thought you just enjoyed the thrill of having different partners," I said, grinning at her, hoping to keep the humor present.

"That too," she said throatily, her mouth spreading into that familiar, seductive smile that always seemed to burn the clothes straight off me. "But," she swallowed hard before looking out the window again, "I'm not a big fan of the whole meeting-the-family factor, especially when the family I was born into is nothing to brag about. Except for my brother, of course." I heard the smile in the softening of her voice. She turned back and faced me with that level gaze that had become deeper and cooler than the lake we were heading toward. "I'd just like to know what I'm getting into, especially because all you've given me about your mom is a few cryptic hints. I know I should have brought this up before, but it didn't bother me when you asked. I can't honestly explain why it's bothering me now, but it is, and I need more details before I am introduced to your family. Mainly, your mother, since she's the only reason I have this rock on my hand."

I pressed my lips together before turning fully to face her. "One of the reasons I wanted you to come with me, rather than anyone else, is because it couldn't be clearer that you wouldn't marry me for my money—or rather, *my father's money*. It will burn Heidi to think that we didn't sign a prenup. It's simply a role to play that I need you for, to be the woman who will not take anyone's shit, and I know you don't. Heidi won't know what to do with herself when her insults fall dead at your feet."

“Who the fuck is Heidi?”

“The woman who calls herself my mother,” I answered.

Natalia sat perfectly still as she processed what I was saying, and I could see the wheels turning in her head as she thought about the implications. Of course, there were many more layers to the relationship with my mother that I hadn't revealed. Still, given Nat's ability to read the people around her, I knew she'd immediately understand my mother's motivations. There was no need to go into personal details. I just needed Nat bulletproof and ready to handle the woman's bullshit when it came her way.

“So,” she said thoughtfully, cradling my hand in both of hers as she contemplated the situation. I had to stifle the additional beat that echoed through me at that. “You've brought me along to be a shield and an excuse against your gold-digger *mother*?”

“There's a lot that's very, very fucked up about that woman beyond a simple desire for money,” I said. “But yes, that's one of the reasons I asked you along.”

“I swear to God, the wealthy are weird as shit.”

I smiled, “More than you can ever realize.”

“What's the other reason I'm role-playing your wife around this family of yours that I'm about to meet?”

I raised my eyebrow, conspicuously dragging my eyes up her body wrapped in the wine-colored dress.

“Oh, right.”

Another few seconds of silence, and when she raised her eyes to me this time, they were lit with mischief. It was as if the strange and uncomfortable Natalia left after hearing about

her newest adversary, and that's all she needed to get back into the game. Thank God for that because although I didn't want to admit it, I felt more comfortable with her at my side with her daring and unwavering personality.

“So, how should we play it?” she questioned. “Because in the alternate reality where I would decide to get married, I would never agree to be in a passionless, unaffectionate marriage.”

I grinned back at her. “Perfect. She's English; PDA makes her itch.”

“Then I fully intend to make her break out in hives,” she said, reaching out and dragging her finger along my jawline before leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

For once, I didn't feel the need to take it further. I was content to let it simply be a kiss, gentle and affectionate. I settled my arm around her waist, and she nestled herself into my side and continued kissing me.

I wasn't sure when the shift occurred or what molecular level it occurred on, but when we parted, there was something different between us aside from the sex and arguments we'd been having for the last few weeks.

Natalia soon pulled her lips from mine and looked down at my face, but she let her fingertip linger along my cheek. “Should we work out our story?” she asked, edging away from me slowly.

I didn't want her to move away from me, but I knew I was pushing my luck by revealing these parts of myself to her.

“In a second,” I said. “There's something else you'll need if we're going to convince the family that you are, in fact, the wife of Spencer Monroe.” I reached into my pocket, pulled out

the other small velvet box I'd been holding on to, and opened it to reveal the delicate, thin band that I'd gotten to go with the engagement ring. It was simple, with diamonds scattered over it in a starry pattern and molded against the ring perfectly.

"May I?" I asked, holding it up.

I couldn't figure out why I was going through all these dramatics, but it was a lovely feeling, given what I knew was waiting for us at the other end of the line. I had no issues playing up this fake married life a little more than was necessary.

"Sure."

I must've been imagining the slightly breathless quality of her voice as I took her hand and gently slipped the ring over her knuckle, where it fit perfectly just above the lovely engagement ring I'd given her.

I sent a text when we were five minutes out. As the sleek black car pulled into the familiar, elegant driveway, I felt a different mess of emotions in my stomach when I saw the small group that'd gathered on the steps to greet us.

"I feel like I should be the nervous one," came the voice from beside me, and I turned to look at Nat as she folded her hand into mine, squeezing tightly. "After all, I'm the one coming to meet the family after a super-secret elopement."

I sighed, taking her hand into my lap. "Trust me," I said. "You'll get why I'm less than enthused about this soon enough."

"Is it the whole family that's problematic, or—"

“It’s just my mother, Heidi,” I said. “I think you’ll take to the rest of them quite well, actually.”

She grinned. “Well, I’m ready, but there’s one problem that I can foresee.”

“What’s that?”

She lifted her hand and wiggled her fingers at me. “We’re a bit uneven, aren’t we? Won’t they find that suspicious?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, grinning as I pulled out the velvet box and opened it to reveal the ring I would wear in this charade.

She smiled as I pulled the platinum ring out of the box and slipped it onto my ring finger. “Feels weird as shit,” I chuckled.

“Looks weird as shit,” she said with a laugh.

My nervousness subsided when we both got our heads straight about our fake nuptials and these silly rings we wore to prove our worth as a married couple for the weekend.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she replied.

I leaned forward to open the car door and get out first so I could reach down and help her out. I grinned as she stretched one elegant leg out of the car, her high-heeled black boot the only mysterious clue to her appearance.

This woman was drop-dead gorgeous. Natalia emerged as elegantly as the goddess I knew her to be, and I stole a look back at the family. I couldn’t help the warm satisfaction that came from the sickly smile that stretched over my mother’s face.

“You should know,” I whispered into Nat’s ear, “I’m having some particularly dirty thoughts about these legs of yours.”

“You better be,” she said. “I’d hate to think I wore this outfit for nothing.”

I chuckled, folding her hand into mine and pulling her over the cobblestone drive toward where the whole family waited with their pompous formality.

My brother was the first to break rank, stepping forward with his usual quick gait. He stood before me and gave me a quick once-over before reaching his hand to shake mine. “You look like shite.”

“I dunno what you expect,” I said, my voice falling into the slight cockney twang it always found when I was with my brother. “Not all of us are just having a leisurely drive in from Provence.”

He scoffed. “How do you explain your lovely wife’s appearance, then?”

“You’ll hurt yourself if you try and figure that out,” Nat said with that damn sexy arch of her eyebrow toward me, then looked at my brother.

“Natalia,” I said, extending my hand toward Stephen, “this is my brother Steve, the future groom.”

Nat stepped forward to shake his hand. “It’s so lovely to finally meet you, Stephen. I’ve heard a lot of wonderful things.”

“Is this how you greet family?” he asked, leaning forward and capturing her in one of his usual bear hugs. “It’s great to meet the lady who finally tamed my arse of a brother.”

I slid my hands into my pockets and grinned at Nat's widened eyes, with my brother impulsively hugging her. I probably should've warned her that Steve was the type to embrace everyone, regardless of whether they were comfortable with it. Needless to say, the man was my polar opposite and a lot of the reason why everyone loved to be in his presence a lot more than mine.

"Stephen, behave," came my future sister-in-law's melodic voice. "It's so good to meet you, Natalia. I'm Nadia."

"A pleasure," Nat said, stepping forward into the embrace of the lovely woman with soft brown hair and gray eyes who'd walked out to where Stephen stood with us. "I'm sorry to be crashing your wedding, but I'm so happy for you both."

"Nonsense," Nadia said. "We'll make it a celebration for us both. I'm not the only bride here."

"But you *are* the woman of the weekend," Nat said firmly, holding her hand. "The only white dress will be yours," she finished with a confident and fun wink.

The cool air virtually dropped fifteen degrees as the woman who considered herself the queen of the proceedings stepped forward, looking toward Nat and me with a frosty and expectant expression. "Spencer, my darling son."

"Mother," I said, fixing her with a tight smile as I wrapped my arm tightly around Nat, instinctively pulling her into my side. "It's been a long time." I looked down at Nat, and she lowered her eyelids in a subtle approximation of a nod before turning back to face the woman who'd given birth to me. "Mother, meet Natalia Monroe, my wife. Natalia, this is my mother, Heidi."

Nat's icy blue eyes met my mother's, and as they stared each other down, I couldn't tell whether I'd made a miscalculation by bringing Nat here. Not many knew what my mother's smiles hid, but I'd been on the receiving end of her venom enough times to know what it was always preceded by.

"It's lovely to meet you, Heidi," Nat said, radiating the smooth class she always projected. "I've heard quite a bit about you."

"I wish I could say the same about you," my mother said just as evenly. "However, Spencer prides himself in keeping his life private from his family. So, it's not meant to be an insult."

"It wasn't taken as one. Thank you for considering that, though," Nat responded.

My mother's eyebrow arched, and her bright red lips pulled up in one corner. "You're intriguing." My mother looked at me, then back to Nat. "I suppose that's one reason my son has given you his name," she said coolly.

"My mother has a way of trying to figure out the women I dare to bring home," I said in a deeper tone than I'd expected.

I noticed Stephen had shut down already, as he always did when mother was sizing up new blood. Another compelling reason I hated being around my family and this woman.

"Spencer doesn't lie," my mother said, seemingly enjoying this awkward introduction. "I'm very interested to know the woman who caught my uncatchable son in her net."

"Funny," Nat said, bringing up the hand that wasn't looped into my arm to rest on my chest.

"And what do you find humorous?" Heidi said.

“You saying I *caught* your uncatchable son,” she chuckled and smiled at me, her blue eyes dazzling. “Sadly, that’s not how it went.”

“I’d say I caught her,” I replied, smiling down at Nat. “And it was a narrow catch, at that.”

“Fascinating,” my mother replied, hanging onto the word as if she were sizing us up.

“While this is all lovely,” Nat said, looking around at everyone, “I would hate to be rude by not meeting the rest of the family waiting on the veranda.”

“Perhaps that should wait after you get some rest, dear,” my mother said pretentiously. “You look exhausted.”

Few people could be as underhandedly rude as Heidi Monroe. The problem with her statement was that Nat looked anything but exhausted. She was radiant, as always. My mother just couldn’t resist a dig to bring out the insecurities in someone. Unfortunately for Heidi, I was reasonably certain Nat had no insecurities at all.

“Oh, I assure you that I am *extremely* well rested after our flight,” Nat responded without skipping a beat, flashing me a devilish grin that was unmistakable to everyone around us.

Nat pressed her lips to my jaw and untwisted us before making her way up the steps, where she kneeled in front of the stunning little girl of ten with blue eyes and black hair who looked up at her shyly.

“Hello,” Nat said, bending down to her level. “Are you Becca?”

“Yes,” my niece answered, not looking away as I walked up the steps to stand next to my sister and Becca’s mother, Sloane. We didn’t even look at each other as we looped our

arms around each other, and Sloane leaned into me the way she always had as we watched my new *wife* interact with my notoriously shy niece. “Are you my new auntie?”

“Well, I guess I am since I’m married to your Uncle Spencer,” Nat said. “From everything I’ve heard, you sound like the most interesting member of the family.”

Becca nodded solemnly. “I do know quite a bit. I go with Mummy a lot to her work at the library.”

“I positively adore libraries; they’re filled with a wealth of knowledge. Do you read many books when you’re there?”

“Yes.”

“This does not surprise me,” Nat said, setting her bag down and pulling out a wrapped present. “Which is why I’ve brought this for you.”

Where the fuck has she been hiding that? I thought as I stood there, trying not to show the shock I felt, watching Nat play her role as my new wife perfectly. I had to admit, I was impressed and surprised that Nat had bothered to read the quick family background I’d emailed her the day I asked her to roleplay as my wife for this shitshow.

I watched Becca’s face light up, and she looked at Nat with a wider smile than I’d seen her bestow on anyone. “Can I show you around the house?”

“I’d love that,” she said. “First, give me a moment to meet everyone, and then I want to take your grand tour.”

Becca nodded triumphantly, and Nat stood before turning to my sister and me. “I’m guessing that you’re Sloane?”

My sister nodded slowly in her gentle, controlled manner, stepping away to reach tentatively toward Nat. “It’s lovely to

have you here, Natalia.”

Nat’s embrace was warm and giving, and she folded Sloane into it as Becca came toward me, wrapping her little arms around my waist. I reached down, squeezing her tightly.

“You’ve popped up, you little weed,” I said.

“I like her,” Becca whispered in my ear.

“Good,” I said. “I like her, too.”

“May we take you to meet Nonna?” Sloane asked, reaching for Becca, who sprang forward happily.

“Absolutely,” Nat responded, molding into the woman I would imagine was the perfect vision of *my wife*...if I ever allowed that to be a thought in my head.

Nat reached for my hand, and we all walked into the house, happily ignoring the cold stare that my mother had aimed at my back.

CHAPTER

Twelve

“*Que bella,*” the charming elderly woman said as she pinched my cheeks and turned toward Spencer. “*Amore mio, questa ragazza e perfetta per ti.*”

I didn’t speak Italian, but I got the gist of what she was saying, and I looked down at the floor. “*Grazie mille, Signora.*” I knew that much, at least. I’d done a little googling on the plane the night before, and thankfully, Italian was somewhat comparable to Spanish, which I could almost speak fluently.

Her dark eyes lit up. “*Parla Italiano?*”

I shook my head apologetically at her. “*No. Español, un poco.*” I faced her with a sheepish smile as I took her hand in mine. “But it’s such a beautiful language. I’d like to learn.”

“Talk to my grandson,” she said, holding my face again, “and my great-granddaughter. Very clever, my girl. You learn it very fast.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“You have to,” she said, pinching her hand in the signature gesture I’d begun to see ever since coming to Italy. “You are part of an Italian family. You must speak the language.”

I smiled at her. “I understand. It looks like I have some studying to do.”

She shrugged one shoulder, elegantly clothed as it was in a cashmere sweater. “Later, though. Are you hungry? I knew *mio bambino* was coming home today, and I asked for some of his favorite foods to be made for lunch.”

I looked over at Spencer, who nodded subtly at me. “I’m starving. We didn’t really eat breakfast, so—”

“*Mai, basta,*” she said softly as she got up from the comfortable chaise near the sunroom window.

She’d been sitting there when we were led inside to meet her. Becca had happily taken on the role of my tour guide, pointing out different facets of the house and explaining interesting facts as if she were a docent. When we made it to the sunroom, Becca greeted her great-grandmother with a kiss on each cheek before sitting down on the floor next to her feet, watching as Spencer introduced me to his Nonna, Graziella.

The distinguished woman kissed him before hushing him, seating me next to her, and insisting that I call her Nonna, which was good because it was one less name not to botch.

All of us went out to the terrace, taking our seats around a table that had been perfectly and formally set. Spencer pulled my chair out for me, letting his hand linger on my shoulder in one of the sweet, casual touches we’d been indulging in since we put the simpler wedding bands on each other—the ones that still felt foreign to me.

Before he could take his spot in the chair next to me, though, Becca slid into it with a sweet, expectant look up at me.

I bit the inside of my cheek, struggling to hold back a chuckle at the girl's daring attitude.

"Bex," her mother chided softly.

I cocked my head to Sloane, Becca's mother, softly signaling that I was happy with her daughter joining me at the table.

"Watch out," Spencer said from my other side so only I could hear, claiming the other empty chair. "She'll give you the whole history of the region if you're not careful."

"Good," I said in return. "At least someone around here is high-value company."

He chuckled, weaving his fingers through mine and bringing my fingers up to his lips. "Watch it, or I'll have to shut this mouth of yours later."

"Oh," I murmured and reached for the glass of chilled white wine in front of my plate, "I'm counting on it."

"Well, son," Heidi said from down the table as she took her seat across from Spencer, "you certainly have picked up some terrible American habits, haven't you?"

I glanced at Spencer's dark expression, then back to Heidi, unable to keep my mouth shut. If the woman wanted *embarrassing American habits*, I could accommodate that easily.

"You can't possibly be referring to Spencer," I interjected. "I don't know any man who has better manners."

Heidi's eyes went straight to Spencer, making it obvious that she had no interest in listening to the annoying American broad her son managed to pick up alongside his terrible American habits.

“I know for a fact that I didn’t raise you to whisper at the table,” she said, pointedly ignoring me and my comment entirely.

What a bitch, I thought.

“Yes, Spencer. We shouldn’t be rude. The next thing you know, we’ll ignore people when they speak to us.” I couldn’t stop myself.

I’d never seen Spencer look as cold as he did now, turning ever so slowly to stare at his mother. Though, I had seen him look plenty intimidating at different moments when I’d gone into meetings at Mitchell’s main offices to help with the procurement of properties. But there was always a removal of personal investment when he looked at the people he intimidated.

Now, there was no removal. Instead, he was fully present, and his gaze was so cold that it burned as his eyes practically turned black.

“You’re quite right, my love,” he said, his voice so icy it could’ve made the surface of the table freeze over. “I shouldn’t whisper in respectful company. I was just informing my wife that I would be—”

“Spencer,” Sloane said, her voice stern. I turned to look at her, seeing that she’d placed her hands over Becca’s ears. In turn, her daughter looked around in frustration as she tried to break away from her mother’s grip.

Spencer shrugged. “She might as well hear the truth at some point.”

“Not now. And certainly not from you.”

“For once, your sister and I agree on something,” Heidi said, reaching for her glass of wine.

“That’s not helping,” Sloane said, not looking at her mother as she uncovered her daughter’s ears. “This is not the time or the place for any of this, and you both know that.”

“Speaking of the time and place for certain things,” I cut in, tightening my fingers around Spencer’s, “where are Stephen and Nadia, the future bride and groom that we’re here to celebrate?”

“They had a few errands to run in Milan for the wedding,” Sloane said as she reached for the water pitcher to fill up her glass and Becca’s. “They’ll be back this evening. I know Nadia wanted to speak to you about a few things.”

Dear God, if this was one of those situations where I was going to be asked to stand up in a wedding because I’m married to the groom’s brother, I might never forgive Spencer for looping me into this.

“Oh? Do you have any idea what she wants to talk to me about?” I asked as a few members of the household staff started filtering in and out of a massive kitchen on the ground floor that opened onto the terrace, putting several platters of fragrant food down in front of us: simple white asparagus roasted with olive oil, risotto with seafood from the Adriatic, a radicchio salad with walnuts, and polenta. It was simple and perfectly made, and as we passed the plates around, the food seemed to allow the family to relax a bit more.

“I’m not sure,” Sloane answered as everyone at the table was distracted by the food.

Becca stole my attention from the idea of being a last-minute bridesmaid while she chattered to me about her lovely life here in Italy; as Spencer said, she was a true encyclopedic source on the history of the region. She told me all about the

school she attended back in London and about her best friend, Ollie, who she always missed when she came back here.

“Do you have a best friend?” she asked me.

“I do,” I answered.

“Is she lovely like you?”

My eyes widened as I smiled down at her. “Even lovelier,” I winked at her.

“What’s her name?”

“Breanne, but we all call her Bree. It’s easier, I guess.”

“How did you meet my uncle Spencer?” she questioned.

I could only laugh at how I’d *really* met the man sitting at my other side; however, Heidi, the bitch glaring at us frostily, wouldn’t appreciate hearing that tale at the table if she thought whispering was ill-mannered.

“I met him through my best friend, Bree,” I lied.

“You did? How?”

“Well, Uncle Spencer is best friends with Bree’s husband, Alex. They all live close to each other on the beach, and one lovely night, Bree and I were taking a walk at sunset, and there was your uncle Spencer. The rest is history.”

I was never one for being a creative storyteller, so I knew I should quit while I was ahead. This adorable little girl was much too inquisitive, and I’d never remember all the lies I’d have to tell if I got going.

“I’d love to visit one day,” she said, making me feel like shit for lying.

It was time to squeeze out of this conversation as efficiently as possible before I ended up inviting her to *our*

beach house and dragging out this fraud even longer than anticipated.

Easier said than done, though. Her sweet smile and how she rubbed my arm before answering a question that Nonna asked about her studies made me feel like a wretch.

Lying to kids, now, Nat? Super cool. I was suddenly seized with a hint of self-loathing.

Becca was around the same age as Addison, Jim and Avery Mitchell's daughter. I was instantly drawn to Addison, and Becca was no different. They were such sweet, smart girls, and they would probably get along famously if I were ever able to get them in the same room.

This train of thought isn't helping things.

Fucking hell. I needed to get ahold of myself. I wasn't a goddamn playdate organizer. It was time to focus on the task at hand instead of getting all squishy inside at the thought of two potential besties.

The squeeze of fingers on my hand caught my attention, and I looked up into my fake husband's eyes. Spencer's face was sympathetic, and I knew he understood exactly what I felt.

He knew everything that would come out of my mouth to this family would be some form of a lie because my being here was based on a lie. Well, at least his look proved to me that if it was a fucked-up thing I was doing, at least I wasn't doing it alone. He was going to have to go along with me.

Partners in crime, at least, and that shit *wasn't* a lie.

As I turned my attention to the delicacies before me, replacing my guilt with food, I felt an icy glare cutting into me. I didn't need to look to know that it came from *Mommy Dearest*.

I ate and tried to ignore the evil demon sitting next to Spencer, but I failed. So, as any self-respecting troublemaker would, I had to steal glances in the direction of the living portal to hell. And every time my eyes did pass over her plate, I noticed that she'd barely made a dent in her food, hardly eating any of the risotto or salad that she'd selected. Instead, she seemed to take great pleasure in cutting a single stalk of asparagus into tiny pieces, eating it a morsel at a time, and glancing at everyone else's plate judgmentally.

Satan's concubine sure seems to like mutilating white asparagus, I thought, not enjoying the dark vibes coming from her.

"How nice it must be," Heidi spoke when there was a soft lull in the conversation, "not to have a care for the food you're eating. Aren't American women fearful of what they eat before special events? Shouldn't you be worried if you eat all that, you won't fit into the dress you brought for the wedding?"

This fucking bitch.

Everyone at the table grew quiet, looking from Heidi to me. Sloane particularly seemed eager to hear what I had to say in response to her mother, and Becca looked down at her plate with an unsure expression that devastated me.

I held Heidi's gaze, scooped up a large forkful of risotto, and put it into my mouth, clearly relishing the taste of it.

"I don't know about the other *three-hundred-million Americans,*" I said once I'd swallowed, "but I certainly would never plan on coming to the land of pasta and wine so I could watch what I eat."

“Well,” she said, maintaining her smile even as it soured, “I can’t imagine my son will be pleased if you wind up putting on all that extra weight. Spencer has always enjoyed a woman with good self-control. Strange that he would marry one with none at all.”

I grinned and dabbed the corners of my mouth with my napkin after Spencer spoke up.

“Natalia knows she’s a cut above any other woman of my acquaintance. She could be five-hundred pounds, and I’d find myself lost in her—”

“Oh, well, at five hundred pounds, you’d definitely be lost in her,” Heidi said, laughing at her joke while the rest of the table sat in mortification.

I stopped and looked at Becca. “Earmuffs, kid,” I instructed while showing her that I needed her to cover her ears. She did, and I looked back at Heidi. “Allow me to cut straight through this bullshit,” I said, putting a hand on Spencer’s arm, stopping him from even thinking about trying to stop me from responding to his swamp monster of a mother. “First, I don’t require any man’s approval of my appearance to feel good about myself, and Spencer is no exception. Second, if—and honey, that is a *strong if*—I were to become five hundred pounds due to my eating habits, I can tell you without hesitation that I would be the single most fabulous, glamorous five-hundred-pound bombshell you’ve ever seen. And while I’m sure you have no sympathy for people who struggle with their weight—”

“I don’t,” she interjected.

“You don’t say?” I said sarcastically. “Well, I have great compassion for them. People all over the world—even places *other than America*, if you can believe that—struggle with

their weight. It can be an uphill battle for one's entire life. But luckily, those people aren't waiting around for sympathy from people like you."

"Well, I think you're blowing this out of proportion. All I said was that you won't fit into your dress if you keep eating like this."

"No, that's not at all what is going on here," I said. "You intended to intimidate me, and you used the one thing most women tend to be insecure about, their weight. Sadly, though, you picked the wrong fight with the wrong woman. If there is one thing that I have a deficit of, it's insecurity." Spencer's mother shifted uncomfortably in her seat, but as you'd expect from the devil's handmaid, she never broke eye contact with me. It was obvious the woman wasn't used to people countering anything she said, but it was equally clear that she wasn't the type to back down. "I don't entertain bullies and people who are so miserable in their lives that they work to make everyone else miserable. I think it's rude, and I think you're rude."

"Spencer. Your wife—"

"Yeah," he smirked at me and shrugged, "I probably should've told you. My wife doesn't take to insults too well."

"No, I *don't* take to them. And while you have a lot of backhanded remarks about America, it happens to be my home, and I think it's pretty great. So, if you wouldn't mind backing yourself off my American ass for a minute and letting me finish this delicious meal, I'd appreciate it."

Sloane snorted a laugh into her wine glass as her mother petulantly resumed pushing around the food on her plate, and Nonna arched her eyebrow smugly as she looked in Heidi's

direction. It seemed she enjoyed watching Heidi squirm, and my guess was that wasn't a common sight.

Nonna leaned forward and broke the silence by asking if I had any siblings, and everyone seemed to relax and continue eating without worrying if someone was going to chuck a wine glass across the table. I was happy that Nonna wasn't offended by what I'd said. I was a lot of things, but I had respect for my elders (the ones who deserved it), and she seemed like the type of Italian grandmother I didn't want to cross.

However, I didn't care if I went off-course with Heidi. I was appalled by everyone—including Spencer—for allowing her to get away with such distasteful, petty behavior. She wasn't fucking God. She was an unpleasant and miserable bitch, and I wouldn't smile and take shit from her or anyone. I wasn't programmed that way, and I hoped Spencer knew that because if he didn't, he was sure as shit about to find out.

“So, did your grandmother have all the gardens planted?” I asked as I walked on the estate grounds after we'd finished lunch and I'd been shown up to the beautiful suite Spencer had occupied while growing up.

I'd changed into a casual pair of soft, skinny trousers, my favorite cashmere sweater, and a pair of flats to meet Sloane and Becca for the walk they'd promised me.

“Actually, she replanted them,” Sloane said as we wandered the stunning gardens. “They were a mess when she and my grandfather bought the estate, and she grew up in a gardening family. There were a few really confused gardeners out here when my Nonna came out daily with a hoe and a few

bags of fertilizer to ensure they were doing things correctly and getting seeds from the right vendors.”

There was something about Sloane that I found so calming. Once we’d gotten away from Heidi, she became much more confident, with the tone of her voice stronger and tougher than it had been just an hour before. Aside from her beauty, one would never guess she came from the womb of the miserable bitch. Even Becca seemed freer, skipping through the hedgerows and pausing to pick a flower now and then. It made me a bit sad for them, living that way.

“Remember only to pick the ones that Nonna told you were okay, Bex,” Sloane called after her daughter, who waved us off before continuing on her way. “Becca spends as much time as she can out here with Nonna,” she said as she looked back at me. “If I didn’t make her come in for her studies, she’d probably spend the whole night outside.” She shrugged then her expression darkened, “I guess if I let her stay all night out here, she would at least have a great excuse to avoid her grandmother.” She sighed, then looked at me with sad eyes, “Forgive me, I should’ve kept that to myself.”

“Don’t worry about saying what you need to say in front of me,” I answered her. “I’m no stranger to disliking my own family. If anything, I’m sorry for making myself into your mom’s enemy by sparking off like I did at the table today.”

“You were going to be her enemy either way,” she said, kicking her booted foot through the tall grass. “It’s inevitable with her. If Mother is crossed by any of us, even for the most insignificant things, it’s impossible to keep on good terms. She just—she is who she is.”

“And here I thought I put the woman in her place,” I smiled, but after seeing Sloane’s unwavering expression, my

ego instantly deflated at that theory.

“No,” she said. “All you did was talk to hear yourself talk with that woman. Nothing affects her. All she heard was noise.”

“She’s that bad, eh?”

“There’s a reason Spencer hardly speaks around her, and Spencer is the harshest of us all. “She’s wasted energy for him, and if there’s one thing I know about my brother, he doesn’t waste anything he values, especially his energy.”

“Makes sense. I’ve seen Spence put people in the ground over a business disagreement. I’ve yet to meet anyone willing to stand up and hold their own against that man,” I said truthfully, understanding why Spencer gave his mother no airtime at lunch.

Sloane’s expression lightened as her chocolate eyes searched mine, “But you can hold your own with him?”

I rolled my eyes. “I have a bit more leverage with him, obviously,” I winked at her.

“How did you honestly manage to pull Spencer off the market? I can’t tell you how many women have wished to be in your shoes,” she teased.

“Oh, I have my ways,” I said, not wanting to get into the lie Spencer and I had concocted to get him through this wedding.

I liked Sloane, and I liked Becca. And, despite how good I was at it, I wasn’t a fan of lying. So, if I wanted to get out of here with a shred of dignity, knowing I hadn’t conned the kind and decent people around this place, I would have to keep the conversation light—time to learn everything about gardening.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

SPENCER

I sat in my father's old office after I changed from my traveling clothes into a pair of jeans. A faint smile turned up in the corner of my mouth, knowing that wearing jeans around this estate would positively repulse my mother. I'd managed to successfully put up an impenetrable façade no matter what she said, simply reminding myself of what awaited me upstairs in my room once I finished this bullshit.

I was pretty impressed with Natalia holding her own against my mother at lunch, but again, that's why I brought her as my fake wife. I knew she could take that woman's insults and hurl them back at her. Sadly, Natalia's words didn't put my mother in her place, and therefore, it was a waste of time to speak them, even if she was standing up for herself.

My mind drifted back to when we dismissed ourselves from the table and went up to our room, where our things had been unpacked for us already. Nat sat down on the bed with a deep sigh of relief. "Not gonna lie, I could get used to this bed."

I smiled, walking over to her. "You're lucky I made Nonna replace all the mattresses a couple of years ago. These beds used to be the worst part of being here."

“Really?” She raised her eyebrow at me. “The *worst* part, huh?”

“Well,” I said, shrugging, “I’d say it would’ve been on par with the other worst part.”

She tilted her head at me as she pulled her knees into her chest to hug them. “Your mother is a lively one, isn’t she?”

I gave Nat a tight smile. “*Lively* is certainly one way to put it.”

“You know what I mean,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

I took my seat on the bed next to her, unsure how to approach the subject of my mother, but shit, I brought Nat here to be part of this, and she was a human and not a fucking robot. She had feelings, too.

“Is it me,” she asked, bringing my gaze back to her, “or does your mom seem to have a particular hatred for Sloane? I’m not sure if hatred is the right word, but—”

“Wow,” I said, eyeing her, “I thought you’d be questioning her behavior toward you and not my sister?”

She smirked at me, “Your mother’s insults don’t affect me. Anyone’s insults could get to me if I gave them power over my feelings, but I learned a long time ago in my own family not to allow horrible people to govern my self-worth. Your sister, though. It seems your mother dismisses everything about her presence. I don’t mean to be rude about it, but from my perspective, it feels like your mother must hate her. I know I just met them, but Heidi’s energy in Sloane’s direction is palpable. Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Hate is probably an accurate enough word, I guess. I think it’s close enough,” I said, toeing off my shoes before bringing my feet up to the bed and sticking my arm under my

head for support as I stared up at the ceiling. “Heidi’s always had a thing about controlling all her kids, and Sloane was always wonderful and pretending to be her little angel when she was a kid.” I frowned, acknowledging how my mother treated us all, “You see, it wasn’t always the easiest to deal with Sloane. Heidi had moments of giving her the silent treatment and constant manipulation, just like she did with Stephen and me.” I blew out a breath, “However, it was clear that Heidi was trying to mold her, you might say. And even though Sloane did enjoy moments of being the golden child, she’s her own person.”

Nat raised her eyebrow at me as if that description of my little sister with the woman she’d met at lunch didn’t add up. “You lost me?”

“Sloane played perfect child, then grew tired of the control and manipulation and became her own person for a summer after she left the country on holiday.”

“Still lost.”

I smiled tiredly at her. “Sloane proved she wasn’t her golden child after returning pregnant from her little summer *holiday*.”

“Be black and white about it, man,” she said with a soft laugh. “So, what you’re saying is your mother lost the battle of control and manipulation with her perfect child after Sloane rebelled, fucked a guy on vacation, and came back pregnant.” Nat squeezed my thigh and laughed, “And here she was going on about me ending up on an episode of *My 500-lb. Life* when she’s got a real-life *16 and pregnant* situation happening in her own home.”

“Precisely,” I returned. “The woman can deflect and make your problems worse than hers if you allow her to. You did

great dealing with her bullshit at lunch; however, you're wasting your time if you believe you're getting through to her."

"Well, I wasn't going to just sit there and take her shit. Or have anyone watch me take her shit."

"And that's the only reason you're the only woman strong enough to be fit to be my fake wife." I looked at her, "Trust me on this, though; waste no energy on that woman. She's not worth it, and you're not here for that."

"Well, I won't be silenced because you believe I'm wasting my energy on her. I'll always defend myself if I feel inclined to."

"And I hope you do. Don't get me wrong. It's delightful entertainment for all of us."

I chuckled, squeezing the bridge of my nose tightly before turning with a quick spin and heading over to the closet. "I've got to go down to the office to talk to Stephen and Heidi—speaking of that devil. Will you be okay if I take off for an hour or so?"

"I feel like I should be asking you that," she said as she unzipped her boots, letting them fall to the floor with a clatter.

"I'll be fine. I've dealt with Heidi's bullshit all my life; it's nothing new to me," I said, changing into a fresh button-down shirt. "I'm just hoping I can be as disengaged with her as possible so she can't sink her claws into me." My fingers flitted down to my pants, and I began to undo my leather belt.

"Hold your hot ass up," Nat said, crawling to me over the surface of the bed in a far less graceful way than I'd ever seen her.

I had to physically swallow back the laugh that bubbled up in my throat at the sight of her practically tripping hand over foot to get to me, but the laugh died down quickly at the heat I saw building up in her gaze.

It was remarkable how quickly those eyes could go from the cold center of a crystal to the heart of a flame within the space of a second.

“Baby,” I said, my throat practically closing as she slipped her hand into the zipper of my pants. The way the muscles around her eyes tensed up at the word didn’t escape me; it hadn’t since I’d started using the endearment with her, mostly to test the waters. But I did want to see whether she’d shut me down or whether there was a chance for something else to grow here. If I was honest, I was testing the waters on myself too. I liked this shit. Imagining this whole situation working itself out into a relationship and seeing if I was remotely capable of settling my ass down for more than a minute with a woman was a trip.

“Babe,” I continued, “if we start this now, I don’t think I’m going to make it downstairs.”

“What did I say about using pet names with me?” she said with that sexy eyebrow arch.

I smirked, “They turned you off, and I really need to get my ass downstairs.” I paused and studied her, then I grabbed her chin and bent to catch her bottom lip between mine. I stepped back and studied her dazed eyes, “It suits you, you know?”

“What suits me?”

“That particular pet name.”

“Slow the fuck down with the names,” she said, half serious and half fucking with me. “I’m no one’s baby, woman, or kitten. I’m my own, and don’t forget that shit.”

I eyed her challenge with a challenging expression of my own, “We’ll see about that.” I chewed on my bottom lip, knowing I was, in some strange way, advancing this, “Though, I’m confident you’ll be mine soon enough, lover.”

I finished with a wink, and while Nat was left to figure out her comeback, I’d already changed into my jeans and left the room.

Now, as I sat in the leather chair facing down the toxic woman in front of me, I brought my hand up to cradle my chin, tapping my finger against my lips.

“Spencer!”

The familiar, sharp tone of my mother’s voice brought me abruptly back to the present moment. I looked up at her, trying to make my expression as pleasantly indifferent and removed as possible.

“Yes,” I answered with no emotion.

“My God, can you try to be more alert? You’re starting to act as much of a vacant idiot as your father, dear.”

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, holding back the aggressive response I would’ve unleashed if I knew it would make a difference.

“Well, can you blame me? You’ve been talking for about,” I checked my watch with a falsely concerned look, “twenty minutes. I keep waiting for you to actually say something.”

A sigh from next to me drew my gaze from my mother's infuriated face to my brother's exasperated one. "You're not helping matters much, Spencer."

"I've honestly lost track of what she was trying to say," I said to my brother, barely shifting my gaze from my mother's face. "She uses five words when she could use one, and it's woefully inefficient."

"Spence," he said, his voice coming out in the stern tone that I knew meant he was far more irritated than he was trying to let on. "Really. Calm down."

No one ever, and I mean, mother fucking ever, told *me* to calm down. Not even my brother, who possessed far less of the strong personality I'd developed as a survival mechanism in this household. I had to bite back my natural reaction, which would have been to level my brother, and that would've been only the prelude to me jerking my ass out of this office, snatching up Natalia, and leaving this godforsaken place.

But I knew this fucked-up game all too well. My mother's supreme skill of *divide and conquer* was in full effect, serving its purpose of having my brother and me at odds. So instead of treating Stephen like the sharks I dealt with at work, I needed to take his advice and calm down instead of wanting to crucify him for suggesting it, which was precisely what Heidi wanted.

God, I hated my mother. Shoving emotions down like this made my blood pressure skyrocket, and if I had a stroke and died because of her? I would come back and make sure this woman's ass was so haunted that Ebenezer Scrooge wouldn't even believe it.

"Seriously?" I said, finally, after taking more than a minute to ensure the venom of anger didn't drip into my tone. "Our mother has been monologuing for the last fifteen or twenty

minutes about how much she hates my choices. She's the one who could use your advice."

"How can I be calm," she said, coming around to stand in front of me as she dug her long fingernails into the skin of her arms, "when my younger son has brought home this...this *puttana*—"

"First of all," I said, my voice becoming even icier than before, "if you want me to sit in this room with you another second, you will *never* speak of my wife in such ways. Not in Italian, French, Dutch, or fucking Spanish. I don't give a fuck. She's not a whore, and I expect you will never refer to her as such again."

"Well, what in the world am I supposed to think of her, Spencer? Don't you dare sit in that chair and expect me to believe she is anything but a woman who is after you for your father's money. And now that she's got her claws in you, I can only pray that you had the foresight to sign a prenuptial agreement."

"You mean like Dad did with you?" I looked at her humorously. "That's what this is really about, isn't it? You're furious that I finally brought someone home and fulfilled that final condition of Dad's trust. Shall we go over the details of that truth, *Mum*?"

Like clockwork, as I knew they would, her eyes began to water. "How could you say that to me?" Then came the lineup of her hysterics that I'd known would emerge next. I could practically teletype the emerging actions as if I were reading a script. The shocking part was that I knew this woman had the emotional depth of a serial killer, so her ability to turn on the waterworks or switch emotions was always unsettling. "How

could you imply that I would want anything for my beloved son but the best? I've only ever—”

“Treated me like shit? Made me feel like I was last on your long list of priorities?” I stared her down. “No, you're right, and I'm wrong. I'm the evil one, and you've always been my victim. That's what this is leading up to, right? How horribly I've treated you, and what a hateful son I am?”

“I never said that,” she said, her eyes still tearful, “but you're doing me a disservice by supposing I want anything other than—”

“My money,” I said, nodding. “Or rather, my father's money. And just so you know, we never signed a prenup. We talked about it, but we sort of just...forgot. Time had just escaped us. It was quite the whirlwind.”

“Spence,” Stephen cut in, his wide blue eyes looking at me with the sincere, older brother concern that he'd learned from the time he was forced to parent me when there hadn't been anyone else after our father died. “Did you seriously marry this woman with no protection of your assets? What could you possibly have been thinking? Haven't you learned anything from—”

He clenched his lips together before turning away from me and looking out the window, but he didn't need to speak for me to hear the words he'd been tempted to say.

Hadn't I learned anything from my father's mistakes?

I tapped my fingers against the desk where my father, Alessio, had sat day in and day out, working himself to an unhealthy exhaustion level while building up his family's fortunes. “If any of you had bothered with a simple Google search, you would've seen that Natalia Hoover earns a small

fortune on her own, and *my money* would not tempt her to marry for that reason alone. She's brilliant at what she does and has built a reputation to match it, so when I say that I was the one who had to tie *her* down, I meant it. She's far above me, and somehow, I'm lucky enough for her to be willing to spend her life with me. I'm not willing to sully that with an insurance policy because I don't care about the financial side of it. And before you say a goddamn thing," I said as my mother opened her mouth, "no. No, and no. I'm not about to disregard my father's last wishes about how his fortune was handled, particularly when that money was left to me to give *my family* and me a better life."

"As you said, though," my mother responded with an edge of maliciousness I'd learned to pick up on over the years, "your *wife* earns quite a bit of her own money. So that begs another important question. Why would you need your father's money to live a better life if your wife is so well-situated?"

"You're correct in this begging a very important question, Mother. And that question goes to you. Why do *you* need the money?" I asked. "The money he left for you in trust should've kept you solvent until the day you died with leftover cash to burn. So, what the hell are you doing trying to manage what he left his children?" I shook my head. "At the very least, your share should've been enough to keep you going so that you could establish a career of your own." I stood up from my chair, shaking my head in fury. "I don't know why you keep insisting on having this argument with me every time I come home, but I'm done with this. Just stay out of my way until the wedding is done, and I'll do you the same courtesy." I took in the sight of my mother, twisting my mouth and shaking my head. "Ironic that you would call my wife the whore when you're the one who's always played that role so well."

I turned to walk out of the office, trying to breathe as normally as possible.

“What was the second thing?” Stephen called from behind me.

I turned back around, looking in my brother’s direction. His mouth was twisted flat, and I couldn’t tell whether he was trying not to laugh or scream at me. “You said *first of all* earlier. What was the second thing that you wanted to say?”

I blinked a few times before remembering what he was referring to. “I was just thinking how strange it was that our mother was married to an Italian man, has been coming back here for so long, but she still has such a shit accent when speaking the language.”

Without another word, I slammed the office door behind me and strode down the hallway, making my way to the heavy doors that led to the terrace.

I breathed heavily in the fresh, fragrant air that smelled like the flowers coming from lemon trees and the wild rosemary plants in the enormous yard.

How could I be feeling this fucking upset? The better question was, *why would I expect to feel any different?*

This was, after all, how it’d been since I was a kid. My only defenses had been Dad, Stephen, and Nonna, and then it had only been the latter two after Dad’s heart attack.

I clenched my eyes shut and tightened my fingers around the marble statue that looked out over the gardens, trying my best to fight through the fog that always settled in when I interacted with my mother.

It had always been this way, and I swallowed a few times as I tried to fight my way out of the accompanying nausea. As

a kid, having a conversation with my mom had always left me feeling as though I couldn't trust what was going on in my own head, and I inevitably didn't feel right afterward until I spent several days away from her.

Having the conversation was never the hard part. The hardest part for me was accepting that my own mother hated me. She always used the excuse of not wanting to be in my presence because I reminded her too much of my father. Who knew? Maybe that was true, but I had my doubts.

I'd come to a conclusion long ago that she was a sociopath. Perhaps that's what I told myself to compartmentalize things. Because how could someone who was supposed to love you unconditionally be the one to damage you so irreparably?

I needed to get out of my head before I started to spiral into memories of my childhood. All the money in the world couldn't heal these wounds, so why was I constantly fighting to protect my share of the family fortune from my sociopath of a mother just to get more injured in the process?

Fuck! This self-sabotaging bullshit will fuck me over if I let it.

I snapped out of my thoughts at the sound of sweet laughter coming from the stunning woman who was the most real part of my life here, even if she was here as my fake wife.

Fake wife or not, the sound of her laughter was all I needed to start thinking with the precision I was accustomed to. The weak and vulnerable version of myself I couldn't stomach was effectively gone, and my focus returned.

I looked down into the shrubbery, grinning, and started down the steps.

That was it. I'd head into Sirmione for the night and regain my focus, keeping both feet firmly planted on the ground.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

I nearly yelped when a strong pair of arms wrapped around my waist, and Spencer sharply pulled me back into his muscular chest. I tilted my head to look into his eyes, and he smirked at me as I heard Becca and Sloane giggling in front of us.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard you make that sound,” he said in that low voice against my neck, “and I’ve coaxed a lot of sounds from you in the short time I’ve had the luxury.”

“Oh, behave,” I teased, smacking his arm. “There are children and family present.”

He didn’t answer. He simply leaned down and captured my mouth in a kiss that could only be described as impolite.

“*Zio!*” we heard Becca demand, and we broke apart to look at her. She was fighting against a noticeable smile. “Don’t be gross.”

“How am I being gross?” Spencer asked, not letting me go despite my pulling away from him. “If anything, you should complain to your *zia* too. She’s the one who’s kissing me back.”

“That is a terrible argument,” she said, looking at him like the tiny adult she seemed to be.

“You’re right,” he said, nodding solemnly. “I’m sorry. How has the tour been, ladies?” He stood at my side, slipping his hands innocently into his pockets.

I looked over at him. He was quite a delicious specimen. “It was even better than you said it would be,” I answered. “Everything go okay with your mother and Stephen?”

His mouth twisted up a bit, enough to tell me it had been just as bad as he’d imagined. After having lunch with that shrew, I could only imagine what had gone down.

Who knew? I had to assume it was a fight over money or estate management, or whatever else that would keep a wealthy family torn apart and seeking private meetings in this massive villa.

“Do you feel like doing a little bit of sightseeing?” he asked, successfully pivoting the conversation. “I thought we could go down to Sirmione; we can watch the sunset on the lake and get dinner there later. Just to get out of here for a bit and have some time to ourselves.”

I tilted my head to the side, trying to get a feel for whatever had happened between him and his mother during that meeting. Despite the mischievous smile I’d come to know and expect from him, I detected a subtle undercurrent of tension running through him that, shockingly, my first instinct was to soothe away.

Comfort had never been my go-to tendency before, at least not with the people I’d bedded. With friends, sure. I was the first one there with a joke and a tub of ice cream, but not with the people I was sleeping with.

Besides, I caught on to that last part of wanting to leave so we could spend time alone. I knew I wasn’t here to spend time

alone with Spencer, or to go sightseeing like this, either. I was here to be doing exactly what I was doing, keeping up a good front as I faked being his wife. And now he was extending the idea of getting away from here so we could spend time alone, something I would expect of a good man to his *real wife*, needing to be alone and away from his family drama. Maybe I was reading into it way more than I needed to.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ve been dying to look around Sirmione. Do I need to change?”

“You look amazing,” he said, grinning down at me.

That tension was undoubtedly there in his jaw, and I couldn’t help myself as I reached up to run my thumb along the strong line to smooth it away. I left my hand there as I turned to look at Sloane, who barely hid her smile as she held Bex to her front, her arms crossed over Becca’s chest in a warm hug.

“Do I need to change?” I asked Sloane, unsure if I looked presentable enough to visit the historic town and wanting a woman’s perspective.

She shrugged. “I would maybe wear different shoes and a different top, but the pants are perfect.”

I nodded before turning back to Spencer and pressing a quick kiss to his lips. “I’ll only be seven minutes.” At his frown, I rolled my eyes. “I need the time to find my way through this museum of a house.”

“Just seven minutes, eh?”

Was it just me, or was that a restless shadow moving through his eyes? Reaching up on my tiptoes, I kissed him again against my better judgment. “I’ll try to cut down the time, I promise.”

I walked as quickly as possible, hurrying up toward the room, feeling his eyes on me as I walked up the stairs. I knew that Spencer was likely watching me from where I'd left him down in the garden, but there was also the sense that there were eyes on me from somewhere up in the main house.

My skin broke out in goosebumps, and I knew the sooner I got back to the front gate, the better I'd feel.

My mouth dropped open when I saw the classic car, which was one of just under thirteen hundred ever made of its kind. I'd looked at Spencer in shock, and from his reaction, I knew my reaction was everything he hoped it would be.

“This isn't a Dino GT Spyder,” I said in a hoarse voice, “is it?”

The wry half-smile, which still showed traces of cynicism from his meeting with his mother, turned into a full-blown grin of happiness as he quickly undid the switches on the top to fold it down. “You know your cars. I'm impressed.”

“Unfortunately, for your cocky ass, I'm not trying to impress you.”

He shook his head, looking sexier than ever. “Oh? Then tell me, how do you know cars so well, Ms. Hoover,” he said.

“Easy. You should see some of the specimens parked in the houses I've sold,” I said, looking around at the remarkable car in front of me, “not to mention some of the corporate properties I've sold. You have no idea what I've seen some clients drive, but I will admit, I've never seen one of these in person. So, you *do* have me there.”

“Well,” he said with a mischievous grin, “maybe if you ask very nicely, I’ll let you drive it.”

“In staying with my previous point of not trying to impress you, I’ll admit that I never learned how to drive a manual,” I said.

“You’re shitting me?”

“No,” I held my ground and wasn’t embarrassed in the slightest to admit this. “Why are you surprised that I can’t drive a stick shift? Big deal?”

He smirked and slipped his hands into his jean pockets, “Well, you seem to know your way around *my* stick pretty well.”

“Dear God,” I said, wishing I’d cut him off sooner. “*Your dick* is not a fucking car, so please refrain from lame attempts at being funny with dick jokes, which—”

“Got it,” he smoothly cut me off. “It was a childish joke, but it was the first thing that came to my mind when you admitted you’d never driven a stick before.”

I playfully arched an eyebrow at him, “I suppose I should be more surprised that you didn’t follow it up with a *that’s what she said* comment, so for that, I give you a sliver of credit.”

His eyes narrowed when he crossed his arms and seemed to stare through me, but I never imagined what he would say next. I was expecting more banter, but his playfulness left with a snap of his changed expression to a more intense one.

“I’m going to teach you how to drive this car,” he stated factually. Then, without a response from me, he turned and managed to maneuver his tall, enormous frame into the car.

“For now, let’s get out of here. The longer I linger here, the more I think I’m starting to break out in hives.”

With the playfulness gone, and Spencer’s sudden change of topic and mood, I got in. I quickly twisted my hair into a bun so it wouldn’t get tangled on the drive, not saying another word as he turned the key in the ignition. I smiled when his face lit up as the engine roared into life, then Spence hastily backed out of the garage.

“Stephen taught me how to drive in this car,” he said, his voice taking on the slightly faraway tone that I’d begun to notice it did whenever he sounded nostalgic. Of course, it wasn’t often, but it happened significantly more since we got here. “Dad had taught him a few years before,” he said, shifting gears as we drove down the driveway.

“You guys learned how to drive in *this*?” I asked, shocked. “That’s incredibly daring. I don’t think I’d ever let my kid near the steering wheel of this car, no matter how responsible they were.”

“My dad had a theory about that,” he smirked at me.

“I’m curious about that theory.”

“He said that the best way to teach someone responsibility was to place their life and fortune directly into their own hands, which is effectively what he was doing with Stephen. I was there to watch while Dad taught my brother, and you’d best believe I was fucking jealous.”

“But Stephen was the one to teach you?” I had to ask, given that he’d stopped the car just before leaving the estate grounds and seemed more emotional than I’d imagined about his dad teaching his brother how to drive.

“My dad died when I was twelve,” he said, staring down the road. “He was always healthy, but I assume the stresses of the previous few years had started to get to him, and he had a massive heart attack.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry,” I said, reaching over to set my hand on his thigh.

He seemed to recover as soon as I became genuinely sympathetic. “Don’t apologize. It’s all part of life. I understand that. I lost him too soon, but,” he seemed to force a smile, “it was his time whether anyone agreed with that or not.”

He still seemed troubled, but I instantly caught onto him, hiding any vulnerability. My heart was sad for him, but what could I do? Pry into his deepest emotions and get him talking? I wasn’t upset that he would hide his vulnerability; I was confused about why I felt anything at all. Vulnerable or not, I shouldn’t care. It was Spencer, and this was me. I was here because I was a strong enough woman to deal with his mother’s bullshit while pretending to be *used* as his wife. Those were just facts.

So, why was it bugging me that I had an emotional hiccup in my system just now, and why did I care that he didn’t trust me enough to be vulnerable?

I didn’t function like this with men I chose to be in a sexual relationship with. I couldn’t care less about their emotional needs. I cared like this only for my close friends and my brother. This shit was foreign to me, so I was happy when Spencer stepped on the gas, and we took off at high speeds.

The powerful engine of the small, cherry-red Ferrari raced over the hills, practically leaving my stomach behind as we made our way into the lakeside town closest to Spencer’s family’s home.

Spencer reached forward for the radio and turned it up. He didn't want to talk, and I wouldn't force him to. At this point, it was best if we both reset ourselves in this bizarre situation we'd accidentally fallen into.

I'd been to some pretty incredible places. Hell, the very beach where I spent most of my weekends was widely considered to be one of the most beautiful locales in the world, drawing tourists from every corner to hopefully rub elbows with celebrities.

I hated to admit it, but those views had absolutely nothing on Sirmione, which was like nothing I'd ever seen.

Spencer pulled into the parking lot of a local museum just outside of Old Town and parked the car. He handed the keys to an attendant standing by, who accepted them as though he received the keys to a car worth almost six hundred thousand dollars every day.

"Ciao, Signore Monroe," the valet said with a charming smile. *"Come stai?"*

"Bene, Paolo, grazie," he responded in fluid Italian that only made me go more liquid. *"E tu?"*

"Bene," he said, tilting his head to the side. Then, he grinned at me and gave me an obvious appreciation. *"Lei e molto bella, signore."*

I didn't have to know Italian to know what he meant by his words, but I didn't feel any heat or self-consciousness until Spencer wrapped his arm around my waist and set his mouth against my pulse point. *"E vero."*

I could see Paolo—I'd managed to pick up that much, at least—biting down on the inside of his cheek, either in embarrassment or entertainment. I couldn't tell which.

“Buona sera, signore e signora,” he said, inclining his head a bit to us as he walked around the front of the Ferrari.

“He seems like a good kid,” I said as we turned toward the parking lot exit, walking toward the doors that led to the streets.

“He is,” Spencer responded. “I've known him and his family since I was little. His dad was the museum caretaker, and he brought in his son to be a part of the community.”

“So, exactly what is there here to—oh!” The words died in my throat as I looked down the thoroughfare that led down to the lake, surrounded on all sides by olive trees. The sun was beginning to make its downward trek, and I felt my heart stall in my throat at the sight of the way the water reflected the light back toward the little town, with its elegant, ancient stonework and the gated, sectioned-off areas where people gathered to eat in the shade of the larger trees.

Stepping away from his embrace, I took a deep breath as I turned in a circle on the cobblestones, taking in my surroundings.

“You grew up here?” I said in a low voice, barely able to contain my sense of wonder combined with the faintest green tinge of jealousy. “In this place?” I waved my hand around the palace-like grounds.

“Why the shock?”

“I don't know,” I said, looking back at him. “I think it would be hard to hang on to cynicism in a place like this.”

His mouth tightened a little bit before quirking into a dry smile that could only be described as cynical. “You’ve met my mother, haven’t you?”

I stopped, furious with myself. How could I have been so stupid to assume what his childhood had been like? My own had been a disaster of epic proportions, but that didn’t mean it couldn’t be worse for others.

Shame wasn’t an emotion I felt a lot, but when I did, it hit me squarely where the Good Lord split it. I looked down at the ground, trying to lose myself in the cobblestones.

A finger came down, gently tracing along my jaw and tilting my face up to look back at him.

“You know,” he said, his tone far gentler than it had been moments before, “one could say the same thing about you, being from LA.”

I blinked at him once, staring into his dark eyes before bursting into laughter.

“What?” I answered, greatly appreciating his changing the tone to something more humorous.

“You heard me,” he taunted.

“You’ve got to be joking. One might say *that city* is cynicism’s natural breeding ground,” I said with a laugh. “Sometimes I think growing up there is exactly why I’m so jaded.”

“Really?” he asked, raising his eyebrow at me. “You think that’s the *only* reason?”

I bit down on my lip once again and turned away from him. In that second, I started making my way toward the old square that marked the end of the narrow boulevard. I wasn’t

sure how to get into the garbage that had made up my childhood, especially since he hadn't exactly been forthcoming. This was bound to be a battle of vulnerability for sure. With the finger pointed toward me now—Spencer most likely knowing precisely what he was doing—it felt like I needed to crawl out of my skin to shake this bizarre feeling away.

Well, at least I knew how Spencer felt in the car when I tried to dig into the details about his father passing away.

Listen to yourself. Are you defending him now?

Bullshit. Vulnerability or not, I was just asking a simple question. But fuck me if he'd answer it, so why would I tell him about my situation, my dead mother and abusive father? Now that I thought about it, I wasn't telling him jack shit. He hadn't told me *anything* about what I was getting into with his demented mother, which was fine. But I wasn't busting out the Natalia personal emotions card for this guy after he couldn't be bothered to tell me there was something seriously wrong with his mother.

“Hey,” he said as I spun around when he caught hold of my arm. I looked up into the eyes that continued to crack me open with their warmth, little by little. “If you don't want to talk about whatever keeps those walls anchored ten feet deep and twenty high, that's fine, Nat. But don't pretend like there's nothing there that's burning you and keeping you from opening up to me.”

“Opening up *to you*?” I countered.

“You heard me,” he said with some authority.

“Last I checked,” I said, holding back any accusations I wanted to hurl his way, “we aren't actually married, and one

would hardly call us lovers.”

“Natalia,” he didn’t break this consuming stare that suddenly ignited some fire inside of me that made me feel warm and comfortable with him. “You may want to hide from shit because of me not opening up to you. It’s just not quite my personality to throw all my emotions out there. It isn’t who I am.”

“And what if it isn’t who I am? Just because I’m a woman, do you think I’m some kind of blubbering idiot who can’t stop prattling on about her emotions? Plenty of women don’t gush about their feelings; sorry to disappoint.”

He shook his head and put his hands up as a sign of surrender. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound that way. I don’t assume you’ll be open or emotional because you’re a woman. You’ve met my mother: it’s obvious I didn’t grow up with an emotional woman to set an example.” He put his hands down again and smiled warmly at me. “But something tells me that underneath all of this exterior beauty, your beautiful soul has no problem opening up to those she trusts.”

“What makes you think I would open up and trust you, of all people, Spencer Monroe?”

“My job is to sniff weasels out for a global empire, and I’m highly successful at reading people.”

“Your point?”

“My point is that while you may not trust me right now, you also have this little, tiny thing about you that tells someone to *fuck off* the instant you feel they’ve crossed a boundary. I know. I’ve witnessed it on multiple occasions.”

“And you’re about to witness it again.”

He slid his hands into his pockets, confident as fuck. “No,” he smiled and chewed on his bottom lip in some incredibly sexy way. “No, Nat. You’ll trust me just enough, and with that trust, I don’t intend on taking advantage of it.”

“What exactly do you intend on doing?”

Why in the hell was I allowing this exchange?

I knew exactly why. It felt comfortable. It was a strange adrenaline rush, and I was enjoying it.

“I intend on being there for you, no strings attached.”

My ego melted as I stared at his current expression, which was so sincere that it made me wonder if I had a chance in hell of fighting this.

“Okay, I’ll say something, but I’m not going deep,” I said, stepping aside so that we walked alongside each other.

“Right, but once you earn my trust, you will,” he said, almost as if he was prophesying our future.

“You act as though one day that will happen.”

He smirked at me. “I wouldn’t say it otherwise,” he arched an eyebrow at me. “Now, go ahead.”

“Fine,” I said, in almost a challenging way. “I’m also a middle child, like you. I have an older sister and a younger brother. My sister Liz left home as soon as she could, and she completely separated herself from all the issues we experienced as children, so we don’t speak often. But my brother Shane is incredible. He’s got the opposite problem from Liz, though. The past has its claws in him in a way I’m not sure he realizes.”

“What kind of past is that?” he asked, looking down at me with concern, all previous hints of arrogance from a second

ago now erased.

I sighed. “My father.” My lip curled, seemingly of its own volition. “He wasn’t a kind man, and that’s the only thing I’ll say about him.”

“What about your mom?”

“She died in a car accident when I was twelve,” I said. “It was—yeah, it was very difficult.” The smile on my face got shaky.

He tilted his head to the side, utterly silent, as he took me in. Was this what it was like for the owners of the companies that he was investigating, forced to just sit in his silence while he decided on their fates?

He was fucking torturous. If only I could read minds like I read body language.

“Come on,” he said, reaching out to take my hand. “I’m not sure it’s wise if we continue with our pasts right now. Let’s get a glass of wine and numb our minds a bit.”

I didn’t have any more words as he led me down the street, the light glistening off the lake slowly turning more golden as the evening wore on.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

SPENCER

She stood up against the railing of the trattoria, the sunlight glinting off her perfectly smooth skin and turning her lovely honey hair a pure golden color. I couldn't help but take the time to look at her, feeling like it was a luxury I hadn't had much of an opportunity to indulge in.

Instead of walking over and guiding her to the table that had just cleared, which the hosts had indicated was mine for the taking, I stood there observing the stunning vision in front of me. She brought the glass of wine to her mouth and took a slow, steady sip, allowing it to settle on her tongue and lean into the flavor.

The slow movement of her lips and the clear indication of how much she was enjoying the wine was enough for me, and I knew I had to step forward and feel the movement of those gorgeous lips on mine.

The table could wait, and so could the host. We would settle in for a lovely conversation at a fine table when I was ready for *that* moment. Right now, I wanted *this* moment. I knew I'd be a fool if I ignored the splendor and beauty of this alluring woman.

I gently approached as Natalia graciously indulged herself in another sip of wine.

“Hey,” I said, wrapping my hand around her and settling it on her flat belly to capture her lips with mine. “What are you thinking about?”

I had to know. Her entire vibe had changed once she seemed to have lost herself in the view. I wanted to know what was going through that mind of hers. I was acting purely on impulse, entirely out of my head, and thinking about nothing but how this moment made me feel.

“This lake,” she said, not bothering to turn back and look at me; instead, she settled into my arms as if all the tension supporting her delicate frame had drained out of her. “How I’ll probably never get over looking out at it. I thought I really could appreciate beautiful sunsets, but this? It’s on a whole other level. The color of the water is unlike anything I’ve ever seen.”

“I know,” I said, watching as the sun began to paint the lake in its wash of pinks, gold, and oranges. “As amazing as the views are in my beach house, I’ve never felt like the place could compete with this.”

“Mmm,” she said as she let her head relax against my shoulder. “I could stay here forever.”

Everything about this serene and romantic moment was foreign to me. It should’ve felt bizarre, and I should’ve reacted like I’d touched a hot object, jerking away from it, but I wasn’t feeling that way.

Instead, it was all part of this indulgence that I was enjoying, and I wasn’t going to push any of it away.

“I’m serious. All of this is so perfect that I could stay here forever.”

Natalia's stomach growled, and my lips spread into a smile against that fragrant spot on her neck that I'd lost myself in for a brief moment. "Seems your stomach doesn't agree with your statement?"

She pulled away from me, the color of her face beginning to flush with embarrassment. "I have no idea how I'm hungry, especially after Nonna kept piling food onto my plate at lunch. You saw how much I ate. And I *know* your mother was counting calories for me."

"Oh, I'm aware, gorgeous. I was right there with you." I pulled her away from the railing, led her toward the table set aside for us, and drew out the chair for her. Almost immediately, the waiter came by with the bottle of wine that I imagined Nat's glass had been poured from.

"*Ciao signore, signorina,*" he said, smiling down at the two of us. "*Come stai questa sera?*"

"*Benissimo, grazie,*" I said, weaving my fingers through Nat's. "*Due bicchieri di acqua, per favore.*"

He nodded, walking away with a pleasant smile, and Nat looked up at me pleadingly. "Please tell me you can manage this order. There's no way I can decipher this menu, no matter how good my Spanish is."

I chuckled. "Sure. Under one condition."

She frowned at me. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"I get to choose everything we eat. Is there anything that you absolutely will not eat?"

"Nope. I'll put anything in my mouth at least once. You know that," she finished with her usual smirk and confident stare.

I started at her words, my jaw dropping in shock at how her lips barely twitched. I could hardly stand it for a second before I leaned down and captured her wicked mouth with mine.

“How’s that for putting anything into your mouth?” I asked against her lips, not considering the few scandalized looks coming our way from a few older patrons seated around the terrace. Still, most of our fellow diners didn’t give us a second thought.

“*Scuzi*,” I heard, and I broke off the kiss as our waiter placed our glasses in front of us, giving us yet another charming smile. “*Vuoi avete deciso?*”

I offered Nat a mischievous grin before I seated myself next to her, then proceeded to order.

“Okay. This might be getting a bit ridiculous,” she said, using a slice of the thick, crusty bread to mop up some of the rich sauce left over from the gnocchi we’d essentially inhaled.

I contained a laugh, “What’s ridiculous? The fact that my date is mopping up her plate with bread as if we’d been married for thirty years or—”

She took her sauce-soaked piece of bread and eyed me in some flirty, dangerous, and adorable way. “No, we haven’t been married for thirty years, and yes, I’m mopping up my plate since we’re not just on a date. Honey, we’re married.”

I softly laughed as she popped the bread into her mouth, closing her eyes and savoring the bite.

“I’m mistaken,” I teased. “We are married, even though it’s not official, so I guess I should watch my mouth?”

“Exactly,” she said. “More importantly, as much as I have planned on thoroughly enjoying my food while I’m here, at the rate I’m going, I really might not be able to fit into the dress I brought for the wedding. You might have to roll me out of Italy if I keep it up.”

“Well, I like that you are in the moment, enjoying everything Italy has to offer. Although, I could see myself enjoying you with a little more weight. I wouldn’t mind.”

“Shut up, jackass,” she said, swatting my hand away deftly so that she could nab the last shrimp from the risotto bowl. “What a thing to say.”

“What do you mean?” I said, placing my hand on her knee and sliding it up her beautiful thigh. “All I’m saying is that if my consideration is what you’re worried about, you don’t need to limit yourself.”

“Jesus Christ, man. Your ego knows no bounds,” she said as I stabbed a piece of grilled octopus with my fork and brought it to her mouth. She hesitated for a second before opening and eagerly taking the bite. “Who said anything about you in this equation? You’re maybe a tenth of what I was concerned about.”

“And since you just admitted that I *was* a part of that consideration,” I said, grinning, “the problem is solved, then.”

“Um, no,” she said as she made a quick swipe of the risotto with her spoon and licked it off in a way that made me groan with longing. “That still leaves us with ninety percent of this problem. For such an incredible businessman, your math is severely lacking. You’ve solved nothing, actually.”

I snorted before signaling the waiter. “In that case, let’s walk while we get dessert. I thought we could get gelato at my favorite spot by the lake.”

“See, that’s about fifty percent of the problem,” she said as I handled the bill with the waiter. “The food is too good, and I find myself unable and unwilling to refuse it.”

“I’d like to say my willpower was mighty enough to withstand the temptation of most things,” I said, “but I’m powerless against the call of gnocchi.” I dragged my fingers along her delicate wrist, looking into her lovely face. “What’s the last forty?”

“What do you mean?”

“Between me and the food, that’s sixty percent,” I said. “So, I’m waiting for the last forty percent of the problem, per your estimation.”

“Oh,” she said. “I’d say about fifteen percent is that I like myself at my current size. I like the clothes I’ve got. I like my body the way it is, even if it’s not perfect.”

“Fair enough,” I said, dragging my hand up the underside of her leg, trying to maintain a modicum of subtlety. “Although I could always finance a new wardrobe for you.”

“Sure. Whatever. Leaving aside that I can finance my own wardrobe,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“So, the last twenty-five percent is?”

“That you’re not the only guy I’m planning to impress with all of this.”

I was surprised that I managed to maintain the smile on my face when my blood felt like it’d frozen over at once, turning my veins into one massive icicle. I let my hand, which

suddenly felt like it weighed a good twenty pounds, fall away from the leg I'd been caressing.

"Understandable," I said. I felt like I had the flu. It was like the words came to me through a massive wad of cotton whenever I spoke. "Come on. We should let someone else have this table."

We stood up, and this time, I didn't take her hand as we walked down the stairs that led down to the lake's edge.

Idiot, I thought to myself repeatedly as I replayed her words in my head. How could I have let myself fall into this trap? But, then again, I couldn't have predicted we'd play the game so well that even I would fall for it. The fucking view, her intoxicating fragrance, soft skin, and whatever the fuck else that'd placed me under this ridiculous spell made me feel like a fool. And if there was one way I was unaccustomed to feeling, it was foolish.

Jim warned me this was possible when I told him what I'd planned. After all, he'd seen me after the weekend Nat and I spent together and how my head wasn't entirely geared right then.

His words replayed in my head as if they were being whispered in my ear by him right now:

'The way I see it, you're going to have one of two outcomes,' he said as we stood face to face in my office at Mitchell and Associates, 'and they both come from the fact that you're completely smitten with Nat and doing this to spend more time with her, regardless of whether you'll admit it. Either you two will fuck like animals and wind up destroying each other, or you'll fall head over heels in love with her and end up being chewed up and spit out. You're playing with fire, and you know it.'

'You really think she'd chew me up and spit me out?' The thought of any woman running over the top of me was laughable...back then. Right now, not so much.

'No fucking clue, man. But she's been saying for as long as any of us have known her that she has no intentions of marrying or committing. None. You've always known exactly who she is.'

He'd been right, of course. Nat hadn't changed, either in temperament or opinion, since she and I started to spend time together, and it wasn't her fault that my own feelings had somehow changed.

And I mean, they *fucking* changed. I didn't even know they had, let alone when this happened. But my reaction to her words at dinner was a stark realization that I was not in control of the situation or my feelings.

I, of all people in the world, was *not* the kind of man who was taken off-guard. I held the reins, steered the ship, ran the show, and called the shots...I was always in control. Until now, apparently. The realization that I was halfway down a path I didn't realize I'd started taking was disorienting, and it made me angry at myself.

I walked along the shore of the remarkable lake, looking out across the expanse of the water and watching the moonlight shimmer on the gentle waves.

"Spencer." I didn't turn around at the sound of her voice. Instead, I stood still and stared out over the water toward the Grottoes of Catullus, where the arches seemed to glow in the light of the moon. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head as I turned back to look at her. "You just gave me the reminder I needed to bring

me back down.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she said.

Looking into her face was harder than looking directly into the sun with those shining eyes as bright as blue flames. I was bewitched, cursed, and so very fucked. Time to fight fire with fire and put these fucking flames out.

“What you said about keeping fit for those other guys?”

“I—” she started, then stopped herself.

My eyebrow raised as I looked down at her face. I hadn’t expected her to hesitate when I confronted her about it. After all, she’d spoken so casually when she’d mentioned it before.

“What?” I said, wondering what she was thinking. Like the little bitch I was.

“We knew this whole thing was a ruse to piss your mom off or whatever. That’s what you asked of me when you invited me to be in a fake relationship with you. That’s what we agreed to, right?” She took a deep breath, and I could tell she was measuring her words carefully. “I never thought—I never wanted for—”

“For it to be real?” I asked, my face dry, my body seriously not knowing how to react to feeling like this for the first time in my fucking life.

“Did you think it would be real when you asked me to lie to your mother for you?” she asked, her voice getting harder. “You think a lie is a good basis to build something *real* on?”

“No, that isn’t what I thought,” I said, feeling the anger in my belly rise. “Not at all. I’ve always known exactly who you are.”

“Oh?” she said, the anger striking her eyes with even more fire than had been there before. “Well, fuck me, but I actually like who I am. Can you say the same? About either one of us?”

I walked forward, reaching out to put my hands on her upper arms. “I *can* say the same,” I said, bringing her close to me. “I like you for everything you are.” I caught hold of her left hand and brought it up, examining the ring I’d given her silently. “Don’t ask me how to explain these sudden feelings I’m experiencing because I can’t understand them myself.”

She was completely silent, her mouth slightly open as I lowered her hand. “I—”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I truly don’t expect you to feel the same way. I took off on some wild fantasy and somehow sold that shit to myself as fucking real. I have no idea why. Maybe it was a defense mechanism that went haywire.”

I let go of her hand, turned away from her, and continued my walk around the edge of the lake.

“Spencer,” she said, walking quickly to catch up with me. “Come on. We barely even know each other. You have no idea who I am beyond some sordid details of my past. You can’t pretend that us getting married would be a good idea.”

“I didn’t mean we should get *married*,” I said, looking at her sidelong. “Look, all I know is that you’re the first person I could even imagine waking up next to for longer than one morning back when you spent the weekend with me. Then, when we got here, I saw how you were with Stephen and Sloane and Becca, the way you handled my mother...”

Natalia’s lip curled up at the exact moment that mine did, and we lost our composure for a minute as we started to laugh.

“Let’s just say that I didn’t even think I could—or would—want anything that resembled a relationship, let alone a marriage,” I said truthfully. “I thought my parents killed that for me. Shit, I’m not sure if any of this makes sense because I never thought I’d ever want to fucking talk about my *feelings* with anyone.” I ran my fingers through my hair, wanting to stop this embarrassing display. “I didn’t mean to put any pressure on you. That was not my intention, and that’s the last thing I want. I’d just like to keep you around for as long as you’ll let me. That’s how I truly fucking feel.”

The three or four-second silence was deafening.

“For as long as I can stand you, you mean?” she finally said, but the words had none of the acidity they usually did when she gave me a hard time.

I managed to refrain from barking out *Thank God!* And instead, I stepped forward and reached up to brush back the strand of hair that escaped her bun and tucked it behind her ear. “Who knows? You’re pretty annoying,” I managed to tease back. “No matter how good the sex is, I might get sick of you first.”

“Nope. I don’t believe it,” she said with that daring vixen look I loved so much. “Anyone willing to embarrass themselves like you just did would hold onto me just for spite. So, I’ve got your ego going for me in this case.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Oh, now I’m embarrassing myself? I thought I was being emotionally evolved or whatever.”

“Aw, you did?” she said, crinkling her nose with fake sympathy and grinning at me. “Well, you’re wrong.”

“I am?”

“Complete humiliation. Devastating.”

“Well, goddammit,” I said with a loud chuckle. “Is that so?”

“You’re a total sap who is so lucky I didn’t leave you in the lurch right now.” Her eyes opened in fake surprise. “Oh, my God. How humiliating would that have been?”

She looked so cute as she stood there teasing me, knowing she had my vulnerable self by the balls. I wasn’t typically a fan of being teased, but when she did it, I couldn’t get enough.

“I basically have full control over you now, Spencer Monroe,” she teased with smug confidence.

“Is that a promise?” I asked, leaning forward to run my mouth along her jaw.

“It’s a guarantee, husband,” she said, grinning.

I covered her mouth with mine, swallowing the gasp of surprise that she let out and receiving the smile against my mouth. Then, easing her lips open with my tongue, I loosened the bun she’d twisted her hair into and pulled, letting her long hair fall over her shoulders and threading my hands through it.

She brought her arms up to wind around my shoulders and leaned into the kiss, dragging her perfectly manicured nails along the back of my neck and raising goosebumps along my skin. I loved the taste of her, and I devoured that rich, smoky flavor that still held a faint hint of the wine we’d drunk at dinner. She was enough for me to get drunk on and happily.

“So, what do you say?” I asked, mumbling against her lush mouth. “Can I keep you around even after this week is over?”

“Hmm,” she mumbled. “That depends on your answer to my next question.”

“Which is?”

“Can we get gelato now?”

“Dear God,” I said, rolling my eyes and smiling.

“You know,” she said as we sat on the bench next to each other, her legs slung up on top of mine as we devoured the ice cream in the cool blue of early night, “you still haven’t told me what’s inside this.”

“Hmmm?” I asked, looking at her, confused, with my spoon hanging out of my mouth.

She laughed as she leaned forward to wipe the ice cream off my mouth. “You know,” she said, “you’re the only non-geriatric person I know who likes pistachio.”

“Call it an Italian thing,” I said. “We like our nuts and nut flavors.”

“There are about a million things that I could say in response to that,” she said, grinning.

I chuckled, leaning forward to capture her mouth with mine. This shit was fucking lovely. Chilling with some gelato and allowing myself to indulge myself in more than that.

My mind refocused on the sweet moment of tasting the flavor of her kiss that was tinted with the cold, icy undertone of her Nutella gelato. “Mmm,” I said, running my tongue over the seam of her lips before pulling back. “You made a good choice.”

“So did you, I have to admit.” She held back the small, white shopping bag in front of my eyes. “So? What’s in this

thing?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, grinning. “Open it.”

She raised her eyebrow but reached inside the bag to reveal the silk scarf I’d gotten at the small boutique next to the trattoria. It had a stunning teal, gold, and white pattern, and I’d thought of her immediately when I saw it.

“I saw you touching your hair all self-consciously when we got out of the car,” I said as she examined the filmy, smooth material between her fingers. “This is so you don’t have to worry about it when we drive with the top down.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, holding up the fabric and admiring it. She put it down, her eyes lighting with happiness as she leaned forward to kiss me again. “Thank you.”

She pulled away and handed me the cup that had held her gelato. “Here, hold this for a second.” Then, without another word, she twisted her hair into a bun and wrapped the scarf around it as if she’d been doing it all her life. She tucked it in before turning back and raising her eyebrows at me. “What do you think?”

“You look like Grace Kelly,” I said, my words nearly catching in my throat, admiring how stunning she looked. “I don’t know how you instinctively know how to do that.”

She shrugged. “It’s a gift,” she said with a sexy wink. She pointed at my gelato cup, which now sat empty. “I’ll take that.”

“Thanks,” I said, handing it to her, still enchanted by her beauty.

Shit, I was so fucked if this didn’t work out. These feelings felt fucking awesome, and even though I didn’t know what to do with them, I was undoubtedly enjoying the hell of them.

She stood and looked for a trash can to dump the cups. “Just so you know, though,” she said, leaning forward, “this puts a lot of points in the *hanging around with Spencer* column.”

“I thought we were trying out dating? Not hanging out?”

I had to know where her mind was because I didn’t want to be steamrolled by emotions. I would need to punch the brakes—not indulge so much—if she wasn’t seeing this the way I was.

“I’m calling it hanging out,” she said with a chuckle. “I’m not sure the word dating is something I want in my vocabulary just yet.”

I laughed, sort of feeling the same as her. “How the fuck does anyone navigate a relationship? Dating? All of this shit is so fucking foreign to me.”

She arched her eyebrow at me, “Then we’re both fucked because all I’ve ever done is criticize my friends for it, so there’s that.”

“I say we just go with it, you know?”

“Exactly,” she answered. “As I said, *hanging out with Spencer*.”

“So just go with the flow?”

“I’m sure we’ll both screw something up, but I’ll most likely break out in hives if I do it any other way.”

My eyebrows rose in humor. “I will go so far as to say I don’t plan on seeing any other woman, so long as you’re willing to stick around?”

Her smile broadened, and she seemed much more comfortable with that approach than anything since I brought

all this shit up.

“And that scores you even more points in whatever the fuck we’re doing relationship-wise,” she said, bringing her face to mine for another simple kiss.

I smiled against her lips. “Good to know,” I said, grabbing her shoulder to deepen the kiss so I wouldn’t disrupt the scarf. “I’m taking notes.”

“Smart man.” She turned and headed toward the cans.

I watched as she walked away. The jet lag was starting to set in, and all I could think about was getting her sexy ass back to my bed.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

This whole relationship idea that Spencer had dropped on me after his sudden mood change came from out of nowhere. I certainly wasn't expecting him, of all people, to go *there* with me.

I didn't reject it altogether, perhaps because I had some phenomenal wine in my system and felt bold. Still, truthfully, I was finding myself caught up in the atmosphere of the village, restaurant, and Italy. So, I was fine to play around with the idea of turning the romance up a little. It was fun, it was a vacation, and hell, it'd probably help us sell our fake marriage a little better.

All things told, the sex was off the charts, Spencer was more enjoyable, and I was having a great time with this. I wasn't getting too attached, though. I was no fool. So, when I would catch him staring at me with that *look* of his from across any room we were in, I would immediately push away the warm feeling it gave me.

Perhaps this was how all people dated. It wasn't wrong to be guarded; it was smart. Not going *all in* with a man you hardly know was merely prudent.

"So, you two are dating?" Bree asked.

“Listen,” I said in somewhat of an authoritative tone, “one might call it dating, but that’s only because he and I aren’t enjoying the company of other people in our beds. That’s it.”

“Nat,” she said, “get real for a moment.”

“I am real,” I answered her. “And in being real, I want to stay close to why you called. It’s about the Haverton estate and whether you and Alex will take on this architecture project?”

“I have to go overpriced with Alex,” she answered. “Now, back to something more pressing.”

“A three-million-dollar commission split between you and me seems more pressing than a fling I’m having right now.”

“Nat,” I could hear my best friend’s frustration, “I know exactly what you’re doing.”

“Looking at the clock and realizing it is ten in the evening for you, way past your bedtime, and it’s way past my morning coffee time.”

“You’re avoiding what’s going on. You can call this whatever you want, but it’s dating. You’re off the market, and Spencer is your man, and you’re Spencer’s woman until one of you hurts the other.”

“Are you trying to scare me or something? Because it’s not working,” I nonchalantly raised my hand to study my nails.

“No, I’m trying to tell you that you’re both playing with fire, and one of you is going to get burned. I don’t want you hurt.”

“Are you saying this because you feel like Spencer will screw me over after we get home? That we’re just caught up in the moment?”

“Yes, and—”

“Good. Because I also think we’re both a little caught up in the moment. As I said, this is just one hell of an exciting fling. It’s a step in the direction of dating, and you and I know that’s pretty huge for me.”

“And if you fall for him? You just said you’re stepping in the direction of dating. What if you fall for Spencer? You and I have talked for countless hours about why you won’t commit to a man or open up to one, and here you are doing that.”

I felt my heart pick up the pace and exhaled it away in a quiet breath. “Bree, darling, I know you mean well, and this business about Spencer and me playing around with the idea of dating has got all your flags up. I assure you that I will be just fine. This heart is guarded and surrounded by stone that not even Spencer Monroe could break through if he tried. I choose who I will and will not let in. So please just laugh at this and know that you won’t be asked to be my maid of honor soon. Let me have a little fun.”

“You sure you know what you’re doing? I’m not getting off this phone until I’m sure that you’re sure. I love you, Nat, and I don’t want you hurt.”

“Of course, I know what I’m doing. I am a grown-ass woman who makes enormous decisions for myself all the time.”

“And if an ex-lover of his shows up at this wedding, and he tells you he wants her back, and you were a mistake? How will that make you feel?”

“Like it’s his loss and not mine. Any man who chooses another woman over my fine ass is a fool, and everyone knows that. Now, would you stop giving me doomsday scenarios as if I’m a damsel in distress? I swear motherhood has flipped a

protective switch in you. You know *I* am not the one you need to worry about here.”

I heard her laugh. “Fair enough. Just be careful. I mean, I want you happy and in love more than anything, but this is Spencer Monroe we’re talking about.”

“Spencer Monroe, who swears he will never settle down ever. Yes, I *know* exactly who Spencer Monroe is, Breanne. Save your motherly energy for those twins I hear in the background, and stop using it on me. I need to head downstairs before the demon lady known as Spencer’s mother comes looking for me.”

“Is she that bad?”

“Let’s just say I’m no longer curious about why Spencer is the way he is. The woman is next level. I’ll tell you all about it when I get back. I’m sure I’ll have a boatload of stories by the time I return home. Now, I need to go. Make sure all the boxes are checked on that contract and let me know when it goes through. I’m excited about this one.”

“I am too. Miss you, and be careful.”

“Bye, Bree.”

After ending the call with my helicopter best friend, I headed downstairs to face more significant problems. I might as well hit the ground running by first dealing with the Mistress of Darkness.

The week passed with ease. Spencer had adopted a new pet name of *babe* or *baby* for me, which was annoying at first, but soon grew on me. I’m sure I was out of touch with how a normal person should behave in a relationship, but that’s

because I could hardly remember the last time I was in one. Not that I was ever normal then.

I just did what felt comfortable to me, and no more. I would be damned if I got hurt. That was not an option now or ever. The only thing I knew to do was to watch Spencer's reactions to me and this situation we'd landed ourselves in. So long as he laughed, teased, or was patient and understanding of my process, then this would work.

I'd been around enough broken hearts, broken promises, and devastatingly failed relationships in my time to know a little bit about the odds, and I wasn't the type to gamble with my heart.

I'd known many strong women who put their men to the test before allowing their significant other to win their love. This was no different. This was *my* version of a test; it's just that my test would prove to be more challenging than a Harvard entrance exam.

There were milestones, hills, and mountains that needed to be climbed to move to the next level of trust with me. But it's who I was and how I was. I'm sure I would hear shit about it eventually, but I didn't care. I knew my worth, and any man who was worthy would be grateful to apply to the University of Natalia Hoover.

After a solid week spent with Spencer and his family, the English accent he'd been slipping into more often around his siblings and mother made him seem even more charming. Of course, I'd take every opportunity to be silly with Bex, using the best British accent I could muster, and it always made her giggle. Spencer and Stephen couldn't help but joke about how I sounded more like Mrs. Doubtfire than Queen Elizabeth, but Bex loved it, and I loved the smile it brought out in her.

Of course, I couldn't and didn't expect Mother Cruella to find *any* amusement in my attempt at humor. In her words, it was a *mockery of distinguished Britons everywhere*. (I guess she didn't give a shit about the undistinguished ones). But if imitating Mrs. Doubtfire was wrong, I didn't want to be right, especially if it meant irritating the fuck out of his mother.

The mood inevitably soured whenever Heidi stepped into the room, seeming to radiate an icy chill no matter how wide or seemingly genuine her smile was. She was utterly off-putting, and I couldn't quite figure out why at first. At first glance, she was perfectly innocuous. She was well put together, coifed, poised, and dignified looking, but she just set off those tiny internal alarm bells we all have. It didn't take me long to figure out what was so disarming about her: it was her eyes. She had dead eyes, like a serial killer. And whatever façade she might put up, whether it be happy or sentimental or engaged, I couldn't get past that there was nothing behind her gaze. Nothing but nastiness, anyway.

A few days before, I'd sat at breakfast with Sloane, Nadia, and Bex in the small nook just off the main dining room. Nadia was slowly buttering a scone, listening to Bex chatter about the book she'd just finished reading the night before.

"Bex," Nadia asked, "did you find the pictures to show Francesco when he comes to do your hair?"

"Yes!" she said excitedly, pulling out her phone. "I wanted to show you. Do you think he could do my hair curly?"

"I don't see why not," she said, reaching out to take the phone from her and nodding happily when she saw the photo. "Oh, yes. You're going to look gorgeous." Then, handing the phone back, she turned back to me with an open look. "Do you know what you're doing with your hair yet?"

I shrugged one shoulder. “I usually just do a loose wave,” I said, reaching for the rich espresso and biscotti that I’d opted for in favor of the English alternatives Heidi always insisted on serving.

“Why don’t you come to get ready with us in the morning?” Nadia asked, looking toward her sister-in-law. “Stephen and I decided not to go the usual big wedding party route, so having more family there would make it quite nice. With only the four of us, I’m sure Francesco and Marzia can fit you in.”

“Oh,” I said, looking around in surprise at Sloane and Bex, who nodded excitedly at me. “Ah—I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“God,” Sloane said, rolling her eyes. “You Americans with that strange politeness of yours.”

I blinked at her before laughing. “I don’t believe anyone has ever described me as excessively polite.”

“Regardless,” Nadia said, stepping in with that effortless way she had of smoothing things over that I’d begun to admire about her, “you wouldn’t be intruding. I don’t have siblings; meeting Spence and Sloane have been one of the best parts of marrying Stephen.”

“I’ll be sure not to tell him,” I said, smiling.

“Oh, he knows,” she replied, taking another sip of coffee. “So, will you be there? Having you in the room with us would be a treat.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling. “Just let me know how much I owe you for the hair.”

“*Dai allore,*” Sloane said.

Nadia waved her hand. “Don’t be silly. You’re family; it’ll be our treat.”

“Well,” a smooth, polished voice came from the door, “that’s not entirely true. Is it, dear?”

The coffee in my cup, which had just been steaming hot, might as well have iced over. I shut my eyes and counted to five in my mind before turning toward the door to face Heidi, who was already dressed to the nines in a pink Chanel tweed suit.

“She’s more family than I am, Heidi,” Nadia said, turning to her future mother-in-law with a smile and pulling her long brown hair up into a ponytail. “After all, she’s the one with a wedding ring on her finger.”

“For the time being, at least,” Heidi said, walking over to where the electric kettle sat on the sideboard and hitting the switch.

We all looked at each other, silent, as the weight of her words settled in. A strange mix of emotions swirled inside me at what she said. I was getting pretty sick of being at the receiving end of her shitty remarks, but I was also a bit sad at the thought that she wasn’t wrong.

“I’m only joking,” Heidi said, her voice taking on that strange musical quality that English voices sometimes did when they got to a higher pitch. “Gosh, don’t be so serious, all of you. And you’ll forgive me if I’m not there, Nadia. I simply can’t trust anyone but Bianca with my hair.”

“Fine,” Nadia said, perfectly unbothered as she sipped her coffee. “As long as you’re here in the afternoon for photos.”

“Of course,” she said, breezing out of the room, taking the cool chill she brought into the room with her.

God only knew what this woman was trying to do. Or maybe the whole point was to get us wondering if she was up to something. I learned a long time ago that allowing people like her to take up space in my head gave them power, and I absolutely was not going to give her that.

I was going to focus on this wedding ahead of us, be Spencer's fake wife, and that was it. At least, I thought that was it. Just the thought of being in Spencer's life for real—having to deal with his soul-sucker of a mother *for real*—was enough to make me take a stutter step.

One thing I always did well was to defend myself against sharks, and although I was prepared to continue doing so, I was well aware that I was letting the woman get to me more than I should've. I was strong and always in control, but Heidi had a darkness that I was beginning to think I might not be a match for.

I sat through the incredibly beautiful wedding ceremony, emotionally charged and wondering what the fuck was happening to me. I thought I had a grip, but my emotions convinced me I was sorely mistaken. And it scared the shit out of me.

I watched as the priest gestured between Nadia and Stephen, officiating the ceremony in beautiful, fluid Italian. And even though I could only understand one word out of seven, the emotion of the ceremony came through in spades.

Suddenly, the priest raised his hands, gesturing widely before stepping back, and Stephen stepped forward, pulling

Nadia into an embrace that practically folded her in two as he pressed his lips to hers.

The love between them was obvious—and contagious. I clapped along with the rest of the guests, as few of them as there were. We all stood, watching as the oldest Monroe led his new wife along the aisle with a glowing look on his face, thrilled beyond belief with his luck. Halfway down, he stopped and picked her up, spinning her around into another passionate kiss. I was so busy watching the two of them that I barely noticed when Spencer caught hold of my hand, threading his fingers with mine as he led me down the aisle, following Nadia and Stephen.

The rest of the day passed in a blur as we gathered for photos, and the staff brought in for the day flitted around the grounds with trays of hors d'oeuvres and flutes of champagne. I met Nadia's mother, who was as filled with beautiful elegance as her daughter, and a few other Monroe—D'Arrazio family members, who'd come from all over Europe for the occasion.

Comparatively, it was a small wedding, having been capped at forty-five people, but that didn't take away from the obvious happiness that radiated through the event. Not even Heidi's presence was enough to dampen the joy that permeated the atmosphere.

After the appetizer hour in the rose garden, we were led back to the ceremony site, where a dance floor had been put out, and small twinkle lights had been draped throughout the floral trees.

“You know,” Spencer said beside me as everyone began to gather on the floor, “with so few guests, I believe *all* the women should gather on the floor for the bouquet toss. Not

just the unmarried ones.” He leaned over and placed a kiss on my bare shoulder.

Strapless dresses always came in handy when I needed them, and this dress served that purpose with tender sentiments like Spence had just done.

I met his smirk with one of my own. “Well,” I said, reaching over to caress his cheek, “aren’t you *really* pushing this little relationship of ours.”

“Striking while the iron is hot, gorgeous. That’s all.”

Damn, his smile, dark eyes, and the shadow defining his sharp jawline was doing more things to me than were appropriate for a small family wedding reception.

I didn’t give a shit what anyone thought. The man was my fake husband right now, and I needed to play that part up more than I had today. At least, that’s what I told myself as I leaned over to kiss him, but I didn’t get the chance to linger there before I felt a tugging at my hand.

“*Zia*, come on,” Becca said, pulling eagerly at me. “Nadia said we all have to go to catch the bouquet.”

I eyed Spencer’s raised eyebrows as he sat back, sipped his wine, and offered me a shrug to tell me to be a good fake sister-in-law.

I stood from the table and moved with the little girl, her black curls bouncing in her excitement, as she led me to where all the women had gathered in front of the stage. Nonna was the only one who’d stayed out of the crush, sitting at a table nearby and watching with an entertained look on her face.

Nadia, in her stunning white gown, cut perfectly to her narrow frame out of Chantilly lace, showing off her delicate shoulders with its strapless cut, signaled to the drummer on the

stage. The drumroll started, and Nadia turned, facing her back to the audience as she brought the bunch of white roses and lemon blossom above her head in one fake-out, and then a second.

Finally, she sent it flying backward with an impressive toss, and as it sailed above our heads, I put my hands up out of pure instinct. And yet, no one could've been more surprised than me when the bouquet landed squarely in my hands, as if it had been magnetically drawn to me.

What are the fucking odds? I thought as my mouth popped open in horror, but I immediately covered that look and masked it with a surprised one. I barely heard the cheers of excitement as I turned to look at Spencer.

The sharply dressed, handsome man was sitting back casually and slowly clapping, amused as only he and I could be since we knew the truth about my marital status and the implications of catching the bouquet. Spencer looked as though he was barely holding in a laugh, and I couldn't help gasping one out as I met his eyes.

I turned away and bent down to face Becca, who was fighting a look of disappointment. Without a second thought, I gently placed the flowers into the little girl's hands, making her happier than the bride at that moment.

"I think these are yours," I said.

"Will they work, though?" she asked, looking up at me with concern. "I didn't catch them."

"Of course they will," I said. "I caught them, and I'm passing their magic to you. But you still have a few years before you'll need the magic they offer beautiful young girls like you."

She looked satisfied, and Sloane gave me a grateful smile as Becca pranced over to her, holding the bouquet above her head.

I turned around and walked over to where Spencer was standing next to the table with his hand clasped on the back of the chair before he caught me around the waist and pulled me into the circle of his arms.

“I love what you did for Becca,” he said as he leaned in to kiss me on the pulse point that he always managed to find. “I’m not sure whether to be here with you and sweep you into a dance or to sneak you away from all of this. I’m thinking the latter.”

I looked up into his dark eyes, which seemed to smolder like slow, hot coals, and, just as slowly as he’d placed his mouth on my neck, I splayed my fingers over his chest and pressed in, satisfied at the slight hiss of air I heard coming from him. “I don’t think you’re bold enough just to sneak off,” I taunted him in a low tone.

He met my eyes with a satisfied grin before taking my hand and leading me away from the dance floor, quickly pulling me after him over the expansive lawn and back toward the house. My desire for him settled into my belly, hot and heavy like a burning stone.

“Wait,” I said, pulling hard on his hand and feeling the heavy silk of my skirt flutter around my feet as we stopped. He raised his eyebrow at me, but I brought him up so that his body was flush against mine. I indicated the small passage in the garden wall that made an old-fashioned labyrinth, which Becca had shown me around on my first day. “In there.”

His grin grew, and he leaned down. I would’ve let him lift my dress and fuck me right there if it hadn’t been for the crash

of the cymbals behind us, breaking us apart.

“Come on,” he said, leading me down the path. It was softly lit with small lamps set into the footpath, but for the most part, it was dark, draped slightly with tiny lights overhead. The two of us tripped eagerly down the path, finding our way to the middle of the labyrinth, where I knew there were a few benches.

The house staff had been there earlier, setting small cushions on the benches surrounding the tall Carrara marble statue of the crowned angel in the middle of the garden.

I pushed him down onto the bench before I climbed into his lap, practically devouring his mouth as I leaned into him. He snuck his hands up my back, dragging his fingers over the zipper at the back of the dress. Sneaking off like this and away from the small wedding crowd spiked an adrenaline rush that I could appreciate.

I pulled Spencer’s hands away from my back, placing them back on my legs. “Don’t,” I said, breathing heavily. “It’s hell to figure out the clasp and zipper on this dress. You can unzip it slowly all you want later, but I don’t want the entire wedding party knowing we sneaked off to fuck.”

“Oh?” a coldly amused voice said from behind us, freezing Spencer’s hands in their tracks halfway up my thighs. “I don’t doubt they would know. It’s easy to spot a whore from a mile away; when you know what to look for, that is.”

I pulled away from Spencer, the lust stopping dead on his face as he turned to where Heidi stood imperiously, hands crossed over her chest with a sneer painted on her face.

“How dare you?” she said, and I couldn’t tell which one of us she was addressing. “How dare you make such a display of

yourself at my son's wedding? I've never seen such vile conduct."

"I highly doubt that," Spencer said, gently lifting me off his lap and moving me to the bench next to him as he settled the skirt, helping me as I tried to become presentable again. "But that begs the question—if you were so disgusted, why would you follow us unless you wanted a show, Heidi?"

"You may think it gets under my skin when you call me by my name, but it doesn't affect me in the slightest. Nothing you do has ever affected me one way or the other, *Spencer*. You've always been the one I could count on to disappoint," she spat. "And, to answer your question, I wanted to see exactly who you brought home to us, my *dear boy*. You've always thought you were the smartest and the brightest, but you've shown everyone here that is a flagrant lie. Just look at her," she nodded in my direction. The look on her face was disarming. It was like she was getting some very sick pleasure from insulting me and her son instead of being offended like she was pretending to be. It was almost as if she'd been looking forward to this inevitably happening. "You may as well have picked her up at an orphanage. You are so proud that she's *independent*; well, I see nothing more than a girl who was *clearly* neglected as a child, prancing around, trying to get attention from anyone who'll give it. How could you disgrace yourself so? I expected better from you, Spencer, although I have no idea why. As always, you've come up short. I even brought—"

"Oh, I saw who you brought, *Mum*," he answered.

I felt ill. I'd always prided myself in being able to withstand any insult, but the words this woman had spewed in

my direction struck my most sensitive nerve, and I felt the pain acutely.

I didn't know what kind of demented game this woman was playing, but I wanted no part. I'd done my best to stick up for myself since I'd arrived, letting her words slide off me, but as I watched this scene unfold, I knew something was seriously twisted.

She enjoyed inflicting pain. She was good at it.

And, surprisingly, she'd gotten to me. I felt stripped down instantly at the suggestion that I was merely an orphan, a neglected child, because that's exactly what I'd spent my whole life trying desperately not to be.

I got up from beside Spencer, my clammy hand squeezing onto his tightly, turning to walk away.

She was evil, and I couldn't get away from her quickly enough.

CHAPTER

Seventeen

SPENCER

Nat wasn't a short woman by any means, but as my mother spoke, she seemed to shrink before my very eyes, folding in on herself to the point that she seemed almost half her original size. Still, she rose to her feet slowly with implicit grace.

I'd dealt with my mother's bile for as long as I could remember, so I was not surprised when she unleashed her tirade; however, Nat was obviously affected, and even though part of me wanted to drill my mother into the ground, the other part of me grew concerned by Nat's disposition.

"Nat," I started, but I had no idea what to say. I'd never seen her visibly shaken, and I wasn't sure how to comfort her or if she wanted me to. I was sure Nat wouldn't want to show weakness in front of Heidi, so hovering over her didn't instinctually seem like the right thing to do. Especially with the look of smug satisfaction, almost diabolical glee, that spread across my mother's face, watching as her words cut as deeply as she'd intended.

Nat fixed her eyes on my mother. "Spencer," she said gravely, her eyes unwavering, "I'll see you back at the house. Please give my apologies to Stephen and Nadia."

Without another word, she strode away from me, her long, silver gown shimmering in the moonlight. My heart twisted in

my chest as she left.

“That’s what I thought—” my mother said, walking after her with purposeful steps, her stride barely matching half of Nat’s.

“That’s enough!” I demanded, reaching out to grab Heidi around the inside of her elbow.

Any skin-to-skin contact with her was abhorrent to me, but there was no way I was allowing her to take one more step after Natalia.

“Do not dare handle me in this manner,” she said, whipping around to face me, her eyes black. “I want answers —”

“You are owed no answers,” I hissed. “After insulting my wife so egregiously, *I* am the one owed the answers. Why did you follow us?”

“You *dare* to speak to me this way!” she snapped, her voice shaking furiously as she tried to twist out of my grasp. “How dare you insinuate—”

“I’m not insinuating anything,” I said, holding her firmly. “I know you were trying to humiliate her in front of me, but all you’ve achieved is to infuriate me in almost every way. I’m sick of you and your bullshit.” I folded my arms, staring down into the woman’s severe eyes. “I saw who was sitting behind you during the ceremony. I have no idea what you had to gain by inviting my ex here, especially when you took such pleasure in ridiculing her when we dated. Now, you think it wise to bring her here when I am with my *wife*?”

She didn’t skip a beat as she switched personalities right before my eyes. Her body went slack, no longer tense against my grip, relinquishing her rage and sliding into character as

the wounded mother. She fixed me with the pathetic, watery gaze she'd perfected to get people to have sympathy for her. This time, when I saw it, I didn't bother to keep from rolling my eyes. "I just want the best for my children—"

"I'm done with your psychotic martyrdom, Heidi," I said. "Why not try a straightforward approach for once in your life?" I let go of her arm. "You know what? Forget it. I already know exactly who you are, and I have since I was seven. I don't need your contrived explanations because I've reached the limit of lies I can tolerate from you. All I need is for you to keep away from Nat and me for the rest of the time we're here. If you do not, as God is my witness, I will ensure that everyone here knows *exactly* who you are in ways you will never forget."

Every time I'd ever tried to make a point to her in the past, she'd roll her eyes and huff out a dismissive laugh that made my skin crawl. But there must've been something in my face that made it clear I was deadly serious, and despite the hatred in her flat, scheming eyes, she nodded at me carefully in surrender.

I turned away from her, striding into the labyrinth's dark paths, pulling like a moth to the brighter lights of the main party. Once I'd arrived back in the melee, I looked around for any hint of Nat's silver satin dress, hoping she'd changed her mind and decided to stay with the rest of the party.

Unfortunately, she was nowhere to be seen, and the rest of the party was still in full swing as I looked around. Finally, my eyes landed on Hillary, the ex I hadn't seen in years, as she sat alone in the corner, sipping on a champagne flute. Her soft brown eyes landed on me, and I sighed, knowing I needed to handle this to shut down this next play of my mother's.

Hillary had been invited here for a reason, and whatever that reason was, I wouldn't let Nat be affected by it. Nat had taken enough shit from my mother; the last thing she needed was this parasite throwing more at her. After all, Nat was only here to pose as my fake wife, not to take emotional abuse head-on.

"Hillary," I said dryly, looking down at my ex. "This is a surprise."

"Hi, Spencer," she said, her soft, high voice sounding slightly more annoying than it ever had. "Your mum got in touch, saying that you've been asking about me and wanted me here. However, I saw you with that lovely lady—"

I had to back down from my lethal feelings. This woman was not the type who would work as an *evil ex* and gladly take my mother up on the opportunity to destroy Nat, my wife. Even though we parted on shitty terms, she wasn't evil about it. I needed more information.

In my line of work, I was a master at changing moods and putting on a believable display of emotions. And now, I needed to switch gears to get information out of Hillary.

I ran my hand through my hair. "I'm sorry about this. You know how Heidi behaves; she is who she is, and I don't think she'll ever stop trying to mess with people. I believe this situation is no different. I am married, and that woman with me is my wife. Heidi knows that, and she still led you to believe something that was never true. I did not ask about you, and I'm sorry if that is not what you wished to hear from me."

She gave me a slight nod and a fragile smile. "Well, then. It was lovely to see Stephen marry, but I think I'll return to the city now. Maybe I'll go to Greece since I'm in this corner of the world."

“Sounds like an excellent idea,” I said, leaning down to kiss her on each cheek before turning away and heading to the small sweetheart table at the front of the dance floor. Stephen and Nadia sat there, enjoying their meal, looking at each other with perfect happiness. That, of course, was interrupted when I approached, and they observed me with worry.

“Is everything okay?” Nadia asked. “We saw Nat going up to the house.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “It’s just Heidi making trouble, but I’ve shut it down. She won’t do anything else tonight.”

“Okay,” Stephen said, looking unsure as he glanced from me to Hillary to the labyrinth entrance. “You know what? I’m not even going to ask.”

“Would you mind terribly if I excused myself to go to my wife, or is there something—”

“Don’t worry about anything,” Nadia responded as she stood and wrapped her arms around me. “It’s just the cake next, and we promised Bex she could be in charge of that.”

I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Love you. It’s good to have you as my sister.”

She squeezed me tightly before releasing me to clap my brother on the shoulder. “I couldn’t be happier for the two of you.”

“Nat?”

When I opened the door to our room, I edged inside, strangely feeling as though I were intruding in my own space. It was silent in the large bedroom, the overhead lights shining

brightly down on the woman sprawled on her side on the large bed, the flowing, silken fabric pooling around her like the petals of a flower.

“Natalia,” I repeated, shutting the door behind me and walking closer to where I usually slept, sitting down next to her and looking at how the harsh light shone down on her lovely hair, making it glimmer like sunlight. “Babe, you can’t be comfortable like that.”

I said *that* name like I’d been using it for years for her. As if it were natural. As if being concerned for a woman whom I deeply cared for *was natural*.

She responded to me by sitting up and turning to face me. She looked defeated, and I had to physically hold myself back from touching her.

“I haven’t really felt comfortable since I got here, Spencer.” Her voice was hoarse, and I could tell from the moment she turned to face me that she’d been crying. “I know I’m only here to help you deal with your family, but I’ve been naïve to think none of it would get to me. Your mother has a way of cutting to the bone, doesn’t she? She’s got the precision of a surgeon; I can tell you that much.” She blinked, and the tears started to crawl down her cheeks slowly. I got up and slowly made my way around the bed to where she lay, reaching out my hands to her. “This is very out of character for me, I know. But I can’t hide it right now.”

“Come here, gorgeous,” I said. “At the very least, let’s get you out of this dress and into something more comfortable.”

I could see from her face that she thought for a second about narrowing her eyes at me, but instead, she placed her hands in mine, letting me pull her to her feet.

I turned her around and worked to ease the zipper down to maneuver the dress off her. “You know, it’s a good thing I didn’t unzip this dress outside because there’s no way I’d allow it back on with this perfect lingerie underneath,” I said, noting her matching lace thong and bra.

She chuckled, pulling the column of golden hair over her shoulder as I undid the chains to the delicate necklace that ran over her silky, perfect skin. She was painfully beautiful as we both made gentle movements to remove her clothing.

“What about you?” she asked as she turned around to face me. “Are you comfortable in that suit and those leather shoes?”

I grinned at her. “Right now, I’m focused on you.” I reached into her hair, pulling at the bobby pins that held the delicate curls in place, easing them out and allowing them to fall around her shoulders, the ends grazing her nipples. I followed her hair with my fingertips, allowing my fingers to veer away from her hair and over the silky skin of her breasts.

I passed my thumb over her nipple, letting it rise and pebble under my hand. When she sucked in her breath, I looked back up at her face and felt my spirits rise as I saw that any residual upset on her face had dissipated, washed away by the lust painted on her cheeks and down her neck by her blush. Her breaths had shortened, and I could practically feel the desire radiating off her.

“I love seeing that look on your face,” I said, leaning forward and allowing my hand to run down her front.

“What look?” The words came out practically on a whimper.

“The one where you either want to devour me,” I said, “or you want to be devoured by me.” I started backing her toward the bed, holding her gaze with mine as the end of the bed frame hit her calves. “Right now, though, I’m feeling a little like I haven’t tasted you in too long.”

“I’m not arguing,” she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and backing up before she opened to me. “In fact, this might be one of the first times I’ll go on record as agreeing with you.”

“Someone note the date and time,” I said, crawling over her and capturing her mouth with mine, effectively stopping any more sass that came out of her mouth. The kiss was deep and powerful, and she accepted my body into her lovely frame.

I moved my mouth down her neck, gently sucking and biting as I inhaled the fragrant scent of her skin. I heard her breaths getting faster and shallower from above my head as her hands found my back. Her long nails pressed down on my shoulders through my shirt, and half of me hoped she would shred it.

And yet, I knew that this time was different. That right now, this moment in bed marked us moving toward something different, and it would be wrong of me to rush it.

Soon enough, I found myself in front of her center, breathing in that concentrated smell of her. I paused for a second, luxuriating in her decadence. There’d never been anyone I could drink in like her and never get sick of.

“Mmm,” I said, hooking my hand around her ankle and bringing it up so that her leg was draped over my shoulder. “I need a little more; hang on.”

I reached forward, parting her folds and passing my tongue up her slit, working my tongue inside her and smiling at the moan she let out that rippled all the way down her back, practically making the two of us vibrate with bottled-up need.

Bringing my tongue up, I focused my attention on her swollen clit, laving it with as much sensation as I could as I eased first one finger into her and then a second.

I knew she was close. The powerful muscles were tensing around my fingers, and I knew it was a matter of seconds before she tipped over the edge.

I turned and moved my fingers up, pressing them into that soft, powerful part of her that would trigger her inevitable fall.

“Oh fuck,” she said, her voice getting higher as her heel pressed into my back. “I—”

“That’s it, baby. Let it go,” I urged.

She tightened around my fingers, and I suddenly felt her toes curling into my hair as her words dissolved into a musical groan. That perfect taste flooded against my tongue, and I kept up the motion against her clit as the spasms went on and on against my fingers.

When they finally began to slow, I pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, allowing my lips to linger there in a gentle kiss that I dragged back up her center before looking at her.

Everything stopped for me in that instant as I took in her face, which seemed to be bathed in light. The glow didn’t come from the ugly overhead lights but rather from under her skin, from the neural connections that seemed to have all lit up at once.

I’d never seen anything so beautiful, and at that moment, I knew I’d do anything to keep seeing it for as long as possible.

Bending forward, I captured her lips, sucking gently on her mouth as she reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Hang on,” I said, bringing the fingers of one hand around so that she could undo the buttons that ran down my shirt.

She did, making short work of them, but she brought me even closer to her as she did it. At the same time, I couldn’t get my pants down fast enough.

I needed to be as close to her as possible—so close that we might as well be connected.

I pulled my other hand back and forced my pants down, so they pooled around my ankles before toeing them off. There was nothing in the world but her.

“Please,” she moaned into my ear. “Please, Spencer. I need you.”

I needed her, too, more than I ever had. These were words I had never used with a woman, and I know they weren’t words used by her. I wanted women; I never *needed* them, emotionally anyway.

Through the dim haze that she cast over my senses, I realized I was now as naked as she was and that my tip was grazing over her entrance, mingling my moisture with hers.

“Spencer,” she said, her voice suddenly much less airy than I’d heard. “Stop fucking with me and fuck me. Immediately.”

I laughed, running my teeth against her lip. I pushed into her, luxuriating in drawing out the stroke as long as I possibly could. I willed myself to linger in the feeling of her, both in the familiarity of her wrapped around me and the new understanding that had sprung up between us.

When I was finally inside her, I paused, lingering at her very center as she brought one foot up and draped it around me, grazing my ass and lower thigh with her toes.

I shut my eyes as she closed around me, the feeling of tightness so exquisite that I could barely take moving, and instead allowed my need for her to vibrate all through my muscles.

When I opened my eyes, my gaze immediately found hers, her blue eyes fixed on mine as she watched me intently. Except now, there was more than focus in her stare: there was a deep passion that I'd never seen before. It went beyond the burning lust I'd gotten so good at recognizing and beyond the pleasure I'd gotten to be an expert at wringing from her.

No, there was a sweetness that lay beyond this desire. It was as if I could see through the clear blue of her eyes and into her heart. It reached into me, wrapping its fingers around my heart in a way that hurt me so sweetly.

I reached down and wound my fingers with hers, bringing her hand above her head as I pulled out, almost to my tip, and drove into her again. We groaned in tandem, and I captured her mouth with mine as I sped up my movements.

I didn't need her to tell me that she was close. I could feel how her breaths were speeding up and how she grazed her lips down my neck to my chest.

"I'm already there," she said, "again. Come with me, baby."

Her use of the endearment she'd never used until this moment didn't escape my notice, and I picked up speed as I moved inside her.

"Don't stop," she gasped. "Don't stop, Spencer."

“I don’t plan to,” I said, feeling the release gathering at the base of my spine as I continued my movements.

Her ankles crossed around my ass, and the tightening of her muscles around my cock sent me diving over the edge. I froze as the wave broke over me, my muscles shivering as I spilled inside her, feeling like I’d never stop.

I went to move to the side so I wouldn’t collapse on top of her and crush her under my weight, but she tightened her legs around me and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“No,” she said, pressing her lips to my cheek, jawline, and lips. “No, don’t move. I want you here with me.”

That familiar ache twisted in my chest, and I eased myself onto my elbows to lay flush with her, staying inside her. She ran her fingertips up my back, through the short hairs on my neck, and grazed her nails along my scalp. I turned and pressed my lips into her palm.

“What do you say we make a run for it in the morning?” I asked. “We can wake up before everyone, head back to Verona, and spend our last few days there instead of on the lake.”

“Verona?” she asked, raising her eyebrow. “The city of lovers?”

“Absolutely,” I said, grinning wickedly at her. “I think you and I are just getting warmed up in the *lovers*’ department these days, so...”

She chuckled and ran her finger down the center of my nose, “I wonder what we’ll find to do there.”

“Oh, you know,” I said. “Look at touristy things, eat pasta, go foraging.”

“Foraging?”

“There’s a truffle forest nearby,” I said with a grin. “What do you think?”

“Actually,” she said, grinning, “I love the thought of foraging for truffles.”

I laughed and leaned down to kiss her throat. “And, obviously, fuck on every surface of our hotel room.”

“Now, we’re talking.”

I moved to my side, bringing her with me. “Do you want to talk about what happened tonight? I’m not okay with you being hurt, especially when you’re doing me a favor.”

“Can that wait for Verona?” she asked, pushing my hair back. “I don’t want to conjure those feelings right now.”

“Understandable. How about your sexy ass sleeps in my arms for now,” I said, and she turned over onto her side. I turned around, hitting the switch next to my bed, and plunged the room into darkness as I kissed her on the neck. “Good night, beautiful.”

“Good night, handsome.”

CHAPTER

Eighteen

SPENCER

“Do you have all of your stuff packed?” I asked as I walked back into our room, checking my phone for the notification from the driver that I’d called from Sirmione at six that morning. “Maurizio should be here any minute.”

She looked up at me with a grin as she shut her suitcase. “I feel bad for him, having to come back here so early after taking people back to town all last night.”

“He’s on call, so he knew that it would be a possibility,” I said, wincing internally as I thought of the young driver’s groggy voice when I’d called him, clearly dragging himself from sleep. “Don’t worry; we’re making it well worth his while, and I’m going to pay for him to go on a nice holiday wherever he wants after this week is done.”

She raised her eyebrow at me. “That’s a generous incentive.”

“Again,” I said, smiling, “I try to make it worthwhile for everyone who works with my finicky, prickly ass.”

She stood, walking toward me slowly. I took in the way her jeans wrapped her perfect ass with appreciation as she approached me, wishing we had an extra minute to show her exactly how much I loved every one of her curves.

“You are what’s worthwhile, Spencer,” she said, setting her hands on my sides and pulling me toward her. “It’s you.”

I leaned down to capture her mouth with mine in a quick kiss, which rapidly became much deeper.

“For people focused on making a sneaky getaway, you sure aren’t worried about making it out of the door.”

We broke apart, and I smiled as Nat bit down on her lips in embarrassment at the presence of Sloane and Becca in the doorway of our room. Sloane was smirking at us, but I could see a hint of worry hiding behind her eyes, almost as if she were trying to push something down so I wouldn’t feel guilty about leaving.

Becca didn’t bother to hide her emotions, and I could tell from one look at my niece’s face that this parting would be particularly hard for her.

I opened my mouth to address her, but she barely nodded in my direction before running past me and wrapping her arms around Nat’s waist.

“Please don’t go,” she said, her words muffled against her jeans. “Gran’s not all bad, I promise. She says she just gets cross, and things come out that she doesn’t mean, but you mustn’t consider it true.”

The three of us looked at each other, wide-eyed with concern at her words, which had shocked us into silence—a first, it must be said, for all three of us.

The silence didn’t last long before Nat knelt in front of Bex, reaching out to set her hands on the little girl’s shoulders. “Becca, if you are playing with your friends, and one of them does something nasty, is it your job to make sure they behave or do you think they should be responsible for themselves?”

Becca tilted her head to the side in thought. “They should be responsible, of course. It’s always your own job to be respectful.”

“Exactly,” Nat said, nodding. “And it’s the same when we grow older. We need to be careful with our words the same way we need to be careful with our actions, and if we hurt people, then we should apologize. If Gran says something that hurts your feelings,” Nat went on, “it’s important for her to say she’s sorry, but you should never apologize for being hurt. Will you promise to remember that?”

She nodded at me solemnly. “I will, but only if you promise we can stay with you on the beach that Uncle Spencer told me about.”

I couldn’t help the snort that escaped me at that, but I managed to turn it into a cough. Thankfully, Bex didn’t notice because she focused on Nat’s lovely, serious face.

Nat didn’t smile, though. Instead, she held out her hand, pinky extended.

“This is a weird handshake,” Bex said after Nat hooked her pinky through her tiny one.

“It’s a pinky promise,” Nat said with a soft laugh. “It’s the most sacred of all promises and cannot be broken. And I pinky promise that, as soon as you are able, you can come to stay with us on the beach.”

“And I pinky promise,” Becca responded, her face falling into the same serious expression that sat on Nat’s face, “that I’ll remember never to say sorry for my own hurt feelings, especially if Gran is the one who hurt them.”

“Excellent,” Nat said, grinning at her. “I couldn’t have put it better myself.” Without another word, she released her hold

on Bex's pinky and reached forward, pulling her into a tight hug.

In the meantime, I turned to my sister. "Are you going to tell me how you knew we would get an early start?"

She tilted her head to the side. "Maurizio's outside. Becca and I were having breakfast when we heard the car pull up. So, I figured it was you."

"You figured right," I said, reaching forward and pulling my little sister into my arms. "So, what was said? I'm sure Heidi has her version of this disaster."

"But of course," Sloane rolled her eyes. "And you know I understand it's the opposite of what transpired."

"Indeed, I'm sure Heidi was irreparably insulted by Nat at the wedding?" I couldn't resist laughing with my sister when she nodded to confirm I was correct. "I will ensure that everyone knows the truth about what happened yesterday. However, Nat's sanity is my priority, and I'm getting her out of here."

"I wouldn't expect anything less. She doesn't deserve that, nor do you, Spencer," she said, almost with some authority.

I kept my expression light. "I'm going to miss you, you know?"

"I know," she said with a smile. "I'm the coolest sister you have."

I turned to look at Nat, who met my eyes over Becca's shoulder. She got to her feet, but Bex held onto her hand tightly. She reached for her suitcase and purse but didn't let go of the child's hand as she started making her way to the front of the house.

“Will you talk to Stephen and Nadia when they get up?” I asked Sloane as we headed down. “Make sure they know we aren’t running away from them.”

“Don’t worry,” Sloane said, grinning up at me. “They’re busy ensuring that they’re very, *very* married. They’ll be preoccupied for at least three days, so I’m sure they’ll be good with a text.”

“Still,” I said, turning to look at her, “if they ask—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll say that you had to make sure that you made it back to London for work,” Sloane said dryly. “Trust me, they won’t mind. They will only be coming up for air when they land in Seychelles for their honeymoon.”

“Nothing like imagining my brother having sex,” I said, curling my lip. “And first thing in the morning? My breakfast should settle well.”

“Oh, grow up,” she said. “Like you haven’t been doing the same thing with your wife the entire time you’ve been here? I know if I had a partner as singularly attractive as her, I’d never leave my goddamn room.”

“Wow, I never knew—”

“Shut up and get out of here before the old battle axe wakes up and has one last word for you both.”

I shuddered. “Fair enough, but...”

Sloane paused when I said *but* and turned back to look at me.

“If anything goes wrong, or if Heidi messes with Bex at all, swear you’ll let me know. I don’t want her to grow up like we did.”

She nodded, her eyes growing tired as the despair started to seep in. “She already has been, Spencer. I do what I can to keep them apart, but I can only do so much when Heidi has her hands in my finances. It’s fucked.”

My lips tightened as I let go of my suitcase and set my hands on her shoulders. “Hanging on to that legacy is not worth it if you have to live under her thumb forever, Sis. If you’re worried about money, I’ll take care—”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s not what this is about, Spencer.”

“Jesus, you’re stubborn,” I said, pulling her in for a tight hug. “The kill switch is always there. You know that, right?”

“I know,” she said. “But I’ll be damned if I ever hit it.”

I pulled back and looked at her steadily before continuing down the steps to the front of the house, where Bex and Nat were standing and talking quietly. They turned back to look at the two of us before we walked out the doors, and I took Nat’s bag to the sleek black Bentley car parked in front of the house.

Maurizio climbed out of the driver’s seat and opened the trunk, taking the suitcases from me and placing them inside. I winced when I saw him yawn, but he waved his hand at me.

“*Tutto va bene, Signore Spencer,*” he said. “*Andiamo?*”

“*Certo,*” I said. “*Mai devo dire arrivederci a la mia famiglia.*”

I turned back to face the small group of girls I loved dearly and walked toward them. Nat was hugging Sloane while Becca looked on, so I approached my niece and knelt beside her.

“Pssst,” I said. “Remember that I can be in London in a day if you need me. If things get too bad with Gran, I’ll be there to help, right?”

She nodded.

“Remember how to find me?”

She nodded again. “And Aunty Nat gave me her phone number as well.”

“That’s good,” I said. “You can call or text either of us, any time, and we’ll come to get you guys in a flash.”

She reached out, setting her little arms around my neck. “I love her a lot, Uncle Spencer. I’m happy you married her.”

“That’s good,” I whispered, “because you’re the smartest person I know, and I want you to love who I love.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew they were true, and there was no taking them back. Still, I didn’t let my motions falter as I stood up, bringing her with me and holding her tightly in my arms as I swung her around. Nat and I traded places, and I moved over to my sister, pulling her in for a tight hug.

“You did good with Nat,” Sloane said into my shoulder. “In fact, she’s a little *too* good for you.”

I chuckled. “I’m aware.” I kissed the top of her head before letting go of her and looking down into her face. “Remember—”

“I know, I know,” she said. “If I need anything, get in touch.”

We exchanged a final hug, and I turned away from her, grabbing Nat’s hand. Nat looked back at Sloane, her eyes

wide. “Oh! Nonna,” she said, bringing her hand up to her mouth. “I didn’t apologize to her.”

“Don’t worry,” Sloane said. “Nonna knows exactly who our mother is. She’ll forgive you for leaving the estate if you make it up by taking her to lunch before you leave the country.”

She nodded. “Fair enough.”

Sloane gathered her daughter to her front, and it broke me to see the tears streaming down Bex’s cheeks.

“We’ll see you soon,” I said. “I promise.”

Nat and I got into the back seat, hurriedly closing the door behind us. I knew it wouldn’t do us any good to linger, and the longer I looked at Becca and Sloane, the harder it would be for me to get away.

“I wish we didn’t have to leave them,” Nat said, looking back at the house and raising her hand to wave.

“I know,” I said. “I wish we didn’t either. But I’m going to try to get them to the States soon.”

She bit down on her lip as we went down the winding road toward the main highway, riding toward Verona.

“Look,” I said, “I know it’s going to be hard, but I just want us to get to Verona and enjoy the last of our time here.”

Her blue eyes looked a million miles away, but eventually, she nodded, placing her hand in mine. “Okay,” she said, sighing as she set her head on my shoulder.

“Okay,” I said, pulling her into the crook of my arm. “We’ll be there soon. Try to rest.”

As we sped toward Verona, where the most famous love story of them all had played out, I kept thinking that Nat was meant to be by my side—forever. And I could definitely live with that.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

The sun was setting on our last night in Verona, and I sat next to Spencer at a table in the piazza, sipping a glass of Barolo as a crowd of people flitted around us, speaking in musical Italian.

The week went exceptionally well and was revitalizing for my body and soul. I'd long since buried the unwanted emotions that'd been conjured the night of the wedding, which was something I was a little too good at doing.

I was still surprised Heidi affected me how she did, but I convinced myself I only let it get to me because I'd had my defenses down with Spencer. She happened to strike my most sensitive chord, but I was able to rein myself in and do what I always did: get over it.

However, I was on dangerous ground, and I knew it. I was not at all prepared to dig into my feelings when Spence found me crying in our room and still wasn't. I wanted to avoid it entirely. So, I locked it away and moved on.

"Her mind drifts off, her eyes dazed with exotic beauty, and I am left to try and decipher the mysteries she holds," Spencer's humored, low and sexy voice said.

I smiled as I took another sip of wine, admiring the beauty of the dark-haired and intensely dark-eyed man sitting across

from me. “Wouldn’t you love to know?” I teased.

He reclined some in his chair, his eyes looking like they were searching my soul as he studied me. His gaze sent a shiver throughout my body, heating my insides with anticipation of the amazing sex only this man could deliver.

I had no idea when I’d allowed myself to be open to him. The whole feeling of melting emotionally over a man was not in my personality. But somehow, I’d let him in, and I could only assume it was because I enjoyed how it made me feel.

His eyebrow arched, “Well, with us in the *lovers’ capital of the world*, I believe I would like to explore more of your body and your intelligent mind too.”

“You’re just letting all of this Shakespeare nonsense get into your head,” I countered, a defense tactic I was using with ease to prevent the conversation from going deeper.

“Perhaps,” he said. He glanced around the room, and then his eyes returned to mine, “I mean, we’ve been here nearly a week, and I have *love on the brain*.”

“Take it easy, Rhianna,” I said with a laugh. “There’ll be no talk of love, forbidden or not, tonight, sir.”

“Sir?” He grinned as he licked his wine-stained lips, “I suppose the atmosphere of this city has worked its way into your heart and soul as well?”

“Nah,” I played it off, “I’m not a believer in love.”

He frowned, and I grew concerned that my silly way of saying a great truth of mine upset him.

“Who hurt you?” he asked in his direct, businessman way.

I took another sip, my eyes searching for the proper answer without getting too deep. “No one, really,” I answered. “I

guess I just feel like love is foolish. I've watched others get hurt by the emotion, and I don't plan on allowing myself to be in that position."

"How do you relate *hurt* with allowing yourself to feel or be loved by another person?"

"Staying up all night with a best friend whose heart has been shattered and trying to do everything I can to console her to no avail is how."

"Breanne?" he questioned.

"Nothing like finding out your groom is screwing someone else just before your wedding. Of course, her revenge was perfect, but still, I wasn't sure she'd ever fully recover from it. It was brutal, and she was helpless against it."

"But she fell in love with the right man because of that pain. She and Alex were made for each other, and they've even got beautiful twins to sweeten the pot."

"Not everyone gets their happily ever after," I said. "I mean, we've been in the land of Romeo and Juliette all week. Those two didn't exactly have the fate I'd choose for myself. Love clouded their judgment and made them reckless."

He chuckled, "You think your fate will match Romeo and Juliette's should you choose to embrace that emotion with, let's say, me?"

"I know where you're trying to take this, and seriously, I might not be worth your time. It's not that I don't trust the emotion; I just don't trust myself *with* the emotion."

"You truly believe love can ruin your life?" he questioned, more humored now than his initial response.

“Haven’t you seen those couples trapped in marriages? My God, I can’t imagine. They fall out of love but still find a way to be comfortable, content, and miserable.”

His eyes narrowed as if I’d conjured a demon or something. “You describe my parents easily,” he said. “Both stuck, focusing on social status and money instead of happiness.”

“There are millions of people in these hopeless unions because they thought they were in love. Even worse, they were deceived by someone who made them feel loved until the viper got what they wanted and grew bored.”

“Shakespeare wrote about this too, you know?” He smirked.

“I’m sure he did,” I rolled my eyes.

“In the *Merchant of Venice*, he wrote, ‘*All that glitters is not gold.*’ Meaning, be careful of something shiny and beautiful because not everything is what it seems.”

“A wolf in sheep’s clothing,” I said, becoming more interested.

“Yes. Some people want something so desperately, and once they get it, they find out it’s a fraud.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, being fooled by someone’s charms. You believe it’s real, and then you’re stuck.”

“That sounds like my father,” he said solemnly. “My mother charmed him for his status and money. I don’t believe she ever loved him—or that she is capable of love at all—and after marriage, her greed grew, and her desire for power and status fueled everything wrong with that woman.”

I smoothed my hands over the white tablecloth, “So, with numerous Shakespeare quotes backing me, I think we’ve settled why it would be a miracle if I ever allowed that emotion into my life.”

He chuckled, his handsome features softening further. “Don’t push it away so confidently because it will come from out of nowhere. Before you know it, your ass is consumed by it, and you’re saying shit like *babe and baby* and meaning it.”

I felt my cheeks flush under his charming gaze. “You’re taking a risk with me; you know that, right? I just think you’re a fool to try.”

“The foolish man is the one who allows his mind to rule his heart.”

“Tell that to Romeo,” I said dryly.

“Romeo rests in peace because his heart ruled his mind.”

“A fancy way of saying he’s fucking dead because he fell in love with the wrong woman.”

Spencer nearly choked on the wine he was sipping after I came back with that sound truth.

“Fine, then. Not even a week in one of the most romantic cities in the world can break down the walls you’ve framed around your heart?”

“It hasn’t worked yet,” I said confidently. “I mean, it’s not like I’m trying or not trying; I’m just going with the flow with your handsome ass,” I answered. “I will not be hurt, and I certainly will *not* be killing myself for lost love. And now that I think about it, I’m sort of done dissecting this emotion.”

He rose, and I placed my hand in his, standing and allowing him to stare intently into my eyes, “Natalia Hoover,

the dangerous thing about having these conversations with me is that you're giving me a challenge."

I arched my eyebrow as the back of his knuckles grazed along my jawline, "A challenge?"

"I accept challenges with all my heart and soul. And knowing how I feel about you," his hand slid across my lower back as we locked eyes, "and the fact that I want you as my own makes me all the more eager. I will have you, your heart, and all your love whether you fight me for it or not. You will be mine. All of you."

"You sound quite confident, Monroe," I answered, standing tall in front of him. "However, I've never allowed myself to be up for the taking."

He grinned, and I saw the *wolf in sheep's clothing* behind that damn wolf smile of his. "You will be before this trip is over," his lips pressed to the center of my forehead, and then he stepped back, "or perhaps even tonight. But, first, you *will* find yourself consumed with thoughts of me, and then, you'll be mine for the taking."

"Well, currently, I'm physically yours for the taking, so I say we return to that incredible suite of rooms and enjoy the last of our night here before we fly to London in the morning."

He licked his lips, and a jolt of energy ran through me. The scary part of this exchange was that I'd already let thoughts of Spencer consume me, and I knew I was in over my head.

"Where's your place in London again?" I pulled out my phone and entered the address of our company's London office,

feeling the unfamiliar ambivalence toward my return to work and a desire to stay in this little slice of paradise. I loved my job, and I'd always been the one to annoy my friends by working on vacations, so feeling reluctant to return to work was different for me.

"Mayfair," he said casually as he glanced in the direction of the airplane window. "It's pretty centrally located."

I blinked at him. "I'll say," I said. "You have a flat in *Mayfair*?" The exclusive neighborhood was out of my own personal league, mainly since I didn't do enough work in London to justify the purchase, but I'd secured a few on behalf of clients, and they could be so beautiful that they made my mouth water.

"A house, actually," he said, grinning. "And you can have the run of it. There's a spare room you can use as an office if you want."

My eyes narrowed, "If I want? Do you want to buy me with your riches, Mr. Monroe?"

He smirked at me, "I would never tempt a woman who doesn't want to be tempted. And, if I were doing such a thing, it would basically be me begging to live the exact life of my father. However, I have a pretty good read on you, and I do not see any gold-digging bullshit in your personality."

I ran my hands over the leather couch I sat on, "Really, because I would certainly marry your ass if I got the privilege of flying in the jet as if it were my own."

He reclined back in his seat, "If that's the case, then I'll have to call Jim and let him know he's about to have a harem of women since this is Jim's jet and not mine."

I rolled my eyes, "Hilarious."

“I’m serious, though. The room is yours if you want it.”

“Sir, the plane will begin its descent into London in a few minutes,” the flight attendant said in a posh accent.

Spencer nodded. “Thank you.” He looked at me after the attendant left and grinned, “All set for the next leg of our adventure?”

“More than. I’m not sure if I should be scared, though?”

“You should be terrified because I plan to turn up the heat on you and me once we’re there. You will be mine, Natalia.”

From the way my name rolled off his tongue, I knew I was fucked. He was seriously getting into me, and I couldn’t stop it or the emotions that came along with it. I’d never been swept off my feet, but what the hell? I deserved this shit as much as the next girl.

CHAPTER

Twenty

SPENCER

I rolled over in bed and lazily opened my eyes. It was always lovely waking up to the usual smells of my London home—which was a mixture of black tea and coffee, wafting from the kitchen, the smell of fresh grass coming into the window from the park across the way, and the slightly acidic smell of the coal used to heat the house.

Now, though, there was something new coloring the familiar smells here: white lemon blossoms, sweet liqueur, and the familiar salty undercurrent of skin.

I turned over and saw the shiny honey hair spread over the pillow, a ravishing delight. I moved closer, wrapped my arm around Nat's slender waist to pull her into me, and settled my face against the back of her head. I closed my eyes and inhaled her enticing fragrance, allowing a familiar warmth to fill me from the inside out as she moved her ass into me, arching her body in a way that had me pulling her deeper into my tight embrace.

Truthfully, I didn't know what to expect when we arrived. When I escorted her into my house, I half expected her to ask me where she was sleeping, under the understanding that we'd only shared a room in Italy for appearances' sake. I also expected her to take off the rings as soon as we landed and

give them back to me without another word on the matter, seeing as we weren't actually married, and there was no point in pretending anymore.

I'd expected everything from Italy to fade. The whole dating thing, the feelings, all of it. But none of those things happened. Not with her or with me.

I enjoyed bringing her through the house, hearing her funny comments as I led her up the stairs to my relatively palatial room with its enormous bed, built-in fireplace, and balcony with wide French doors that looked out over the park.

She set her suitcase next to the chest of drawers and her enormous leather purse on top before turning toward me. "So, the house is lovely, but when do I get to decide if I like having sex on that particular bed?"

That was all it took for me to take the woman and give her the *sexual tour* of the London home, starting with my bed. She approved, and the weekend couldn't have been more to my liking. Sex, ordering in, and more sex, smiles, and sassiness.

It wasn't just Nat herself I was adjusting to, even though whatever dynamic I had with her was certainly different from any other I'd had. She was the first woman I'd ever had in my London house in pretty much any capacity. I bought the place as an investment because I was sick of staying in hotels whenever I came back for business despite the fact I'd grown up in this damn city.

I'd done my best to lay the groundwork for making a home here, and because of that, it wound up being the one place I never brought a woman. It was my way of retreating from my player bachelor life, not allowing *that* side of me here. That was most likely why my mind had shifted from being entirely secure to utterly insecure, having Nat in this house, of all

houses. However, it didn't take long before the insecurities faded, and I was content as fuck with her being here.

The following six days passed in a flurry, with us spending every day together the way I knew we would if we were home in California. Or, at least, the way I imagined we would.

Overall, this situation, feeling as though Nat lived with me, was working out. I knew it'd only been a week, and I was sure the honeymoon phase would end sometime, but right now, it was fucking lovely. Waking up in each other's arms, making her breakfast while she showered, and walking out the door to head off to our respective places of work in London, I could quickly get used to this. Malibu would likely be the same.

I'm pretty sure it was *too soon* to fall in love and all that went with that, but hell, right now, I was not complaining.

Nat turned over, and I smiled when her eyes fluttered open, and she looked up at me softer than she ever had, even with how things had been changing between us.

"I don't have any work to do for my client today," she said, moving so that her head was lying comfortably on my bicep. "I sent them all the documentation for the properties I scouted yesterday, and they're going to make their decision over the weekend."

"Interesting," I said, edging forward to press my body alongside hers. "Whatever are you going to do with your free day?"

"No clue," she said. "I was hoping you would have some ideas since I'm not that familiar."

I pulled back from her and raised my eyebrow. "Bullshit," I said. "You've been coming out here for years."

“Yeah, for work, not play,” she said. “But I’ve never gotten to be a tourist.”

“Well, we’ll have to change that now, won’t we?” I brushed the tip of my finger down the center of her nose, “What do you say we do some tourist shit?”

She chuckled. “Fine, but I don’t need to see the changing of any queen’s guards. That one doesn’t do it for me.”

“Fair enough. I’ll make it worthwhile, but first, let me introduce an exciting way to *do* London with me as your tour guide,” I said as I leaned forward and kissed her softly.

She chuckled while rolling her eyes. My smile broadened when she rolled me onto my back and proceeded to have her way with me.

Once we’d finally gotten out of the house, we went to get coffee in Battersea Park, and I handed her some bread I’d purchased while she was looking at the souvenir coffee mugs. I wanted to give her hell for that, but instead, I smiled and admired this innocent-looking side of her. Nat and souvenir coffee mugs? Never in a million would I have guessed that one.

“Bread? Didn’t we just have breakfast?” she asked, raising her eyebrow at me.

“It’s not for you,” I said, grinning. “It’s for them.”

She followed the direction of where I nodded my head and saw the ducks paddling along in the water. She looked back at me with confusion, “Seriously?”

“As a heart attack,” I said, tearing off a piece of bread and throwing it into the water for the nearest mallard. “My dad used to bring me here on Saturday mornings. Heidi never liked going to Battersea—it wasn’t posh enough for her—so it was just ours. And don’t give me hell for it, either. I saw you with those coffee mug souvenirs, so I’m sure you can manage to feed the ducks.”

“I was looking for something for Bree,” she answered as if I would buy into that lie.

“Right,” I answered, “Because Alex and Bree have never been to London. Just admit it. You’re softening up a little, appreciating the finer things that a trip to London can offer without burying yourself in work.”

She tucked a piece of hair behind her ear and gazed at the ducks. “I’ll admit, I’m enjoying trying out this whole relationship thing with you. So, yeah, you caught me acting like a normal person for once.”

“Good,” I grinned when she glanced back at me. “I’m grateful I’m the one person in this world who can help Natalia Hoover become more *normal* for a change.”

She sighed with some irritation and looked over at me, “It’s a good and bad thing, you know? If you hurt me, I don’t know how I’ll respond, but I’m sure everyone will say it’s far from normal.”

I chuckled, “I can only imagine.”

Her face softened, and she tore off a hunk of bread to throw in the water, seemingly ending that conversation and changing the subject. “What about Stephen?”

I looked at her in confusion. “What about him?”

“You said that your father brought you here?”

“Oh, of course,” I answered. “Steve would sometimes come, but at that point, he fancied himself too good to come out with his dad and little brother, so it was just us.”

She didn’t look at me, but she wrapped her long, delicate fingers around my hand as she threw more bread into the lake. “Your father sounds like he was a wonderful man.”

“He was,” I said, “and he would’ve been very fond of you.”

That was an understatement. He would’ve told me to get my head out of my ass and find a way to make this relationship work. He would’ve seen this was the most genuine I’d ever been. Most of all, he would have seen me *happy* for the first time. I couldn’t tell Nat that because I didn’t know how it would make her feel. At the rate I was handling these emotions, which were steamrolling me like a freight train, I’d probably drop onto one knee and ask her to marry me. I didn’t trust myself anymore when it came to her.

It was better to play it safe and appreciate all of this, step by step and little by little.

I tightened my fingers around her hand and pulled her up from the bench. It was safer to get away from the deep talk for now. This was dangerous ground for me emotionally, and it was time to change the scenery.

“Come on,” I said, pulling her close for a simple kiss. I stepped back and ran my hands over her perfect ass. “We’ve got a lot of touristy shit to do today, and the clock’s ticking.”

As usual, the things that went unsaid between us didn’t need to be spoken right away; they’d come out in their own time, and that was most comfortable for me for now. I had to believe it was for her too.

We spent the day immersing ourselves as tourists in the City of London. We managed as many tourist sites as we could, me explaining the history of the Tower of London and giving her some examples about how and why the tower was built. The history overseas was always rich, and I loved immersing myself in it on days when I usually had no work. I could walk through old cathedrals and study the architecture for an entire day, allowing my mind to relax in the beauty of such rich details.

Nat seemed to appreciate it as much as I did. Her usual sass was fading, and I knew my heart was in danger when I met her more genuine side. We walked through the city as if we were on our honeymoon, and I allowed myself to fall deeper into this. By the time we moved toward the final destination, I felt more than confident that this would all pull together as it should. Everything was smooth, flawless, perfect, and meant to be.

Finally, after a lot of walking and talking, I brought her up to the doors of a building that I had a feeling would be familiar to her. Although, it took her a while to realize where we were, given the conversation we were having.

When she figured it out, she laughed. “Wait, is this—” she stopped, and that look of intrigue I’d been admiring on her face was back.

Fuck. It took my breath away to see her like this, filled with wonder and beauty.

I offered her my elbow to escort her into the theater area. “I couldn’t let this trip end without a visit *here*, especially once you admitted that you’d never been.”

“The Curtain Theater,” she said with a wry grin. Then her expression changed after she arched her sexy eyebrow at me.

She pulled away from me, and as if performing in a play herself, she instantly fell into character. She sighed dramatically, worthy of making it onto the stage we were walking in to see. I could sense the excitement practically radiating through her as we walked around the old theater, seeing the ancient stage, and climbing on top of it. I couldn't help smiling as she took one of the players' swords from the display beside her and brandished it, whipping it through the air like a Chamberlain's Man.

"This is the part where I would perfectly recite a line from Romeo and Juliet," she said with a funny accent. "You can just fill in the blanks for me, I'm sure."

"And here I thought you knew the play by heart," I chimed in, sliding my hands into my pockets, absorbing her beauty even further. "I mean, you can't stop gushing about their love story, so you must really love it."

She smiled and stared at me, prompting me to step up and over to where she was. I walked up to her and moved a strand of hair behind her ear as I looked down at her lovely face.

"Well, the truth is that the only time I watched Romeo and Juliet, I was too busy lusting after DiCaprio to hear what he was actually saying," she said, shrugging. "And to clear things up, I've just never felt like the story was particularly realistic. I never saw love like the kind Shakespeare described, so I didn't think I should expect it for myself."

"You are very good at dismissing the emotion, with your words at least."

Her expression remained soft, and I felt a surge of energy bolt through me when I saw, for the first time, a look in her eyes that was nothing less than love.

I wasn't letting this moment pass either one of us by. "And now?"

"Now," she said, walking away from me, "it feels entirely different. The significance of the story, the words, even the relationship between those two idiotic kids."

This was a monumental change in this subject from Verona. She was dead set against any words of love then. In fact, our last conversation had put to bed any ideas about Natalia loving anyone.

But now, I could see the difference in her, and I didn't want to allow this opportunity to slip away. I couldn't allow it. I knew this was the biggest risk either of us could take, and I was willing to take it for both of us.

I swallowed thickly before walking up to her. "I love you, Natalia. I'm not sure exactly when it started coming on, but I've known it for a while, I think. I realize as I'm saying it out loud to you that it's the first time that I'm admitting it to myself as well. I've been fighting the feelings, but I'd be a fool to let it all pass out of fear of rejection. I won't allow fear to rule my heart or what I know is true. I've never been governed by fear, and I don't intend to start now."

She gave me a soft smile like the one she'd given me that morning when I noticed she was coming closer to me. The smile faltered, though, and she looked down at her feet. "I've never said that to anyone except my little brother, and I've never thought I could edit my life to accommodate this feeling. I'll be honest," her eyes met mine, more severe now, "it scares the shit out of me, Spencer."

"I understand that," I said. "I've never actually said it either. But I've unequivocally never felt it like this before, and

I'm happy it's with you. Fuck, I'm just happy, period, right now. I'm happier than I've ever thought possible.”

I leaned down to kiss her, cupping the back of her neck as I tilted her face to meet mine. I knew things would be different from now on as we exchanged this kiss on the Elizabethan stage, and I felt my previously stone-cold heart beat more intensely.

CHAPTER

Twenty-One

As we stood on the stage of the Globe, my heart was practically beating out of my chest as I looked up into Spencer's gorgeous face, thinking about how intensely bizarre this whole experience had been. But, then, when he dropped the bomb that he loved me, it took exactly one and a half heartbeats for me to assess whether I loved him in return and to answer that I felt the same.

I might've known it for a while; I might've been feeling it since we walked next to Lake Garda, and he admitted to feeling something else beyond the simple lust I'd been insisting to myself was the only thing I felt for him. After all, love was a foreign emotion I honestly thought didn't exist within me.

I wasn't trying to figure out the exact date and time I started allowing myself to develop these feelings, but it would probably take a visit to a psychic to figure out that mess. Still, being the control freak I was, I wanted a grasp on how I'd managed to let these feelings in.

Maybe if I knew when this happened, then I would know why.

And if I knew why I might be able to control myself so my heart wouldn't run off without my mind's consent.

When Spencer professed his love for me, it was so effortless for me to tell him that I loved him too. But how could the two most non-committal strangers to love and relationships type of people who declare their love for each other in the way we did? Was this the way love worked?

If I looked past the doomed ending for Romeo and Juliet, I saw two people who found love quickly, without a firm or solid foundation, like Spencer and me. It didn't take years and years of dating, breaking up, trials and errors, and all the nonsense some married couples brag about going through before they knew they were in love.

Maybe we find love immediately, then our minds overthink it to protect our hearts, and we either end up all in or screwed because we're afraid of it and push it away. Like I had been doing.

This meant that being in love with Spencer could be very possible and very real.

Right now, I had to stay in the present moment of where we were on the day of touristy events. So, we sat quietly, eating our tiny sandwiches, both fixated on what we'd proclaimed to each other an hour or so ago.

I snapped out of my thoughts when Spencer leaned forward with a light in his eye. "We've got a few different options if we want to head toward the restaurant where I made a reservation. We could go to Westminster Abbey or the London Eye and kiss as we climb up over the city."

I grinned at him as I thought about the different options and remembered something I wanted to see before I left the city again. "Can we go to the Abbey? We can cross over Westminster Bridge to get there, right? Of all the amazing

historical places we visited today, I'd love to visit those locations too."

"Right," he said, smiling. "You want to see the bridge?"

"Not *only* the bridge," I said. "But something *on* the bridge. You'll see."

He sat back, looking confused for a second, before shrugging and getting up. "All right, then. Let's get going."

On the Underground, we held hands like any other couple, and it took a second for me to remember that we *were* just like any other couple. It was as strange as admitting I felt love for Spencer, if I was honest. Acting like a couple. My God, so many of my friends would ask me who I was and what I did with their friend if they saw our outward display of affection today. My foot kept bouncing on the floor, and I couldn't help alternating between feeling like every eye was on me and knowing my ego was getting the better of me. Because, in reality, no one could possibly give a shit about a random couple sitting on the Underground.

When we finally got off the train and climbed out of the station in Westminster, I breathed deeply as we got into the fresh, cool London air, tying my scarf more tightly around my neck. Spencer pulled me by the hand over to the beautiful 18th-century bridge, and we started crossing it. I watched as the sun glinted off the river, filtering through the clouds that likely carried rainfall. Coming from LA, the idea of a sudden and unpredictable rainfall thrilled me, and part of me wished it would start so Spencer would pull me into his arms.

Still, he proved he didn't need an excuse when he wrapped his arms around me as we stood there, watching the water flow under the bridge.

After a few minutes, I ducked out of the circle of his arms, pulling him after me across the bridge toward the large, imposing statue of three women that stood on the plinth where the bridge met the thoroughfare.

I ran my finger over the inscription on the plaque, feeling an ache for the bravery of the woman who raised her spear over London, refusing to be conquered.

“This was what you wanted to see?” Spencer asked, his voice quiet and reverent as we looked up at the statue. “I’m surprised you know about Boudicca. Usually, people from outside of the UK don’t.”

“I learned about her in college when I was taking a history of architecture class with Bree,” I said, contemplating the ancient Briton queen who’d led a revolt against the Romans. We’d been learning about the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire and the Neo-Gothic building style used to construct the new Westminster Palace. The statue had been a footnote in our textbook. Still, her name caught my attention. Immediately after, I went to Doheny Library and checked out three books about Boudicca. I ignored my homework for the rest of the day to read her tragic story and see what’d happened to her daughters. “There’s always been something about her that hits me.”

“You’re not alone,” Spencer said, looking up at the statues of the two daughters who flanked her, whose attacks she avenged when she raised her army against the Romans. “You know the Romans refused even to say her name? Even though they ultimately squashed her rebellion and she killed herself to avoid capture, she struck so much fear into them that saying her name was like conjuring a ghost.”

“Like Voldemort, if Voldemort were on the side of good and independence and feminism,” I said, looking up at him.

He chuckled. “Exactly.”

“This is the one thing I always tried to make time for whenever I came back here,” I said, tracing the letters of her name once more. “She inspires me.” I turned back to him, giving him a wry smile. “Something about her protectiveness I seem to relate to very well.”

His eyes widened as he turned back to me, and his smile twisted to mirror mine. “Should I be afraid?”

“Just warned,” I said, reaching up to run my finger along his jawline. “Don’t break my heart if I trust you to hold it.”

His face grew more solemn. “I understand you’re scared. I get that.”

“I’m not scared,” I think I was telling the truth. “I’m ensuring you’re the one who will be scared if you think this has all been a game when we return to California.”

“I guess this is the part for two people who were sworn enemies of love to understand where trust will come into play.”

I smiled. “Then I trust you’ll not fuck this up.”

Spencer chuckled, took my hand, and brought it to his lips, “I have no intention of fucking something up that thrills my heart and soul.”

We passed a pleasant few hours inside Westminster Abbey, going from room to room and enjoying the reverent grandeur

of the place where so many rulers had been laid to rest. After walking out of the cloisters, the only thing I could think of was how hungry I was, so Spencer and I made a beeline for an Indian place he'd told me about.

Now, with naan, curry, and saag paneer in front of me, I started thinking about the other things I was hungry for. In our dark, secluded booth, I cozied up to the beautiful man that I'd officially been able to begin thinking of as mine as of that day. I ran my hand up his inner thigh as I studiously spooned up spinach with my bread.

He offered me a dirty look, but I didn't stop, simply continuing to run my nails farther up in a way that made him crazy.

As soon as he paid the bill, he practically hauled me out of the restaurant and into a cab, which thankfully took us straight to the house ten minutes away. And no, we didn't make it up to the bed. We barely made it out of the entryway before my clothes were stripped off, and his mouth was running down the center of my stomach and down to my pussy, dampening me and making me convulse under him. Jesus, this man knew how to bring everything inside of me alive at the drop of a hat.

Every day since we admitted to loving each other had been heavenly, but there'd been yet another shift. It felt like another bit of tension that I didn't even know I'd been keeping between us had fallen away.

The two of us were more affectionate, both in public and private. It became more and more common for him to text me in the middle of the day and ask me to meet him for lunch near his office or for him to tell me that he was near my place and

that he wanted to take me for a cup of tea if I wasn't busy. At first, it was hard for me to relax into his kisses around his colleagues and mine, but I got used to it as quickly as I had him telling me that he loved me.

As abnormal as it would've seemed to me just three weeks before, I now felt like I couldn't live without it.

"What are you doing tonight, Nat?" Kev, a real estate associate and friend, asked while I gathered the last of my work and slid the contracts I'd been working on into my leather bag.

"Home," I said with a laugh and then exhaled when I saw the humored look on his face. "That sounded extremely odd to say out loud."

"I'll say," Elizabeth added. She was my only enemy in this place, and I wanted to roll my eyes into the back of my head as she approached, looking as if I'd asked her to join this short conversation. Kev was lucky to be in the position to do what all of us tended to do when she butted in: he turned and walked away. "Could it be that you managed to—"

"Managed to what, Elizabeth?" I said, folding my arms and forcing a bitchy smile onto my face. "To secure *another* multi-million-dollar deal while you scrounge around, trying to poach clients from your colleagues?" Watching her porcelain skin turn as red as her flaming ginger hair was a delight.

"You come into my office and steal my clients all of the time, Nat," she spat out at me. "What am I supposed to think of that? Perhaps I should move to America and do the same to you?"

"You're dreaming, Elizabeth. If there's one thing I never have a shortage of, it's clients. I certainly don't need yours,

and you know that,” I sighed. “As for moving to America, I say go for it. If your way of getting delusional revenge on me is to uproot yourself and relocate to somewhere you know nothing about, across the world from your family, I’m sure that’ll work out brilliantly. That’ll really put me in my place.”

Before she could respond, my phone rang, and I answered Spencer’s call.

“Look out the window, love,” he said, somehow knowing I had access to the front window that overlooked the city streets.

“I’m on my way out of the office,” I said, annoyed Elizabeth was still standing here as if we were in the middle of an argument she was going to win.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said.

“Hang on, Spence,” I held the phone to my chest and looked at Elizabeth. “Is there some reason you’re still here?”

“Is that the billionaire everyone is talking about?” she asked.

“Oh, dear God. I seriously can’t even with you.”

“Spencer Monroe, right? He works for Mitchell and Associates. I know him. He’s been in this office a time or two.” She had a predictable look. A look that pleaded with me to ask the inevitable follow-up question.

“Bless your heart,” I said with a bored sigh. “And let me guess, you and he?”

“We did.” Her smug satisfaction made me embarrassed for her. She acted like this was a revelation that would humiliate me, but she was sorely mistaken. I was not the type to be jealous of past lovers, and I knew very well that Spence had at

least as many of them as I did. If I were to get my feelings hurt over every woman Spencer had bagged, I'd be offended for the rest of my life.

I cocked my head to the side and raised my eyebrows, "Well, it looks like that's yet another deal that you failed to close, eh?"

"As if *you could?*" she scoffed loudly, sounding like she was hacking up a hairball. "He's *not* a one-woman man."

"I'd probably tell myself that too if I were in your shoes." I watched as a dozen questions seemed to cross her face.

"I don't believe for a second—"

"I don't care *what* you believe," I interrupted. This conversation had gone on far too long. "You are of no consequence to me. But allow me to give you a piece of time-honored, ancient wisdom to save you future embarrassment: Mind your own fucking business."

I walked away from the woman as she stood there, irritated and flustered, and put my phone back to my ear. I'd almost forgotten I had Spencer waiting on the line.

"Is everything okay?" Spencer said while I hit the button to the elevator, waiting for the doors to open.

"You know how it goes with miserable people. They want to make your life miserable to match theirs, and it's up to you to walk away."

"It's pretty much the definition of what I do for work," he laughed. "Though I make their lives more miserable, I feel better for it."

"You fire people for dirty work and steal business from other empires."

“I don’t steal jack shit. I just make offers that people are unable to refuse.”

“I suppose I do the same, personally and professionally,” I said coyly, hearing him laugh.

“Well, I can most certainly vouch for the *personally* part,” he said. “You’ve made some offers I’d never refuse. It’s why I don’t plan on letting you go. Instead, I may just officially ask you to marry me to seal the deal while I’ve got you waking up with a smile every morning.”

I grinned when I stepped out of the office’s front doors, seeing Spencer reclined against a white Bentley, holding his phone to his ear. This man was the epitome of every woman’s dream, and I had to admit, I loved that he was mine.

“Yep, I’m marrying your sexy ass,” he said, looking me up and down. “But before that, I have reservations at the Clove Club. Time to get you home and changed. What do you say?”

“I say,” I said, walking up to him and pulling his phone away from his ear, “I’m going to need you to help me change.” I leaned forward and pulled his bottom lip between mine. “You look irresistible, being all rich and powerful like this. I like it.”

He laughed against my kiss, his hand covering my ass and pulling me close.

“Nat?” I heard a familiar voice from behind me.

My head snapped around, and I felt a strange rising in my heart just as I felt a sinking in my stomach. I pushed away from Spencer.

“Shane?” I questioned, rushing forward as my little brother fought his way to his feet, attempting to hide that he was in pain.

Despite that, it couldn't have been clearer that he was nursing injuries to multiple parts of his body. He smiled at me, and no matter the bruises on him, nothing could dull the sweetness of his smile.

"Shane," I said, reaching for his chin and turning it to get a full look at his face. "What the fuck? What are you doing here? How did you even know how to find me?"

"You gave me this address before you went out of town," he said, raising his eyebrow.

"And how did you pay to get here?" I stopped, closing my eyes. "The emergency credit card?"

"I figured you wouldn't mind," he said shamefully. "If you do, I'm sorry."

"Of course, I don't mind," I said.

"It was business class," he said, looking up at me sheepishly.

"Of *course*, it was. Only the best for Prince Shane," I rolled my eyes. "Well, I wish I could've seen the flight attendants' faces when they saw you and this piece of meat you call a face."

"Nat," I heard Spencer say from behind me. I turned and saw Spencer approaching us, sizing up my baby brother. "Who's the raw hamburger?"

I shut my eyes tightly, wishing that Spencer would, for once, put a lid on the dark humor. I suddenly felt very uncomfortable in the presence of both men, as if two worlds were colliding, and I was unprepared. "Spencer—"

"I'm her brother," Shane said, his attitude flaring up as he grinned menacingly. "Who the fuck are you? Her flavor of the

week?”

“Of the month, actually,” Spencer said, grinning back at Shane. “Or maybe the year. Maybe for life. We haven’t decided to put a time limit on it.”

“Seriously?” My brother looked between us, shocked. “You finally nailed her down?”

“Can we not talk about who’s nailing me anywhere?” I said, reaching for my keys. “Spencer, I’m not sure what we’re going to do for dinner—”

“I’ve already canceled the reservation,” he said, putting his hand on my lower back. I flinched away from the touch, but he didn’t say anything. “Shane, what do you like? I’m feeling Chinese takeaway.”

“Fuck it, let’s have Chinese,” Shane said, picking up his duffel. “And if your place is as nice as that car, we’re eating it at your house.”

If Spencer ever wanted to judge my personal life and my family, he was about to get his chance.

“Sounds like a plan,” Spencer said, reaching for Shane’s bag. “Come on. I’ll have my driver bring us there and order takeout along the way.”

I wanted Spencer to meet Shane, but not like this. I knew my father must have been behind this, and I also knew there would be no way to keep any of this from Spencer anymore. He’d want to know, and now that the evidence had been presented to him, there would be no way to keep him out.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

SPENCER

I couldn't stop eyeing Shane as we walked upstairs to the guest room, which was on the floor below ours. He would let out a quiet hiss of pain now and then with specific movements, and I also caught him peeking at me more than a few times, sizing me up or gauging my reactions.

I prided myself on being able to read people effortlessly, which was a critical element of my being so good at my job. Looking past someone's façade, seeing them for who they really were, and knowing their intentions was second nature to me. Nonna used to say I was psychic, which always made me and my siblings laugh, imagining me wagging my fingers at a crystal ball.

So, it didn't take more than half a second for me to size up Nat's little brother. I could instantly determine that Shane used the people who loved him, and he was a drug abuser—you didn't have to be psychic to pick up that last part. His drug abuse probably abated his guilt for using people, but it also created a vicious cycle.

If he weren't Nat's brother, I would have handled this situation with a few words, and the problem would have been gone.

Nat had dropped a few hints here and there, making it clear that I should restrain myself from calling him out for showing up unannounced. She'd said enough in the time I'd been with her for me to know she loved her brother tremendously and that they had a difficult family dynamic, just as I had.

I had no intention of forcing myself into this situation, but I also knew this was an excellent time to learn a thing or two about the woman I'd fallen for. I was more curious than anything now.

"This'll be you," I said, pushing open the door to the second bedroom on the floor and turning the switch as I walked inside, "for as long as you need to stay."

Shane let out a long whistle as we walked inside. His lack of maturity was already annoying me, but I would keep my mouth shut for Nat's sake. For now.

I watched as he looked around at the furnishings and the beautiful bed I'd had made ahead of our arrival in London, preparing for the possibility that Nat might want to stay in a separate room. "Okay," he said, looking around in wonder as he plopped down on the bed and bounced on the comfortable mattress. "I can rest at ease knowing you're not with my sister just to get her money."

I guess Mr. First-Class Plane Ticket is the only one allowed to dig her gold.

I slid my hands into my pockets, trying to act casual. "Nah. Being a gold digger is way too complicated. I don't have time for that."

Shane let out a surprised, raspy chuckle, and he reached up to set his hand on his throat, massaging his neck in discomfort as the laugh turned into a cough. "You sound like her."

“So do you,” I said. “You both are bold when getting straight to the point. Holding nothing back.” I sat on the small ottoman under the window across from Shane, trying his best not to let on how much pain he was in.

“That we do. We’re direct.”

“Right,” I answered. “Direct about everything but whatever is going wrong in your lives.”

I knew that was pushing it, but I didn’t care. I wasn’t going to tiptoe around the fact that he got the shit beat out of him and wasn’t offering any information about what’d happened. And he could *act* bold all damn day, but he wasn’t being forthright about his intention to fly across the world to find his sister in London, and I wasn’t going to ignore that.

The little shit had the nerve to meet my eyes and say, “What makes you think anything is going wrong in my life?”

“I’m assuming you’ve looked in a mirror,” I said. “I’m not sure if you know this, but it’s not normal for people to go around looking like someone took a hammer to their face.”

“And he’s funny,” Shane said, raising his hands to clap slowly and sarcastically, acting like an obstinate teenager. “I swear I’m okay. At least I am now that I’m away from LA and with my sister. Can’t that be enough for now? I mean, I hope you don’t have a problem with me wanting to chill with Nat.”

My face darkened, and my restraint from five minutes ago, putting up with this guy for the sake of Nat and learning more about her and her family, was swiftly fading. I had excellent self-control, but for twats like this, I had none.

“Would *you* have a problem with your girlfriend’s grown-ass brother wanting to be with his sister?” I asked. “Especially

if said adult brother showed up on your doorstep looking the way you look right now?”

He sighed heavily as he stared back at me, clearly sorting through his words as he decided the best approach, like the good little manipulator he was. Then, suddenly, his eyes landed on my left hand and went wide. “Hold up,” he said, bolting forward. “Are you *cheating* with my sister?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I said, confused. No part of our relationship had ever been anything other than honest, and for him to suddenly accuse me of infidelity came out of left field. And not even that, he was making zero sense.

“I’m talking about the fact that you’re *married*, but you’re playing house with my sister in London. And you’re not even bothering to be sneaky about it? Do you have any respect for Nat? Or for your wife?”

Suddenly, his assumption snapped into place with the clarity of a lightning strike, and I looked down at the wedding band that I was still wearing. God help me. Nat and I were just playing around wearing them last week. Now, this. Another round of explanations.

“Oh, that. Yeah, it’s kind of a long story.”

“I’ll bet you this entire goddamn house that I can follow along,” he said, his fierce brown eyes—entirely different from Nat’s in color but the same in intensity—staring me down.

“Only an idiot would take a bet they’d be sure to lose,” I said, finally shrugging off my suit jacket. “I know you can follow. Nat told me how smart you are. So, how about instead of a bet, we make a deal?”

He tilted his head to the side, narrowing his eyes even more as he waited for me to go on.

“Since you’re the one who dropped in unexpectedly, you will explain yourself first. Then I’ll tell you anything you want to know about the ring,” I said, holding up my hand and tapping my ring with my thumb, “and your sister’s understanding of it. Deal?”

After a while of him looking at me, he sighed and settled back onto the bed, his eyes taking on a slightly faraway look as he began to collect his words.

“Hmm. Well, I don’t know. What has Nat told you about our dad?”

“Not much,” I shrugged, thinking she hadn’t even told me her father’s name. I knew things seemed difficult between them, but she was never more than extremely vague.

“Well, the only thing you need to know is that he’s an asshole,” Shane said, reaching up to touch his busted lip. He glanced at me as if waiting for me to pass judgment on his assessment.

I shrugged. “A lot of parents shouldn’t be parents,” I said. “My mother is one of them. I’d call her a cunt, but I’m not a fan of using that word as an insult.”

He blinked at me a few times as if trying to process what I was saying before bursting into laughter.

“It’s true,” we heard Nat say from over by the door. We looked at her as she came inside with a washcloth and the first aid kit. She’d discarded her heels in favor of the plush slippers she bought on her second day here, and she changed into sporty joggers and a crop top that I loved. With her blond hair pulled back into a loose, messy bun, it hit a particular pained part of me when I thought of how we might spend all our

nights like this. “I can attest to how awful his mother is,” she said, sitting by her brother and reaching for his face.

“Really?” Shane said, raising his eyebrow. “This from the girl who refused to let the Kappa Kappa bitches get to her after refusing to join them and calling them a cult?”

“You did not,” I said, grinning at her.

Maybe having the brother around could be mildly pleasant.

“Guilty,” she said, setting the warm water on the bedside table and opening the first aid kit to examine all the offerings inside of it. “I went through Rush for the hell of it. Sororities are a good networking opportunity, and I figured I might as well get into the culture while I was at USC. But as I got further into it, it freaked me out more, particularly how they would flip their hair.” She hissed and shivered as if experiencing the memory in real-time. “And their weird waves and door stacks. All of it was so fucking weird. I just couldn’t go through with it. So, when I got the bid from Kappa, a top house, I turned it down.” She shrugged, looking from me to her brother and back. “Of course, that left them with a sour taste in their mouths, so when my friends and I would go out on the row, those girls talked so much shit.”

“But it’s not like they were lying, were they?” Shane said.

“Never said they were,” she said, picking up the washcloth. She looked over at me and shrugged. “It was the usual slut-shaming, saying I slept my way to the top of my class and all the other typical shit. But here’s the thing: I got my way to the top of my class because I’m intelligent and worked my ass off. I slept around because I liked it and made sure those hoes knew it.”

Shane and I both laughed at that, but the laughter was short-lived before Shane winced visibly and pulled his arms in to protect himself.

“God, Shane. Be careful,” she said, sitting next to him and beginning her examination, looking him over from top to bottom. “I’m pretty sure there’s blood matted into your hair.”

“You can always give me a haircut,” he said, closing his eyes as he relaxed into her care. There was an evident protectiveness as her careful fingers ranged over him, ensuring that her touches were soothing and gentle as she wiped off his face. He opened his eyes as the washcloth moved past his eyes and turned to look at where her hand was hovering over his shoulder.

“Wait just a goddamn second,” he said, bolting upright.

“Jesus, Shane!” she shrieked, bringing her head back right before the top of his head met her face. “Are you trying to give me a black eye now? Also, I’m pretty sure you have a broken rib, so no sudden movements!”

“We can talk about my sudden movements later,” he said, grabbing her left hand and pulling it forward. “Did you *elope*?”

She sighed. “Seriously?” She set the washcloth aside and gave him a sideways look. “You freaked me out for this?”

“Yes, *seriously*,” he said. “Before, I thought your boyfriend was a cheating scumbag who was flaunting his marriage without respect for you or his wife. Now I find out you’re the loser who gets married without telling me?”

“This is way too long a conversation to have on an empty stomach,” I said, pulling out my phone. “Are you good with Chinese too, Nat?”

“Sure,” she said, barely looking at me. “You already know what I like.”

“Yeah,” I said noncommittally. The way she’d barely acknowledged me since Shane’s arrival, while understandable, was starting to get under my skin. However, ever since we got here, she hadn’t even looked at me once, which made me think that there was something more at work here than she was letting on. “Shane? What do you like?” I asked.

He shrugged, wincing and drawing a glare from his sister. “I’ll eat anything.”

“Are you a fried rice guy? Steamed rice? Noodles guy? Beef and broccoli?”

“He likes lo mein with anything—literally will eat any kind of noodle—and Mongolian beef,” Nat said. “Those are his two favorites.”

“Okay,” I said, taking in her impatience as she picked up the washcloth again. “I’ll start putting in the order.”

“And while you do,” Shane said, “explain the wedding rings you both are wearing.”

Nat met my eyes for the first time since her brother arrived, and we both sighed.

“Well,” I said, studying the online menu, “it has to do with my mom.”

“It has to do with a weekend of amazing sex,” Nat said, “and Spence knew he could never find another to match me. Then, an unexpected wedding came up, and he didn’t know how to ask me to go in a way I’d agree to without getting his screwed-up family involved.”

We both looked at her, shocked into silence at her candor. There was a strange aggression at play here, and I wasn't entirely sure where the defensiveness was coming from.

"Perhaps I have a better version of this whole situation," I started. "If you'll allow me, I can tell how I came to ask you to pretend to be married to me and how we wound up falling in love for real?"

We stared each other down, neither of us saying a word before Nat shrugged. "Sure," she said, turning back to Shane as she wiped a smear of blood off his neck, "but tell it well."

"Right," I sighed.

"Okay," Shane said, looking between us so quickly I was worried he might get vertigo. "I'm confused."

"I told you it was a complicated story," I said.

"You guys are faking being married?" he said, pointing between us. "Why the fuck would you do that?"

"Again," I said, "my mom. When I say she's terrible, I'm not kidding."

"Shit, man. Rich folks are fucking weird," he finished with a laugh.

"That would be an understatement," I added with a sigh of defeat.

I went on to give him the Cliffs Notes of my family history as much as I could. I spoke of my father's wealth and my mother's sociopathic behavior, my dad's death, and the trust for each of the kids, including the caveat that each of us receives the remainder of our inheritance upon our marriages.

"I still don't understand the fake marriage shit," he said while Nat used this time to doctor the kid's wounds.

“My mom always wanted me to marry someone nice and malleable, someone she could bully into signing over the money from my inheritance. I knew the chances of that happening with your sister would be slim to none because no one gets away with giving her shit or trying to order her around.”

“But why say you’re married at all?” he asked. “If being married means the money is out of the trust and at play?”

“Because if I’m married, that means she can’t try to get me to marry someone she’s chosen,” I said, “which she’s been trying to do for the last fifteen years. I just don’t want to deal with her shit, and this seemed the easiest way to shut her up and help me attend my brother’s wedding without unnecessary bullshit.”

“Jesus,” he said, staring at me. “You seriously don’t seem the type to need to fake anything to shut people up. Regardless, a mom forcing her son to marry so she can steal the inheritance through the wife is a whole different level of wretched.”

Wow, the kid caught on and impressed me somewhat with this response.

“Tell me about it,” I said, giving him a dry smile. “It was a real treat being blessed to have her as a mother.”

“And as a *fake* mother-in-law,” Nat chimed in, reaching into the first aid kit for the disinfecting cream. “She definitely had some choice opinions of me.”

“Okay,” Shane said. “I can follow the whole fake marriage to save your ass thing,” his eyes met mine, then he glanced at the rings again. “But why are you still wearing the rings?”

We looked at each other, and Nat looked down at her rings. “I guess we’ve just gotten used to them,” Nat said, “and each other.”

“I don’t mind the feeling of it,” I said, looking at her with a smile. “Or having her around. She’s pretty good company. Perhaps the whole fake marriage thing could become the real deal. We shall see.”

Nat bit down on her lip. “Why don’t you get real by completing our food order?”

Just like that, the warmth faded away, and I knew the dismissal for what it was. The icy curtain dropped back into place the way it had before this trip, and I fought hard against the frustration that began to set in as I stood from the ottoman.

“Of course,” I said, walking out of the room, feeling more distant than I should have. Just like I could sense something was up with Nat’s brother, I felt something was going on with Nat.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

“I like him,” Shane said, watching as Spencer left and the door shut behind him. The two of us were quiet for a second before he finally turned back to look at me, grinning. “To be honest, you deciding to help him with his bitchy mom is easier to believe than you deciding a guy was worth spending more than one night with.”

“Hilarious,” I said as I scoured the medicine kit for Neosporin or any variation of it. Filtering through the tubes and packages with familiar objects but unfamiliar names, I finally pulled out a tube with a blue label that said Germolene. Comforted by the sight of the words *anti-septic ointment*, I unscrewed the top, smeared some on the end of one of the Q-tips in the box, and turned back to Shane.

“Now that Spencer is gone, I want the truth,” I said softly, touching the swab gently to his cuts and ignoring his wincing. “Tell me about what happened. Was this because of Dad?”

He clenched his lips together, avoided my gaze, and shook his head. I reached down, took his hand, and pressed my palm to his. I waited patiently, knowing that my brother wasn't great in silence. Chaos had always been our norm, so loud noises and impatience were something that we both understood well.

Perhaps he'd immediately give up the details if I were throwing shit, screaming, and demanding answers.

It's what our family dynamic was. It's how we learned to communicate when we were asked questions. Of course, it was a horrible excuse for avoiding me and the question, but I understood it at least.

He finally sighed and looked back at me, "I was going back and forth between your place and mine," he said, biting his lip. "It was too much work to move my entire computer setup, so I'd go to your place to make sure everything was good at the condo, sleep for a bit, and shower with that nice-ass water pressure of yours."

"Good," I said. "And while you took advantage of that, I hope you got your work done simultaneously."

"Definitely," he said, nodding. "It was all going pretty well, too, until I had to go to the old house for something. I thought I'd timed it correctly so he wouldn't be home, but you know my luck. He walked in while I was sitting in my old room."

"For fuck's sake," I answered, setting the Q-tips on the bedside table. "Why the hell would you have gone to the house? Why would you even *want* to?"

Sometimes I could not understand how my brother's brain worked.

Shane shrugged, moving his toes back and forth on the wooden floor next to his bed. His shoulders started twitching, and the jerky way that his body started moving made it clear that he was coming down from one of any number of drugs he was using again.

This time I wasn't going to be gentle with my fucking approach. I wanted goddamn answers about what happened.

"Tell me the truth," I said, getting down into his face. "What made you go to that fucking house again? Were you high?"

He blinked at me a few times, his eyelids taking on that frantic, mothlike movement that they always did when confronted by something he didn't want to deal with. He did his best not to meet my eyes, but I wouldn't allow him to avoid me.

"Answer me, bub," I said, my voice pitched low and soft. It was the voice I always used when he was little, and I had to reassure him he wasn't in trouble after our dad would unleash his fury on Shane for something that wasn't even his fault. "You know I won't be mad unless you lie to me. Just come out and tell me whatever it was you took. I want to know why you went back to that goddamn house."

It was highly infuriating to talk to my brother like he was eight years old again, but I wanted answers about this stupid-ass decision he'd made.

My brother looked back at me. He blinked a few times and swallowed hard, "I took Ketamine."

You've got to be fucking joking. I don't know how this is our adult lives.

Instead of yelling that thought out loud, I nodded. "What made you take that? Were you looking at pictures of mom or watching old videos again?"

He nodded, looking down at his hands. God, how did people do this? It was pathetic, infuriating, exhausting, and heartbreaking all at once. But I knew no other way to handle

him. How could I want to take his pain away while also wanting to punch him in the face? My heart sank while I tried to remain firm yet gentle, coaxing out more information from him.

“I was going through pictures and the videos again. I finished a job and came across an old video of mom with the two of us when I was a baby.” He stopped and sighed. He looked up at the ceiling, and my anger died immediately. He looked back at me with tears pooling in his eyes. “It got to me, Nat. There’s a reason I never look at that sentimental crap, you know? But I just decided to go through an old hard drive of mine, and it spun me out hard. Then I—” he shook his head, looking back down at his hands, “I just needed something to help me escape.”

“I never give you shit about how much you smoke pot,” I said. “You know that. But I *will* give you shit about always needing to turn it up a notch. First, it’s coke, then it’s Oxy and whatever other pills you can get your hands on, and now this? Ketamine? There has to be a time when you finally personally tell yourself that enough is fucking enough.”

“Trust me,” he said, “I know.”

“If you took any money off *my* emergency card to buy that shit, I’m going to—”

“I didn’t!” he said, shaking his head adamantly. “I swear. I had some left from the last time I bought, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, nodding slowly. I wanted to believe him, but the thought of a drug addict having any *leftover* drugs was laughable. “So, you looked through old pictures of mom, watched videos, and did the drugs. What happened after that? What made you think to go back to that house?”

“I remembered I still had access to the security cameras through the app on my phone, so I took an Uber. I just—I remembered Dad still had all her clothes and stuff, and I wanted to grab the blue sweater she was wearing in the video. Do you remember the one?”

“Yeah, I remember,” I said, my voice quiet.

My memories crept in, forcing me to recall my mother. She had dark hair, something our oldest sister had inherited from her, and Shane got her dark brown eyes. I’d always remembered that blue was her favorite color. Everything was blue for mom: dishes, décor, everything.

She always wore blue, but this sapphire-blue cashmere sweater was burned into my memory. I could remember how soft it was when I wrapped my arms around her and pressed my cheek against it and how her Chanel perfume clung to the fabric.

After she died, I snuck the sweater out of her closet and kept it under my pillow. At night, I’d spread it out and lay my head against it so I could smell her and pretend I was lying against her chest. Once Shane saw me with the sweater, he would sneak into my room every night because he wanted to feel close to her too.

Every family grieves differently, and I knew that even then. We mourned our own way, the only way we knew how, by clinging to everything that was Mom. It’s all we knew to do to keep her close and her memories alive.

Of course, it didn’t take long for Dad to fuck it all up. I’ll never forget when that son of a bitch stormed into my room and demanded to know what I’d stolen. He threw a raging fucking fit like the nightmare he was.

It was then that I stopped thinking of my father as merely cold. I'd realized instead he was like Iceland; icy on the surface for sixty-five percent of the time but with enough volcanoes under the surface to make you nervous about an inevitable eruption.

"Okay," I finally said to Shane, swallowing back my feelings at the thought of those days and how much I'd struggled. "So, you got high and thought that you'd go back for the sweater. What happened after that?"

"I was going to take it straight back to my apartment, but I ended up looking around the house. Did you know the old man has kept the whole house the same? He hasn't updated a single thing since we moved out. The pictures, the furniture, all of it."

"Not surprising," I murmured. "He's always been bad at moving forward, as we know too well."

"Yeah," he said, his voice slowing. "Anyway, I went into my room, and I just wanted to sit on my bed for a minute."

"I'm guessing you weren't just there for a minute."

He shook his head.

"Did you fall asleep?"

He nodded, biting down on his lip again. "The next thing I knew, I felt something yanking on my hair, and then something hard hit the back of my head, so I must've hit the floor. Everything was super foggy for a minute, and then I felt the pain all over my face, and it kept going and going. My ears were ringing so loudly that I could hardly think. Not to mention the pain in my ribs, so I knew he was kicking me. I don't know if he punched my face or kicked it. I have no idea how it happened or in what order. It's all kind of jumbled."

I didn't say anything, holding my breath slightly as I waited for the rest.

“The pain cleared up the rest of the fog pretty quickly, and I managed to get Dad's feet out from under him, so that was how I got away. I ran out of the room, but the K was still working on me, so I couldn't run as fast as I usually do. I didn't even realize I was still holding the sweater until I was almost at the door. Dad grabbed my arm on our way out, and he managed to drag me down again.”

He bit down on his lip and barely seemed to notice that he'd opened his cut once again. He took the tissue I handed him and held it to his mouth, still not looking at me.

“I was able to get out and away from him, and I managed to get down the street while he was still yelling after me. I ended up getting an Uber to your place, and that was when I booked the flight out here.”

I sat back and looked hard at my brother, contemplating his ragged face, and thought about how far apart we'd grown in the last few months.

Years, actually.

Despite my limited capabilities as a kid, I always did my best to make sure he was as happy as possible, but he'd been extending the distance between us throughout the last few years.

I wasn't sure I'd ever realized how deep the distance between us went, though. He'd confided in me that he started doing drugs in college, which wasn't surprising. So many people experimented with drugs and partying at that age, and I was no exception. But I never messed around with some of the things he did.

At first, he'd been open about what he was doing and how much, calling me after every Saturday night and letting me know how much he regretted the decisions of the night before. He'd always say, *"I'm never doing that shit again. Nat, I need you to hold me to that!"*

I'd always responded the same way, knowing that it was never a permanent shift he was making. *"Sounds good! Can't wait to hear about how good you feel next Sunday morning!"*

Then Saturday night festivities started early on Friday. Then Thursday through Sunday. Taco Tuesday also couldn't be missed. Rinse and repeat.

It didn't take long before it went from one day a week to all seven days.

Eventually, he stopped telling me about it, especially after a nasty argument we had. He blew up at me, saying how sick he was about me always being so passive-aggressive and how annoyed he was with my lack of sympathy.

We made up the same way we always did, but there was a new gulf between us that had never been there before, and I'd felt sick over the idea that I'd lost the confidence of my little brother. It was one of the reasons why I'd been so insistent on the weekly dinners, understanding that he needed some semblance of consistency in his life.

The bitter pill to swallow was that no matter how hard I'd worked as a kid or how much I did now, there might not be anything I could do to make up for what he'd missed out on during his formative years.

I honestly had no idea how to respond to this, and now, the only thing that came out of my mouth was something I couldn't possibly have predicted.

“What happened to the sweater, then? Did you leave it at the house?”

He gave me a grin that bordered on savage before pulling his backpack toward him and unzipping it. “See for yourself.”

He pulled out the cloudy-soft fabric, which was remarkably the same color it’d always been, and he handed it to me. I took it, running the royal blue fabric through my hands, and brought it up to my nose, shutting my eyes as I breathed deeply.

Under the stale smell of unworn clothes, cedar wood, and a faint lingering of cigar smoke—either from the times she’d spent with my father or the times he would come back from his networking events covered in smoke—there was the smell of her Chanel perfume.

God, I miss you, I thought, choking back the sob that was gathering in my throat.

“You should have it,” Shane said. “She would’ve wanted you to wear it.”

“You know dad will probably call the police, right?” I said. “He’s going to try to make your life hell, even if all you took was a sweater.”

He shrugged. “Even if he does, at least there’s company in jail.”

Whatever had been left of my heart before he said that was decimated in the space of that sentence, and I turned away. Shane had always hated the sight of my tears, often shutting down and backtracking what he had to tell me if it meant his feelings might sadden me.

I didn’t want him shutting down again now.

“I’ll go check with Spencer about the food,” I said, getting up. “Everything you need is in the shower. Get changed if you want.”

“I’m sorry I messed up your time with your boyfriend,” he said, his morose voice coming in from behind me. “I didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t mess anything up,” I said, turning back to give him a brief smile. “I’m happy you’re here, Shane. We’re going to find a way to get through all of this. One day soon, I hope.”

Once I was just outside the room, I saw Spencer standing in the hallway. The look on his face was unreadable, so I did my best to smile, but it felt wooden.

“Hey. Is the food here yet?”

“In the kitchen,” he said, not smiling back. “You know, if your brother needs help with your dad, we can always get him a lawyer. No matter what kind of standing your dad has, I can get a lawyer to bury his ass.”

I stared at him, feeling the inside of my chest going metallically cold. “I don’t know what you think you heard, but whatever it was, it must stay between us.”

Fuck. The last thing I needed was Spencer Monroe pushing back on me because of my brother’s drug addiction. I could fall out of love as quickly as I thought I’d fallen in love with the man if he wanted to pull rank about this. I wouldn’t be an absolute bitch about it, but I didn’t need him or anyone telling me how to deal with my brother when they didn’t live my fucking life—or Shane’s.

Spencer eyed me with that businessman, billionaire-bastard look, examining me as if he were about to say something to educate me on everything he overheard. But,

instead of saying anything, he simply nodded and turned, heading up the stairs to the room we shared.

I had no idea where this would go or what Spencer thought about it. All I knew was that if we *did* have some form of a relationship, this part might be a bit of a challenge.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Four

Things were sufficiently tense downstairs in the kitchen as we focused heavily on our Chinese food. I could tell Spencer was keeping something on a slow-burning smolder, clearly waiting patiently for us to get back upstairs so he could voice his opinion on the subject when we were alone.

I zoned out for most of the conversation while we ate. Spencer and Shane sat together, eating and riffing off each other for what felt like forever, even though it had most likely been only fifteen minutes. I played with my food, unable to stomach anything else. Despite the voracious hunger I felt when we got back home, despite the seductive smell of garlic, ginger, and noodles, I couldn't bring myself to swallow more than a few bites of food here or there. Both Spencer and my brother kept looking at me with concern, which I had to admit was valid.

I took my plate to the sink, keeping my back to the two men behind me, who continued chatting as I stepped away.

I finished cleaning my plate and turned back to the men. "I'm beat, so I'm headed to bed." I walked toward my brother, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and running my fingers through his hair. "I'm glad the shit is over, and I'm happy you're here."

He stiffened for a second in my arms, but only a second. It passed quickly, and then he was reaching up to wrap his fingers around my arm, relaxing into me the way he had as a little boy. “Love you, Sis. Thank you for letting me stay with you guys.”

“Where else in the world should you be?”

I did my best to ignore Spencer’s stare over Shane’s head. I kissed his head, his hair smelling less like dried blood and more like Spencer’s preferred brand of sandalwood shampoo. Letting go, I turned away from the both of them and started heading for the door. Once I got outside of the kitchen, I heard Spencer speaking softly to my little brother.

“Really, though, Shane, do you need anything? Is there anything else that I can grab for you?”

“No, man. I should be good with the food.” The two of them were quiet for a second, save for the sound of chewing. “I am sorry I just butted in on you guys. It seems you two were having a good time before I got here.”

“Trust me. Nothing can stop me from having a good time with your sister,” I heard Spencer respond with a cocky yet humorous tone.

“Ah, shit. Are you trying to get me to kick myself out of your house?”

“Perhaps,” Spencer said with a chuckle.

The two of them laughed, and I smiled as I listened to them teasing each other.

“Well, make yourself at home,” Spencer said. “If the jet lag starts getting to you, the fridge is full of whatever you need to make yourself comfortable. You’ve got a place here as long as you need it, okay?”

The two of them fell silent once more before Shane spoke quietly, “Thank you. Seriously. You’re a good man.”

“I know,” Spencer answered. “But it’s no problem. I also want you to know I will help you in any way possible. There’s nothing worse than a parent who’s out to destroy the health and happiness of their child. It’s fucked up, and I know that game all too well.”

I stepped away from the kitchen door, feeling those raw emotions rising in my throat as I headed for the stairs.

When I got to the room, I lay on the bed, gathered the silken comforter into my hands, shut my eyes tightly, and tried to fight the helplessness creeping in.

As a kid, the inability to wrestle my life into compliance felt crushing. The beautiful, wealthy home projected to the outside world, worthy of compassion because of its widowed father and motherless children, was a hollow façade, held together by the efforts of a girl who was barely managing to get her little brother to eat enough to put on weight.

The beauty and grandeur of this room suddenly felt overwhelming, and I brought one of the pillows over my head to shut out the world.

The noise in my head was starting to grow, building to a massive crescendo, and I didn’t know how to cut through it.

A familiar, sturdy grip on my arm jolted me back into my body, and I lifted the pillow off my head to look at the man who’d been destroying all the safeguards I’d spent the last decade and a half firmly putting into place. Spencer’s handsome face was creased in concern, and he dragged his finger down my cheek as he looked me over.

“He’s okay,” Spence said, lying beside me and wrapping his arm around me. “Shane went to bed a little bit after you did. It seemed like he was pretty beaten to shit in more ways than one.”

I gave him a tight smile before looking up at the ceiling. “Thanks for being so understanding with him.”

“How else would I treat him?” he asked, running his knuckle down my arm.

I shrugged, and his fingers fell away. “Not entirely sure. I couldn’t have predicted he’d fly out here, so I definitely couldn’t predict how you’d treat him.” I sat up, pulling my knees into my chest. “My brother has been through a lot of shit. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “About that.”

His voice trailed off, and I turned to look at him. His face didn’t have the quiet, loving concern it had when he lifted the pillow from my face. Instead, I saw the indifference I’d started to associate with his desire to figure out something that someone was keeping from him.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I finally asked.

He pursed his lips as he balanced his elbow on his knee and tilted his head to the side. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this stuff about Shane or your dad? I knew he was a dirtbag, but I never knew about the beatings and—”

“You can call that what it actually was,” I said, my voice taking on a dead tone I rarely heard myself use. “Child abuse.”

He pursed his lips, waiting for me to explain.

“It didn’t need to be said,” I replied, looking down at my fingers and examining my cuticles. “I didn’t want to

contaminate what we were doing with my family's bullshit."

"And what would you call any of what happened at my family's home?" he asked, lifting his eyebrow. "A fucking *Happy Days* reunion?"

"Exactly. We were dealing with your mom. So, why would I pile my bullshit on top of that?" I asked. "I mean, honestly, why would I want to bring up the darkest part of my life if I didn't have to?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said, his voice turning into a dry, sarcastic tone. "Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we decided to do this relationship for *real*? I wasn't fucking around when I admitted I wanted this to work, and I hope you weren't, either. You should've told me something about this stuff, Nat. This is some heavy shit."

I felt a strange hot, prickling sensation as it surged through my stomach, filling me with a nauseating defensiveness that gave me a sour taste at the back of my mouth. "You never asked, Spencer. Not really, and you know it. How was I supposed to know you were ready for all that? It's not the easiest thing to open up about."

His expression was blank as I went on.

I held up my hand, shaking my head. "And let me remind you that you brought me to Italy and into your family's crap so you'd have a bone to throw and distract your mom while your brother got married. When was I expected to stop and download my family dysfunction onto you in the past weeks? Don't forget you didn't invite me to Italy with sincere intent, even if it might've turned into that. We started by fucking, so please don't pretend you were invested in what was going on with my personal life then."

I didn't recognize the flash of anger that went through his eyes, but it was gone too quickly for me to comment on it. His face was coolly impassive now. "Fine. Say whatever you want to say about what and who we are to each other. I won't pretend to be invested."

He turned away from me, leaving me feeling a dry lump in my throat. "Fine," I choked out, climbing off the bed and slipping my feet into my fuzzy slippers as I reached for the soft jersey robe on the chair next to the bed. "Fine. I won't pretend, and I won't ask you to, either."

Nothing like two people determined never to have a relationship, finally forming one and then having no clue what to do with it. We were both lost, heading down a road without a map and with no idea where we were going. Any smart person would laugh their asses off at Spencer Monroe and Natalia Hoover trying to make a relationship happen... together.

Emotions started dumping on me now, and I didn't know what to do with them. I didn't need a *fight* with someone while I worked through family trauma. I had to get out of here quickly before the tears began to escape. I wouldn't show him how much he affected me: I couldn't.

"Nat."

I didn't look at Spencer as he caught me gently by the arm, turning me to face him. I pinched my lips together, swallowing back the knot that had formed in my throat.

"Baby." He set his hands on my shoulders and squeezed gently. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of what I said. I'm annoyed that you're shutting me out, and I just—"

"Snapped?" I asked. "I noticed."

“Stay here with me, please,” he said. “Let’s just sleep on it and let things get better for the morning, okay?”

I looked hard at him before conceding with a brief nod, removing my robe, and lying down on the bed again, turning onto my side and pulling the pillow forward, so my head was securely cushioned. I curled into myself, pulling my knees to my chest and looking toward the tiny crack in the drapes at the navy sky that hung above the park.

A hand crept over my belly, and I felt the touch of his chin poised over my shoulder, but I jerked out of his grip, pulling forward so that I hovered by the edge of the bed. I was so close to the end that I felt my knee hanging over the mattress.

“Natalia.”

The use of my full name made my stomach clench in an uncomfortable recognition, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Few people called me Natalia like he just did, and the one who did it most often had never done it with affection.

“Don’t,” I said, huddling in on myself. “Please. I can’t do this right now.”

He sighed through his nose as he pulled the covers up over us, allowing them to settle in place.

I wasn’t sure whether he slept, but sleep eluded me for hours as I stared into the corner of the room, wondering how we were supposed to move past this point.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Five

SPENCER

The silence that stretched between us was deafening and seemed unending.

Everything I did around her, every step I took or every time I closed a door, felt too loud and abrupt for the house.

Before, everything we did felt effortless, but now, it all felt stilted and uncomfortable. It was as if whatever Shane had been trying to escape had followed him across the pond and been wedged between us in the form of a destructive, oppressive silence.

Nat's little brother might've been a bit removed from reality, having done more than his fair share of drugs, but he was still aware of his surroundings and knew something was wrong too.

The day after he got there, he slept for almost a full twenty-four hours, only coming out for a few minutes here or there to make himself a cup of tea or coffee before heading back into his room to continue sleeping.

And now, it was yet another new day, and I expected more of the same.

Nat got up before the sun and was quickly in the bathroom, making it obvious she wanted to start her morning alone.

It could've just been a coincidence, though. I knew she often had breakfast meetings with clients when she went on business trips.

Maybe I was reading into things too much.

Goddammit. I was fucked if I didn't deal with this head-on. I needed to figure shit out and hopefully get Nat to open up to me. I mean, getting people to spill their guts before they realized what they were doing was a specialty of mine in business, so why hadn't I deployed that tactic? I wasn't the type to play along with the silent treatment, wondering what was going on in someone's mind.

I wasn't a mind reader and had zero desire to be one.

I grabbed my phone from the table and shot off a few messages to my assistant and Jim, ensuring they were prepared for me to work from home. I didn't have any urgent meetings this morning, and if anything came up, I could be at the office in a flash.

“Aren't you getting up?”

I glanced up from where I sat, reclined against my pillows, as Nat came back into the room. She was dressed to the nines in a charcoal tweed dress that hugged every generous curve and graced all of her delicate bone structure with peeks of black lace. Her long hair was swept to the side in a waterfall of thick, honey curls, and she already looked ready for the day ahead.

It was taking everything in me not to jump out of bed and pull her close so I could let her know just how much I wanted her, but I sensed she knew. Instead, I propped my arm behind my head and watched as she continued about her morning,

grabbing her stylish black heels from where they sat under the ottoman and sitting to put them on.

I had some good associations with those shoes, mainly after she'd worn them the other night. She hadn't even taken them off when I'd taken her to bed our first week here, and they wound up around my ears while I took my time fucking her.

Altogether, it had been one of my favorite nights with her. But, then again, how could I pull one night out and set it above all the rest when they were equally enjoyable?

"I'm going to work from home today," I said, smiling at her. "I don't have any urgent need to go into the office. But if I do, it's right around the corner."

She gave me a hard stare. "Shane's a big boy, you know. He doesn't need a babysitter."

"I never said he did," I replied, doing my best to keep my voice mellow and unbothered by her tone.

"And he's not some thief you need to keep an eye on. You don't have to sit around here, watching your things. How can you expect him to feel at home if you're going to take these random days off to work from home?"

"I don't expect *him* to *feel* like he's at home so much as *I* would like to *be* at home instead of at my office. Besides, it's a bit hard to feel at home when you're across the world."

"You *know* what I'm talking about. Don't be an asshole," she said dryly.

I was unpleasantly surprised at her insinuation that I should leave my house during the day so her brother would feel more comfortable. Was I expected to tiptoe around the

kid? I didn't know if her response came from protectiveness or just flat-out enabling, but either way, it wasn't normal.

I stared her down. "While I'm being an *asshole*, I'd like to mention that I never said anything about him being a thief. Perhaps there is something you would like to share with me?"

We stared hard at each other, each of us waiting for the other to break.

"Well," she said, looking down as she rearranged her shoe, "he has my number. So, if he needs anything, he can text me, and I'll come home. *You* don't need to stay here for him."

"He also knows you have a busy work schedule in your own right and that you're here to secure the sale of an enormous property that will deliver a remarkable commission. I trust he understands you may be unable to run home and take care of him on a whim."

"I'm running late, and I'm done with this conversation." She grabbed her purse and slung it over her shoulder, heading for the door. "Do let me know if he brings about any destruction in the house, will you? I'd hate for my brother to cause you any unpleasant anxiety."

"Good God. Nat," I said, reaching up and running my hand through my hair. "Come on. Stay. Let's have breakfast or tea, at least, and talk this out."

That's what couples do, right?

"No. I'm running late," she said.

"Christ. It's not even seven in the morning," I said. "What are you late for? The fucking sunrise?"

"I'm late," she said and walked out without another word or look back.

I fell back onto the pillows and stared at the ceiling, unsure how to make any of this better.

I didn't see much of Shane after he and I ate a silent breakfast. I didn't let that weigh too heavy on me, though. He'd had his ass handed to him in that beat down, and he was jet-lagged, so I didn't think anything of it.

At about noon, I heard him stumble downstairs from where I'd set up my workstation in the kitchen and poked my head out to greet him.

"Hey," I said, smiling at him. "You want some coffee or tea? If you're up for some lunch, I can take a break from work, and we can head out for a bit."

"Thanks," he said, clearing his throat. "I think I'll just grab some water. Not really up for going anywhere right now."

"Sure," I said, getting up from my stool and grabbing him a glass. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like a rock, for a while at least. Then I woke up at three in the morning and couldn't fall back asleep until like eight."

"Yeah. Jet lag is a bitch." I handed him the water. "You hungry? The leftover Chinese is all yours if you want it."

He smiled at me as he chugged the water. "Not really, actually," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I just wanted something to drink and maybe get some more sleep."

"Sure," I said. "Just let me know if you need anything, okay? I'm around all day today."

He saluted me as he refilled his glass and headed back for the stairs. “If it’s okay, I think I’ll take advantage of that big-ass bathtub in the guest bathroom.”

“It’s all yours, buddy,” I said. “Your sister dragged me to Lush the other day, so if you want a fancy-ass bath bomb, you’re all set,” I finished with an eye roll and a soft laugh.

He laughed. “Thanks, but I know better than to go digging in my sister’s bathroom amenities. That stuff is sacred.”

“Right,” I said with a smile, then turned back to my computer as he left the kitchen.

The rest of the day passed quietly, and I couldn’t help checking my phone compulsively as I waited for Nat to come home. I hoped she’d talk to me about what was happening once she got here—or just speak to me in general. But the longer I waited, the more she seemed to stay away, and the pit in my stomach grew until I finally ate cold Chinese food in despair and went to bed.

I was thankful to have fallen straight to sleep but was pissed when I woke up an hour later. I checked the phone, but no word from Natalia since she texted earlier in the evening, saying she would be late. I couldn’t fucking sleep, so I grabbed a book and started to read.

When Nat finally came home, I was in the process of rereading the same damn paragraph for the millionth time.

“Did you have a good day?” I asked, setting my book aside.

“Mm-hmm,” she said, putting her purse on the vanity without looking at me. “Sorry if I made you worry. Some friends and I decided to go for drinks after work.”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t worried.”

Holy fuck, we're having a conversation. Progress.

“How was Shane today?” she asked. “Did he come out of his room to make some mayhem in Mayfair?”

“Cute,” I said. “No, he didn’t. He’s been sleeping all day. I’m not sure if he’s really slept a full night since the beatdown.”

She turned back to look at me with her eyes growing wide. “Is he okay? Should I check on him?” She stood up and bit her lip. “I went by his room but thought he was asleep, and I didn’t want to wake him.”

“He’s fine,” I said, getting off the bed and walking over to her. “I promise. He surfaced twice today for water and food. He threw down some cold noodles with me at dinner.”

She blinked at me a few times as if unsure whether to trust me and my assessment of her little brother.

I reached out, rubbing her arm to reassure her. Her breathing slowed, and I saw the sudden worry quieting down.

What the hell is wrong with her? I thought, not expecting her to nearly go into a panic attack.

I wished I could just pull her in, wrap my arms around her, and show her how much I loved her, and for a second, I wondered what was stopping me. After all, I’d already committed myself to her, hadn’t I? I’d already decided I wanted this life with her, which meant I needed her at my side regardless of the moods she fell into.

This was all so foreign to me, though. Instead of reading a book about the history of Ghengis Khan, I should’ve been downloading something like *What to Expect When You Finally Find Your Sorry Ass in a Relationship* so I would know what the fuck to do.

As I stood there hoping I was doing this part right, Nat dropped her hands, turned away from me, and then headed into the bathroom, leaving me to stare after her.

The following two days passed in much the same way, virtually zero conversation with Nat, and me, turning to Shane for company at the end of a long day at work. I was fine to hang out with her brother, but shit, I was beginning to feel like he and I were the ones in a relationship.

“Nat,” I said, pulling back the covers and getting into my side of the bed, “you need to talk to me.”

“I don’t *need* to do anything, Spencer,” she said, lying on her side and facing the wall. “What I need to do is go to sleep. Then, tomorrow when I wake up, I *need* to get dressed and nail this project down. That’s what I need to do.”

I lay on my back, staring up into nothing, and ran my fingers through my hair.

It wasn’t in my nature to deal with anyone’s bullshit, but for the first time ever, my heart was overruling my brain, which was the only reason I hadn’t walked away.

If I could get Nat to open up, we might be able to have an honest discussion and unpack what’s going on here. I wasn’t the type of man to sit back and be walked all over, but it was clear that Nat was acting out because she was in pain, and if I could help her, I would.

The next morning, I decided to spend my free afternoon with Shane, attempting to get some insight into why Nat had shut down. He was the best lead I had since she wasn’t talking.

“Mr. Monroe?”

“Yes, Christine,” I answered my assistant, who was old enough to be my mother, through my desk intercom.

“Shane Hoover is here to see you.”

“Show him in, thank you,” I said, shutting down my laptop.

I turned to gather my leather briefcase and put away the last of my work on the Grover project. I would deal with those bastards in the morning.

“Holy shit!” I heard Shane say from behind me. “Sorry, ma’am,” he said to my secretary.

She smiled. “Not to worry, deary,” she glanced at me, staring over her glasses, “Mr. Monroe’s office isn’t soundproof, so trust me when I say I’ve heard it all.”

“Hopefully not my sister when she’s here,” Shane said, then looked immediately back at my smile and watched as I shook my head no.

“Mr. Monroe knows better than to pull that nonsense on me,” she said with an authoritative gaze, her Birmingham accent thicker than a moment ago.

“I would never,” I smoothly lied as she playfully waved her hand dismissively. “Thank you, Christine.”

She nodded and turned to leave as Shane walked forward and took an empty chair across from my desk.

“So, who sits in *this* hot seat?”

I grinned as I continued to pack up my things neatly. “You do at the moment,” I said, glancing up at him. “And tomorrow,

I'll have the CEO of a company we acquired last October sitting in it."

"And exactly what do you do here? Must be good, judging from the view."

I glanced out my office windows, taking in the sprawling views of the city. "Tomorrow, I'll have Benson Fields sitting in that chair," I eyed Shane's confused expression. "And he'll sit there until I make him crack and tell me why he's been embezzling money from Mitchell and Associates."

"Fucking hell," he answered. "How can you tell he's embezzling? I mean, are you sure?"

I sat in my chair, tucking away my computer chords, "It's my job to sniff out the weasels. And when we have a CEO who's withholding earnings from the company that funds it, all it takes is one tiny little slip-up, one wrong glance, and I'm on their asses. And trust me, Mr. Fields will not enjoy sitting in that chair tomorrow."

"Will you have him arrested?"

"Not before I destroy his mental state," I said. "As I said, it won't be fun for him. For one, he's not just stealing from my best friend's company," I glanced around my meticulous office and then back to Shane, "but I've been needing to blow some steam off given that your sister has been ignoring me for the past few days."

"Yeah, I get that," Shane said.

"Yeah, I doubt that," I answered, knowing this kid had no idea how irritable I'd become since Nat shut down on me. But I wasn't in the mood to go into any of my drama, so I returned to the plans at hand. "All right," I took the strap to my leather

bag and pulled it onto my shoulder, “where are you taking me to lunch?”

“You’re not going to tell me about this Fields guy? What you’re going to do to him tomorrow?”

“No,” I answered, “I’m off the clock and done with the shop talk. So, let’s get out of here. I’m down for wherever you want to go. So, where are we going?”

Shane frowned, “You don’t have to hang with me, dude.”

I walked toward him, standing up. “I know,” I answered with a smile. “However, I have no desire to be with business associates tonight. Even though your sister only says the words good morning and good night to me anymore, I still have this insane desire to keep her around. So, if I have to go on a date with a Hoover, I figure it’ll be you.”

Shane rolled his eyes and chuckled, “All right, I do know where I want to go. But I’m afraid to tell you.”

I half smiled as we stepped into the elevator, “Cough it up, and you don’t need to be afraid of telling me anything.”

He chuckled. “All right, then,” he let out a breath. “Can we go to Fleet Street?”

I blinked at him. “Why was that so embarrassing for you to ask?” I grinned slowly. “Are you a *Sweeney Todd* guy? Did you think I’d judge you for your love of musical theater?”

He bit his lip diffidently before shrugging. “It’s a masterpiece. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it onstage, where the performers are playing their own instruments, but it’s fucking excellent.”

I held up my hands. “Hey, I’m not here to judge. Let’s go to Fleet Street.”

The two of us left my office and headed for the East End, where the true crime junkies liked to gather at the Jack the Ripper museum and head to the Tower of London, looking into the Traitor's Gate while they were at it.

"No offense," he said, "but I'll admit that you don't exactly seem like the type of person to be into musicals."

"Well, I'm into good shit. And you did state that it was a *masterpiece*," I replied as we made our way to the tube station. "Actually, my grandmother loves the opera. She always took my siblings and me to performances before my father passed away. We'd go to the Teatro alla Scala opera house in Milan. It was quite extraordinary. Most children would hate the opera, but my Nonna gave us no choice in the matter. Consequently, I enjoy it immensely."

Shane was quiet for a moment as we took our seats on the underground. "I didn't know about your dad. I'm sorry."

"You couldn't have known," I said, "and I'm the one who brought it up. You're fine."

Fortunately, the conversation became more casual as we continued toward Fleet Street and Whitechapel. He told me about how he'd studied sound mixing and engineering and even pulled out his phone to play me some songs he'd mixed.

I had to admit that I enjoyed our time more than I had imagined. We had a particularly good time exploring the museums in the East End, traversing Fleet Street all afternoon, and even stopping by a bookstore so that Shane could pick up a compilation of old Penny Dreadfuls from the eighteen hundreds before heading back to Mayfair.

When we arrived back at my place, we saw Nat sitting in the kitchen with a plate of spaghetti, reading a book quietly. I

nearly froze where I stood, seeing her sitting there, wearing simple clothes, her hair loosely pulled up, and wearing reading glasses. She was beyond beautiful, lost in the world of her book.

“You’re both a little late,” she said, picking up her plate after taking her final bite and bringing it to the sink. “I’ve already had dinner.”

“That’s okay,” Shane said. “We stopped for fish and chips while we were out. We had some boy-bonding time without you. It was awesome.”

She chuckled. “Good for you.” She yawned widely and picked up her book, heading for the stairs. “Listen, I’m beat, so don’t throw too big a party down here, will you?”

“Say less, Mom,” Shane said.

We both suppressed smiles but didn’t look at each other as she headed for the door, letting it swing shut behind her the way she had on her brother’s first night here.

How the fuck did we wind up in this place?

I looked over at Shane, a newfound determination set in me now. “I’m going for something strong tonight. Would you care to join me?”

“I’ll take whatever you’re having,” he said.

“Bourbon, then,” I said. I walked over to my bar in the living room, pulled out my best bottle, and poured it into two glasses.

“The good stuff, eh?” Shane said as I placed his glass in front of him.

“I figured you deserved a nice drink,” I said, “for what I’m about to ask you.”

He went briefly motionless as he studied the bourbon in his glass before lifting it to his mouth and taking a sip. “I figured this was coming. It’s because Nat’s been stonewalling you about our dad; am I right?”

“You might say that,” I replied. “It’s pretty impressive, actually. She’s remarkably adept at shutting down any attempt I’ve made to get to know her in the beginning. It’s like she doesn’t believe I’ll actually stick around once I hear what she has to say. So, if she’s not going to talk,” I raised my glass to him and crossed my ankle over my knee, reclining into my chair, “you *will* talk. What the fuck happened with both of you and your dad?”

I didn’t give a fuck anymore. I wanted answers, and Shane *would* give me those answers.

“I might as well be that poor bastard you’re going to drill tomorrow at your office,” he said after another sip.

I nodded. “Only if you don’t give me some answers to this madness I’m blindly navigating.”

“I get you’re frustrated.”

I grinned. “You have no idea how frustrated I am. Not with you, but with some ghost that has made an invisible wall between your sister and me.”

“And the reason you don’t ask her?”

I exhaled, “As much as she plays a good role of acting like I don’t exist and that she despises my presence, I see through her easily. I know her well enough that if she wanted nothing to do with me, she would’ve left already.” It was a truth I was clinging to desperately. It was the only reason we both hadn’t already said goodbye. “She wants to tell me she’s afraid I’ll leave her, so she’s preemptively pushing me away. Sadly, I

also know she's frightened because she's hiding behind this façade, and if I approach her, she'll either run or freeze, like a cornered animal, waiting to get hurt. So, I prefer to take an easier route—with *you*—so as not to cause her added stress.”

“You’re correct. She won’t open up to you. And I’m afraid if I talk, you might leave her, and if it’s because of me opening my mouth, she’ll never forgive me.”

“Understandable,” I said, “however, I’m not playing games. If I were, I would have asked you both to leave my home the minute I was made to feel like some kind of fucking guest in it. Being one who grew up with abhorrent family dynamics, I can assure you that anything you tell me will not make me run away from Nat. In fact, it might work in your favor since I have a better understanding of how these things work, and I will know how to be there for her.”

“You’re right.”

I grinned over the rim of my glass. “I know,” I said before I took a sip.

“Well, I don’t know where to start.”

“Just start,” I urged.

“Well, our dad was legendary for breaking promises.”

I licked the bourbon off my lips. “Like how?”

He sighed. “It started with our mom dying. He was always cold and distant before she died, but after, he changed completely.” He swallowed more of his drink. “It didn’t take long for some really bad things to start happening after that.”

We kept talking, and as the night wore on, my stomach sank further and further into the floor as I got a better feel for what Nat had been holding back from me.

My respect for her secrets grew at the same time as my disgust for her father did, and now, I understood I needed to take a softer approach with her and what she chose to reveal.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

My cell phone alarm went off earlier than usual the following morning, and I groaned slightly as I turned over in bed, looking over at the drapes that allowed a hint of gray dawn into the room.

When I started setting my alarm so early, I told Spencer it was because I had breakfast meetings around the city with clients. That was the only way I knew to get out of our usual morning routine—a slow, lazy rising, allowing him to hold me and wake me up in all the ways I loved the most—because we'd arrived at an impasse. I was having trouble reconciling my desire for him and my wish for him to stay with me with my inability to tell him the truth he wanted to know.

Because of that, for the last three days, I found myself jumping out of bed and getting myself completely ready for work before most places even opened for their breakfast rushes. As a result, I'd had to be resourceful in finding a decent place to wait out the early part of the morning.

There was no place to go, really. So, I just grabbed coffee and thanked God it wasn't bitterly cold or raining since. I took that time to walk around and breathe in my surroundings.

I couldn't talk about what was going on with me or why I'd snapped into this twilight zone version of myself. Hell, this

was the first time I was thinking about how I'd just mentally shut off the world these days.

I had taken a brutal hit after seeing my brother in his battered and bruised state, knowing our father had been the one to hurt him so badly, and not for the first, tenth, or even thirtieth time. The physical abuse we'd endured at my father's hand was something I'd long since locked away, but for some reason, the mention of my mother—and the memory of her perfume on that sweater—cracked open that vault of pain, and it was enough to shatter me.

I'd never been good at dealing with difficult emotions, and adding my brand new, so-called relationship with Spencer into the mix made it nearly impossible. How was I supposed to communicate my feelings to him when I couldn't even bear to conjure them in my mind only for myself? I couldn't even think about them, let alone speak them to someone else.

It was too far out of my comfort zone, and everything became a perfect recipe for me to have an emotional breakdown if I were the type to let it happen. On the contrary, I didn't break down; I built up. I put walls around myself so high that even I couldn't see over them.

I wasn't the type to display weakness; my father showed me the consequences of showing weakness long ago, and I hadn't made that mistake since. It was the only way I knew to keep the dam from bursting, and now, I was fucking numb.

I was on autopilot, going through the motions. Whatever came naturally, that's what I was doing. I focused on effortless things, like dressing myself to look like the powerhouse real estate agent I was and getting out there to secure the best possible deals for my clients. Because of my extra hustle, I'd

managed to close the massive commission deal, and I landed two others without even trying.

Just as I had done for the past three days, I grabbed my coffee, found my bench facing a beautiful large stone fountain, and allowed my mind to turn off before heading to my office and burying myself in work.

I scrolled through my phone, wishing I could feel whole again. Instead, I felt outside of my body, but I still had a nagging sensation in me—it must've been my heart; I guess I still had one—to allow Spencer in. But as soon as I considered talking to the man, something inside me would shut down even more. It was like I had no control over the lockdown. So, thinking about Spencer was a bad idea.

“Excuse me, ma’am?” a voice said to my left.

I glanced over to see a tall frame casting a shadow as the sun rose behind him, painting beautiful hues over the city.

“Spencer?” I said with the excitement of a corpse. “What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he answered me. “So, this is your little hideout, eh?” He sat by me, and I stiffened, praying to God that he wouldn't offer a romantic gesture—yes, this was a *huge* problem.

All things sensual in my life had been shut down also. If this played on any longer, I would most likely check into a mental institution. Seriously. For me not to crave sex, especially with this god of a man who knew precisely how to satiate my appetite, was a major fucking problem.

“I really want to be left alone,” I said.

“I know. You've made that perfectly clear since your brother arrived.”

I rolled my eyes, my stomach turning, and focused on breathing. I could almost feel myself batten down the hatches, ready to hide from him deep within.

“Baby, I’m here,” he continued while I remained silent. “You need to talk to me or something.”

“I don’t need you to call me baby,” I said, feeling my blood pressure spike at the sentiment.

“Okay,” he answered, but I didn’t hear sadness or frustration in his tone this time. Whatever tone he was using on me was working. “What would you prefer I call you?”

I exhaled. “Don’t act like a dumbass,” I said, irritable.

“Fine, I won’t act like a dumbass. Instead, I’ll act like the dick most people know me as,” he said.

“That’s better,” I answered.

I heard him chuckle. “So, since I have free will to be a dick because apparently, that’s what’s helping us get through whatever this is, I’ll just come out and say it.”

“Say what?” I answered.

“What the fuck is going on with you?”

I looked over at him and frowned. “No, that’s not going to work either.” I half smiled, so torn and troubled I couldn’t find the desire for him or anything else, and I had no way to fix this.

As if Spencer read my mind and saw the scared little girl who’d just lost her mom and was forced to raise her brother while their dad physically abused them, his entire demeanor changed. He looked like he’d seen the person I truly was, and, in that instant, I felt comforted. For the first time this week, I felt like I could breathe and think.

“Shane and I talked last night,” he said, his eyes seeming to hold mine like a magnet. “Not about everything, but about *his* experience with your dad and how you were so protective of him. He also spoke about how Liz distanced herself from the family, leaving you alone to deal with your dad’s cruelty and everything else he took away from you.”

The wall I’d put up got lower and lower the more he spoke. He wasn’t talking to me with pity, like the man who was in love with me; instead, he was the fierce businessman I’d met so many times in Alex and Bree’s office. He was no bullshit, rigid, strong, and all fucking man, and that’s who I needed to pull me up from my knees and let me know it was okay to offload my burden.

Even though I was feeling a bit more myself, I still couldn’t manage to respond to him as he went on, so I just stared ahead, watching the rising sun.

“I’m not going to pretend that it’s easy for me when you don’t confide in me,” Spencer said, ignoring any reactions on my end, “but I understand many more of your reasons for resisting. It was stupid of me to think I’d already done enough to earn your trust.”

“It’s not that,” I said, feeling myself thaw at his words. “You’ve done more to earn my trust than any man I’ve ever met.” I looked back at him, thankful he’d pulled me back into my body. It felt like this was the first time I’d taken a breath all week.

“That’s not saying much, considering your standards and boundaries,” he said, chuckling and leaning over to kiss my shoulder, and somehow, it was like life was surging back into me.

I'd never shut down so hard and fast before, and consequently, I'd never experienced this rush of revival, coming back to life as if I were Sleeping Beauty and my handsome prince had just kissed me. This was all a mystery to me.

"I want you to know that whatever you have to tell me about the past and what you've been through, I'm here when you're ready. I'll be patient and wait to hear whatever you want to tell me, whenever you want to tell it. I meant it when I said I love you; that hasn't changed. And just because I'm a little annoyed that you're not confiding in me and avoiding me, that doesn't change the fact that I'm in this. I'm learning rather quickly, that's what it means to be in love." He reached up, smoothing a strand of hair back and behind my ear. "You know, just in case you missed that particular memo."

"God. You're such a condescending ass sometimes," I said, laughing more with relief that I'd felt this strange fog leave me and that I didn't tense up at Spencer's tiny, tender gesture of touching my hair. "You know that, right?"

"A condescending ass? Really?"

"Really," I arched an eyebrow at his sexy expression.

"Well, fuck me, I was trying to act like the dick most people hate," he said, his smile growing to take up his entire face. "And yet, you love me anyway. You responded well to that method, though I don't prefer to act that way with you." He smiled again.

"I don't think you were at full capacity *dick*," I teased.

"I wasn't," he grinned. "Though you love that side, right?"

I couldn't help the smile that spread across my face, and I reached up to run my thumbs over his cheekbones and along

the edge of his chin, taking in the beautiful lines I hadn't allowed myself to indulge in the last few days. "God only knows what that says about me," I replied, not bothering to suppress the smile that lit up my face.

He tipped back his head and laughed. "Thank God, you're finally admitting it again," he said. "I was starting to go insane without you admitting how you actually felt."

"Just me?" I asked, tilting my head back to raise my eyebrow at him. "I'm not the only one who's been quiet over the last couple of days, am I?"

"I've only been taking my cues from you," he said, grinning down at me, "which is why it hasn't felt right to do this..."

He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to my throat, drinking in my perfume as he did so. He let his lips linger over the soft skin on my neck, allowing his tongue to taste me as he dragged his mouth down the center of my throat. I sighed, letting my eyes roll back at the feeling.

He wasn't the only one who'd missed this.

"And now?" I gasped as his teeth scraped over my collarbone.

"Now it just feels right," he murmured, "but we need to head home for me to formally reintroduce myself to what I missed aside from your dazzling smile."

"Well, not yet," I said, smiling down at him as he teased my neck before bringing his eyes to meet mine.

The look and that sparkle that made his dark brown eyes glisten in a shade of bronze told me it'd really been too long. I lifted my hands to frame his face and kissed his forehead tenderly.

“I do love you, Spencer,” I said with more sincerity than I’d ever mustered. “I truly do.”

I stared deeply into his eyes, and I saw his truth. It was always there; I just never paid attention to it. Well, in my defense, I was programmed not to when he and I first met. If there was ever a man I needed to keep my defenses around, it was him. But that all faded today.

I thought about how he stuck around through my bizarre array of emotions, not wavering even as I disconnected from myself and detached from him. There was *no reason* Spencer should’ve kept me around when I tried so hard to push him away, yet he did. And not only did he stick around, he searched me out this morning, working to break down the defensive wall I’d put up to shield myself from the world. No man had ever done that for me—cared enough to work around my bullshit.

We’d gone from him answering his cell phone while having sex to now; a bomb could’ve gone off next to us, and he wouldn’t be distracted by it.

He wouldn’t take his eyes off me. I was important. For the first time in my life, I *felt* important to someone, essential to their life, and *that* was enough.

“Let’s go home,” he said, standing and offering me his hand. “I know you didn’t have to go to work this early and that you have no meetings or breakfasts to attend. So, there’s no rush.”

On the way home, Spencer explained that he had to be at work to deal with a CEO he’d caught embezzling funds from Mitchell and Associates, which would give me plenty of time to talk to my brother—who was *very* used to me shutting down, but not this extremely. And then, Shane and I could take

some time and just breathe a little without the stress of talking about our father. But the main issue Shane and I needed to address was his drug use and that I wouldn't tolerate it any longer.

I wondered if I could maintain my relationship with Shane if he didn't get clean and sober. I could only tolerate so much before shutting him out of my life for his own good. I loved him, and that's what scared me the most. Being hurt by the ones you love the most was the most painful feeling in the world.

Perhaps I shut down so hard this week because, after seeing Shane in such a horrible state, my subconscious knew it would come down to this, and the thought of losing him or casting him aside was too much to bear. Who knows? Maybe I was subconsciously putting Spencer to the test, giving him every reason to break it off, but he passed that test with flying colors.

What I *did* know was that I felt confident again. I was a woman of action and was about to prove it.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

SPENCER

It was a relief to have the whole plane to ourselves, even though we couldn't take full advantage of it the way we did on our way to Italy. Of course, I couldn't deny Shane's presence had put a bit of a damper on the way I'd envisioned our flight back home, but that was only me being selfish.

Since our reconciliation, things had been easier for the three of us, but I couldn't help noticing a definite rift between Nat and her brother, and it wasn't for any conscious reason that I could tell. Ever since I overheard him admitting to using ketamine, and from what I'd been able to read between the lines since then, I had my suspicions that he was holding something back. But I knew Nat wanted to help him more than anything else, and I had no doubt she would.

Still, all bothersome drama set aside, it was a lovely last two days in London. Nat acted as a tour guide, taking her brother to all the sites he wanted to see, and I returned to work, buttoning up the last of the bullshit from the embezzling dick of a CEO.

As I sat and worked at the airplane table on our flight home, my mind drifted back and forth. I was focused on going between my phone and my laptop as I contemplated some of the new contracts Jim had forwarded me. He needed me to

review the latest deals that Mitchell and Associates had underway and peruse some prospective ones for the next few months. But, unfortunately, I was fucked in the focusing department. If my mind wasn't wandering, then my eyes were continuously drawn to where Nat and her brother sat side by side, quietly discussing what was to come.

My mind drifted back to my discussion with Nat when she'd opened up to me more about her fucked up dad. Sadly, Nat and Shane didn't have a lot of answers about why their dad was so cruel; they assumed it had to do with inheritance from their mother, of all things, which I understood all too well. But many details were a mystery, and that was all I knew. I didn't want to press hard for more because I promised her my patience, which was precisely what I would give. Family issues were sticky, and I knew that first-hand. Her willingness to communicate when she was ready was all I needed for now. The rest would come in time.

I smiled when Shane stood up. "I'm going to go lay down in the back," he said.

"Well, if you plan on using mine and your sister's room, you're sorely mistaken," I said with a grin, resting my chin in my hand and swiveling slowly in my airplane seat.

"I'll be in one of the peasant's rooms, then," he answered with a laugh. "Maybe that hot flight attendant can join—"

"I think that hardworking young woman will be just fine without your unwanted advances; thank you very much," Nat said, agitated and most likely because of the conversation she and Shane had before he got up. "Now, go rest."

Shane nodded and left to find a room, and I walked over and sat next to her on the leather sofa. "I heard you talking about inheritance stuff again. You know, if anyone can

understand complicated inheritances and weird interpersonal relationships with family, it's me. Just let me know to what level you want me involved, and I'm on it."

"That's the thing," she'd said, turning to look at me. "I'm not sure if I should involve you in this. Everything with my dad is so intense and bizarre; he always makes things much more complicated than they need to be. So, if I bring in my bigshot boyfriend from his elite company, who happens to be an Oxford-educated attorney—"

"Solicitor," I corrected gently.

"Yeah, whatever," she bit back at me gently. "Anyway, he'll see that as an attack, and he will fight back. It won't be pleasant."

"I wouldn't expect it to be," I said. "But I take your point, and I would never want to make things harder for you." I sat back some and nodded toward her somber expression. "I'll take my cue from you on how to proceed."

She smiled and ran her hand up my leg. "Thank you."

I got up when I heard an email alert, hoping it was the one I was expecting from the security division of the company, and walked over to check my computer. As I did, I couldn't help but notice the nagging feeling in my stomach that I'd essentially told Nat I'll sit back and wait until the last minute to help her. Because let's face it, if Natalia Hoover *needed help*, she would never ask for it. Not in a million years. We were too alike in that way.

So, I'd put myself in a position not to lift a finger even though something could go wrong with her abusive father, which didn't sit right with me.

I quickly responded to the company that'd gotten back to me and closed my laptop. I glanced over and saw that Nat was reclined on the couch, setting one arm behind her head and putting the other hand on her face to cover her eyes.

I went over to where she was lying and picked up her feet.

"What are you—oh," she said, uncovering her face briefly and then relaxing once more as I sat down on the couch and set her feet on my lap, slowly pulling her shoes off one by one.

"Not that I'm complaining, since these shoes look incredible," I said, placing the lovely black torture devices carefully next to my feet, "but I will never, ever grasp why you'd do that to yourself. Doesn't wearing that shit hurt?"

"Sure," she said, shrugging, "if you don't spring for quality, and even then, it's a pretty gnarly experience. But that's the price we pay for looking like a million bucks, right?"

I shook my head. "I still don't get it."

"You appreciate the sight of it, don't you?"

I smiled, leaning over to give her a simple kiss. "I do, that's true."

I sat back on the sofa and began to rub the graceful arch of her foot, luxuriating in the sigh of pleasure she let out as I indulged in the massage.

"You okay?" I asked, leaning back and wrapping both my hands around her feet so I could give the massage my total concentration. "This isn't me getting involved, I swear. But in case you weren't sure, a healthy part of relationships is one party asking the other if they're okay when dealing with family messes."

She shrugged as she reached one hand up and set it on my shoulder. “If you say so.” She sighed, stretching her foot out so my thumb could access every bit. “If you promise to massage me like this on the regular, you can ask me whatever you want.”

“Will you answer, though?”

“Probably not,” she chuckled. Then she sighed, sat up, and reached out for a pillow that she set under the small of her back so she could concentrate on the conversation. “This isn’t the place for this conversation anyway.”

“Why, we’re alone?”

“I know, but I don’t want to risk Shane coming out and thinking we’re talking about him, even though we’re just trying to figure out how to extricate him from everything that has to do with our family trust.”

“Exactly what were your mother’s requests regarding the trust?” I questioned, wanting to know more about this peculiar situation.

“Mom had specific wishes and instructions for how she wanted her assets distributed, particularly after we used the money set aside for us to go to school.”

“And since this is boiling down to Shane not getting his full inheritance, I assume he didn’t follow instructions of your mother’s school requirements?”

“No, that isn’t the issue,” she answered. “Shane did exactly what he was supposed to do on that front. He didn’t get honors, but he did well. And when he went to her estate attorney,” her face grew distant, “the attorney said there was nothing else for him, which made no sense. There should have been a lot more in that trust, which is partially the fucked-up

reason why my brother still has a key to Dad's house. Dad still gives him money, partly so he can pay for the apartment."

I frowned and studied her troubled expression, "Aside from the fact it seems that money was stolen from your brother's inheritance, your father still seems to be controlling his adult son. I mean, there's no easier way to control people than through their need for money and desperation that way."

"You're correct in that assumption."

"And would I be correct to assume your dad is likely the thief who stole from your brother's inheritance, most likely to create this toxic atmosphere of control?" I said, looking down at her. She nodded, her face solemn as she looked away. "Do you think he stole from you too?"

"If he did, he was a lot sneakier and more subtle, and it was much less than he took from Shane because I haven't noticed," she said.

"How long have you known about all of this?"

"I knew a little bit about it. But I'm honestly just learning about it in its entirety. This whole time, I had suspicions about why he was broke and needed our dad for money, but Shane asked me not to go too deeply into it. He knew I had my issues with Dad, and he didn't want to have a hand in making things more complicated, I guess."

I studied her when our eyes locked. Nat practically stared me down as if she could read my mind and the next question I wanted to ask. *If Nat loved her little brother so much, why did she wait so long to get involved?* That just didn't add up to me.

I refrained from asking because the question was adversarial in nature, and there was no way to sound sympathetic and accusatory in the same breath. On the other

hand, I had to hope she knew I could intimately relate to a messed-up family with parents stealing and manipulating their adult children over greed and wealth.

I let the conversation die there and pressed a kiss to the top of her foot before lifting them off my lap. “I’m going to get back to work,” I said, giving her a grin. “I have a couple more items to handle before we land.”

“What about my other foot?” she asked indignantly, wiggling her left toes at me.

“Later,” I said. “Ever heard of delayed gratification?”

“Asshole,” she muttered, and I chuckled as I walked back to my desk and turned over my phone.

My smile faded suddenly as I looked at the screen and saw the seven missed calls, all from the same name. *H. Monroe*. My stomach dropped as I thought about why Heidi would call me when we’d exchanged such harsh words at the wedding.

My phone lit up again, and the name *Stephen* flashed across the screen this time. I stared at my phone, confused, wondering why my family was blowing my ass up suddenly.

I picked up the phone and swiped my thumb across the bottom to unlock it. Then, I decided to act as if I didn’t just notice seven missed calls from our mother.

“Hey,” I said. “How is Seychelles, and why the hell are you interrupting your married bliss to call me?”

“To tell you to answer your mother’s call so she stops fucking bothering my wife and me.”

Goddammit.

Steve’s tone was so cold and abrupt that I stood up and walked to the conference room at the back of the plane.

Nat looked up, worried. “Everything okay?” she quietly asked.

“Fine,” I mouthed back to her and turned toward the conference room.

Natalia was more focused on her own family bullshit, and I was pretty confident the drama was just igniting on my end. I held the phone to my ear once I walked into the private jet’s conference room.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I needed to get some privacy.”

“Oh, forgive me, I didn’t realize I was intruding. Perhaps, that’s why Mum is blowing my phone up. You’re just too—”

“Steve,” I said, interrupting him and shutting the door behind me, “I get it, fuck. Now, I’d rather you get straight to the point instead of bitching about the point before you make it. Why the hell is Heidi calling you?”

“To tell me that it’s up to me as the oldest son to cut my honeymoon short and come home so that we can, and I quote, ‘*save my idiot brother from that little whore.*’ Her words, but I’ve been hearing them for two days, Spence.”

“They’re obviously *her* words. That woman is the devil herself, and I’m sick to fucking death of her baseless opinions about my life.”

“Yeah, well, her baseless opinions have been blowing me up for the past two days because you’re not answering your phone.”

“Stephen, she hasn’t spoken to me since your wedding,” I said. “I only just got seven missed calls from her, and I have no idea what the fuck crawled up her ass and died, but I have nothing to do with it.”

“Well, you clearly have something to do with it because she’s hyper-focused on you.”

“Oh, in a different way than she’s always been?” I asked, unable to stop my venom from coming out. “What’s different about this?”

“I didn’t ask for this, Spencer.”

“I never asked for it either, Stephen.”

We were quiet for a moment, each of us taking a minute to calm down—nothing like a toxic parent putting the siblings up against each other.

“Listen,” I said, pressing the bridge of my nose between my fingers, “I have no idea what she’s after now. Let me know if you figure it out, but I’d recommend blocking her. She never makes sense anyway. Insulting Natalia or trying to save me from my wife is an old play in the handbook for evil mothers-in-law. So, she’s going in circles if she’s trying to come up with any idea on how to do that. So, other than that, block the woman if you don’t want to deal with her calls.”

“I won’t do that.”

“Well, I don’t envy your wife on her honeymoon,” I said. “I have to go. Enjoy the Indian Ocean. And trust me, blocking Heidi might save the honeymoon *and* your marriage. I won’t let that woman ruin my wife’s opinions of me, and you shouldn’t either.”

“Spencer—”

I hung up before we could exchange another word.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

SPENCER

We landed smoothly, as we always did when flying with Jim's outstanding flight crew. Aside from the obvious luxury of traveling privately, the flight crew Jim had working for him was priceless. Call me a superficial, rich dick, but it was great to have the best pilots in the world flying your ass around.

"It was a pleasure to safely return you and Miss and Mr. Hoover home, Sir," the captain said after we reached the bottom step, exiting the plane.

I shook the captain's hand and grinned at him after he paid no attention to the two-hundred-dollar cash tip I'd offered through a generous handshake. "Thank you, Jack. Smooth fucking landing as always," I teased, knowing he had an excellent sense of humor, which a man like myself appreciated on these long-ass flights.

"You know I pride myself in that," he smirked.

"As you should, and it's why I always compliment you," I chuckled. "Have a great evening."

"You too, Mr. Monroe."

I excused myself, turned, and saw Nat getting into an Uber that had pulled alongside the Bentley where my driver was waiting for us.

I frowned in confusion and walked to where the flight crew was loading the last of their luggage into the car.

“May I ask where you both are heading off to?” I asked when Nat turned back to me.

“Sorry, you were talking to the pilot, so I couldn’t tell you about the Uber taking Shane and me home.”

I looked at her as if she’d grown two heads. “Forgive my directness, but I believed home would be at my place either in The Hills or Malibu?”

“Why would you think I would be moving in with you?” she laughed as if all of this was a hilarious joke that I was on the ass end of.

“I don’t know, perhaps because your cute little ass has been living with mine for the last two to three weeks overseas?”

“Yeah, um, no,” she said. Her tone was sweet, but I was confused as hell.

“Am I missing something?” I asked. I’d hardly expected her to jump off the jet and take an Uber home the moment we landed. “Are we home now and leaving the relationship back in the UK?”

“No,” she said, getting flustered. “Spencer, I need to be with my brother for a while. Let us work some of this out. I’m not going straight from our vacation to moving in because we’ve been living together for three weeks. Just give me time.”

I absently glanced at her ring, and she must’ve noticed because she sighed, took it off, and placed it in my hand the same way I’d given the pilot his tip. So, I guess this was my

tip for the three weeks of being in my arms and giving her a shoulder when she finally decided to cry on it.

“What the fuck is happening right now?” I asked, growing angrier by the second.

“I’m going home, and you’re going to the office like you said when the jet was over Arizona. That’s all. I’ll text you later.” She leaned forward and kissed my cheek before sitting in the car and turning to where Shane was typing like a madman on his phone.

“Well, okay, then.” I forced a smile. “You kids drive safe,” I said, trying to pull it together and act like the most beautiful woman on this tarmac wasn’t dumping me and driving off in a fucking Ford Fiesta.

I pulled my act together as fast as I caught it falling apart and slipped my wedding ring off. The days of playing the dumbass married couple had ended, and part of me was glad the ridiculous show was over. I hated fake shit.

With both rings tucked into my pocket, I turned to my driver, who was shooting the shit with the flight crew. “Tony, I’m going to need you to take me to the office downtown.”

“Right away, Sir.”

It had to be the look on my face that made everyone quickly return to their post-flight duties. My good mood was long gone, and now I had to focus on work, all while having not slept on the flight home and knowing jet lag would kick my ass in a couple of hours.

I texted Jim before I opened any more emails. Thank God I had work to keep my mind occupied.

Spencer: *Wheels are on the ground. I'm heading to the office now.*

Jim's text came immediately back.

Jim: *Take the rest of the day. I've got everything locked down from all the shit you handled on the plane.*

Spencer: *Nah, I need to focus on work and keep my mind off Nat.*

Jim: *You know, in most healthy relationships, you don't want to keep your mind off your partner.*

Spencer: *And yet...*

Jim: *Is Tony driving you?*

Spencer: *Yes.*

Jim: *Good. I'm sending him the address to where I'm having drinks. I'll see you in about fifteen minutes.*

I honestly wasn't in the mood to talk about feelings. But this was Jim, and if there was one man who could make you feel better about your shit, especially in relationships, it was that man. Too bad I hadn't asked him if he'd be in the company of the entire gang tonight because I wasn't in the mood for their bullshit.

However, it was too late by the time the hostess led me to the back of the room, where the three doctors and two CEOs sat, drinking their preferred drinks. They were all smiles,

looking like sharks getting ready to devour my ass as soon as I sat down.

“Sexy Spence,” Jake, the heart surgeon and Jim’s brother, hit first. It was apparent they’d all been filled in that Spencer fucked up the first relationship they’d known me to have. “From the look on your face, I’m thinking whiskey tonight? Something a bit harder?”

“Harder? What are you going to give him, Moonshine?” Collin, the neurosurgeon and Jake’s best friend, said, elbowing Jake in his side.

“Bourbon,” I smiled at him and the waitress who’d approached for my order, “sour, thank you.” I finished and looked at the expressions of each of my friends who waited for me to spill my guts about what’d happened with Nat while we were overseas.

Cameron, the pediatric neurosurgeon, sat to my left, and Alex and Jim, wearing their no-nonsense CEO masks, sat at each end of the table silently, waiting to peel me open to see if I’d bleed for them tonight or not.

“Should I start?” Cameron spoke, his deep blue eyes mischievous as fuck.

“I hadn’t realized it was show-and-tell in kindergarten today, nor did I know Jim would be here with all the circus clowns,” I said, looking at Jim, but my deadly expression only turned a smile up on the bastard’s face.

Well, fuck. I’d always been cocky as shit with these assholes, giving them shit for their lovey-dovey relationships and insisting I’d never fall into this trap, and now, it was time to pay the piper. And they knew it.

Karma was about to bitch slap me, and I needed a whole lot more booze than what I'd ordered if I was going to be able to listen to this.

“So, he’s pissed,” Collin said, raising his glass of scotch toward me. “Everyone at this table owes my ass a round since I was right that you ain’t getting laid tonight.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the shit I knew I was about to take. “If that’s the way this is going to go, gentlemen,” I said, eyeing their smiles, “then raise the glasses and keep them coming because we’re all about to get drunk tonight.”

“Tell us what went down,” Jim cut in, keeping the conversation level so he could get the real information about what’d happened since I left three weeks ago.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Everyone owes Cameron a round. He called it that this dick would avoid the topic,” Alex said, eyeing me as if to challenge me for more.

“I’ll buy Cameron a drink for knowing me well enough to call that truth,” I said.

“Actually,” Cameron said, “since Jim was a *wealth* of information while helping bust open the case in my problems with Jessa, I should be offering you the same advice.”

“What, dipshit?” I asked, wishing I hadn’t.

“Slow, no, and go,” he said.

I watched Jim practically spit his drink back into his glass while the rest of the table erupted into laughter.

“Laugh it up, chumps,” I said with a smile of my own. “However, that’s not where I’m at in this relationship, so it doesn’t apply to me.”

“Well, if you’d speak up, we’d know where you were and could advise you accordingly,” Alex said.

“I don’t need advice. That’s not why I’m here,” I said with my eyebrows raised and a laugh of disbelief that these idiots all thought I’d come to cry into my glass over a woman. “I *thought* I was meeting Jim after a string of emails went sideways on my flight back. Having drinks should help me sleep to get rid of this jet lag faster.”

Jesus, at least there was still some piece of me left that I hadn’t offered up for Nat to take, stomp on, and walk away with.

“Yeah, well, you look like shit,” Jake said. “So, spill it. I have kids at home who will be pissed if their dad misses bedtime stories.”

“It’s nothing, really,” I said. It was better to get straight to the point than tiptoe around this shit all night with jokes from these clowns. “Nat and I decided we saw something more in each other on our trip and have decided to try it out. Who knows where it goes from here.”

Jim scratched his head, sat back, and crossed his arms. “If it were easy as that, I’d believe you. But it’s not. You’re holding back because of your vulnerability, which I didn’t know you possessed until now.”

“Fuck that,” I said.

“No,” Jim was sterner, “that will fuck *me* if you don’t air it out. If I lose my best guy because you’re in denial and unprepared, then I will be fucking pissed.”

“Ignore all of us dipfuckers. We’re just giving you a hard time,” Collin spoke, using his favorite made-up word. “Just tell us what the fuck is going on. We’re honestly here for you.”

“Not without me saying that you *had to know* this could go either way, man,” Cameron added. “I mean, it’s Natalia fucking Hoover you’ve chosen to be in a relationship with. Of all the available women, you picked the one who has damn near made a blood oath never to settle down. This shit could get tricky to navigate for you.”

“Thanks for that reminder,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Well, that’s basically the issue. I didn’t think it would be this challenging, given she and I both shared the same idea of relationships. But I’m fucked, I think.”

“That foreign feeling inside is what the rest of the world calls emotions,” Alex said.

“Very funny,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m aware of what emotions feel like, prick. I’m just not used to being pushed around by them.”

“Well, we’ve all been in your shoes, dude,” Collin said. “I’ll go on record and say that if a woman doesn’t shake you up a little and make you feel that heart of yours, she ain’t fucking worth it.”

Jake nodded and grinned, “If she doesn’t make you fight for it, she’s not for you.”

“And for one who was chasing ghosts for over a year with my lady,” Cameron said, “I’ll tell you, it’s worth the fight in the end. You learn a lot about yourself. Trust me, I did.”

“You also learn to appreciate the fuck out of her, knowing how close you were to not having her,” Alex added.

“I don’t think we’re that deep into a relationship yet,” I said. “Though I did think she should come home with me and stay with me tonight.”

“Moving in together already?” Jim asked.

“Why not? We lived together at my place in London.”

“You were on fucking vacation,” Alex reconfirmed what I already knew.

“What’s the difference? We were both working and shit, just like we will be doing out here.”

“Okay, this is going back to Jim’s bullshit relationship advice,” Jake said. “That whole slow, no, and go, shit. Your ass is in the slow zone, as in slow the fuck down, and don’t ask the woman to move in with you. Give her fucking time. She’s probably got to tend to the life she’s had for years without your ass in it. Chill the fuck out and appreciate why some people shouldn’t get married just because they think they’ve found their soulmate.”

“True,” I said. I was shocked that I agreed with Jake, the least serious one of us all, and that was saying a lot when you put him up against Collin. “That’s what I’ll do. Just calm the fuck down and settle into the slow lane.”

“Which should be easy for you since you drive like a granny in that damn bitchy little Ferrari you own,” Collin said, always bringing cars and racing into the picture.

“Sure,” I answered, wanting this conversation to die.

“Don’t just go slow with all of this, though,” Jim added, “let her lead for a bit. That isn’t natural for you, but Nat has a bold personality. So perhaps, it’s best if she shows you what she wants for a bit, and you follow along like the sad little puppy dog you are.”

“Fuck, this isn’t going to be easy.”

“It won’t,” Cameron said. “You can bet your ass on that. Your heart will tell you one thing, and your mind will tell you another. It’s already written all over your face. You have to

level those things down with each other. Don't give too much power to each of them; you'll be fine."

"Look at all of us," Collin interjected. "I swear to God, women don't have shit on the relationship talk we pull off. Listen to us advising someone once they head down the rabbit hole of love. And we're damn good at this too."

"We should write a fucking book. Seriously," Jake said, looking at me.

"I didn't think you were not serious," I said. "Why would I think the world's leading heart surgeon *wouldn't* want to write a book on relationships? It's almost as if saving relationships is more important than saving lives."

Jake chuckled. "Mark my words, dick," he narrowed his eyes at me and grinned, "you'll be begging me to save your life by saving your relationship by the time this is over."

"Huh?" I questioned.

"A relationship is like a mountain you've got to climb. You're at the base of it and haven't even started climbing yet. You've just got your gear, and you've looked up at the beast and thought you'll be fine. Trust me, you'll want more advice soon enough."

Once I managed to get two straight days of sleep and clear my head of the jetlag—admittedly checking my phone every few hours to check on the texts from Jim and Nat—I came into work and began to refocus my energy on the acquisitions I made while I was abroad. I hadn't had much time to focus on them after I caught the embezzling CEO, but despite my lack of focus on the acquisitions, I was pleased to see that

everything was still coming through strong. The emails I'd sent out to charm the small startups were also paying off, and I smiled with pride when I saw they were thrilled to know that Mitchell and Associates wanted to acquire them and give them an infusion of cash to help them get off the ground.

Everything in the office was going as well as possible, and Jim and I toasted with a well-earned scotch practically every day. Shit was going strong, and I felt fucking great about that. However, it didn't feel as entirely awesome as it used to, and that's because Nat clouded my mind throughout the day.

Since we landed, I texted her every day, asking her whether she'd be coming to spend the night with me or if she wanted me to spend the night at her place. I had to wonder if I was turning into a clingy son of a bitch. However, only seeing her two out of the ten nights since being home made it clear that it was *normal* for couples to want to spend time together after they discovered they were in love.

The worst part was that it wasn't just the sex I missed. I missed things I never even noticed with women. I was drifting off in thought, missing all the smallest parts of Nat and having her next to me, having her fragrance on my pillows when I woke up and being able to reach out and touch her as the first thing that I did, seeing her in the kitchen as I made my coffee. Shit like that.

It wasn't like me at all to be sentimental, so once again, I found myself in foreign territory and not knowing what the fuck to do.

It had been something too easy to become used to, and now she was flitting in and out of my life the way she'd been content to before Italy, before everything had changed.

Thank God I was going to see her tonight. I couldn't get to Malibu fast enough. I didn't just need to get laid; I needed this woman in my presence, so I would stop craving her. Nat planned to come over after work, and I decided to order in so I didn't have to share her with anyone at a restaurant.

I could only sit here and stare at the ocean waves for so long without checking my phone every other damn second to see if my cameras caught her car pulling into my driveway. Yeah, I was beyond fucked. I had the patience of a two-year-old lately, which was another thing that was unlike me and my personality. Patience was something that came naturally to me. If I wanted something and didn't want to wait, I just fucking got up and made shit happen.

Now, I had no power over what I wanted. Nat was in complete control, and I was riding backseat, and there was nothing I could do about it. So, I needed to find a way to create a healthy routine with consistent behavior in this *so-called* relationship.

The phone alerted activity on the driveway camera.

Fucking finally, she's here.

I settled my strides into a casual step when I walked out to meet her at the gate. I walked to her car and smoothly helped her out of it. Then, I rolled in full Casanova style, pulling her in for a kiss and luxuriating in her and what I'd been missing for the last couple of weeks.

"I've missed your sexy ass," I said, kissing her once again and pulling her inside by the hand. "It feels like it's been forever."

"Yeah," she said, her voice noncommittal. "Yeah, it has."

Fuck my life. This can't be normal? Can it?

Inside, the two of us stood around my kitchen island, and I pulled out a bottle of wine as I took her in. She was just as beautiful as ever, but something about her seemed removed, as if her mind were across town.

“You alright?” I asked, pouring her a glass of wine and handing it to her. “Is everything okay with Shane?”

“We’re figuring it out,” she said, taking a sip.

“Okay,” I said, struggling not to feel annoyed. “That’s not an answer.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. It’s been a process, especially since, according to my dad, Shane *robbed* my dad and then skipped town. I honestly have no answers. It’s all assumptions, and I’m not in the mood to dwell on or talk about it. I think you already know it’s pointless to talk about shit when you have no control over the situation and no idea what’s going on.”

“You have no idea,” I said, my eyes meeting her serious ones.

“What the fuck does that mean?” she questioned.

I was in no mood to argue. I just missed her and wanted to fucking have her with me.

“It’s nothing. If you don’t want to talk about stressful shit right now, I won’t press you to.” I turned away from her, putting the bottle away before coming back and pulling her into the circle of my arms. I wasn’t backing down from her. I fucking needed this woman. I inhaled her scent and wrapped my arm around her waist, drinking her in. “I’ve missed you so damn much, baby. It sucks not having you in my bed every night.”

She gave a dry, disingenuous chuckle before extricating herself from my arms. “Oh, relax. I was just here the other day.”

“Feels like it’s been longer.” The annoyance had officially given way to burning anger, and I came around the island to face her. “What the hell is going on with you?”

“Nothing,” she said with as much irritation in her voice as I had in mine.

“Why are you so closed off with me?”

“I’m not,” she insisted, to which I could only roll my eyes.

“Call me fucking crazy, Nat, but I thought us saying we love each other and what we had in London meant something.”

“It did; I mean, it does. And me not staying with you every night doesn’t mean jack shit,” she retorted, her cheeks flaming. “It could just mean I have a ton of work in the morning, and I like my own bed. Have you ever thought *that* might be what’s different from our relationship in London?”

“You weren’t complaining about how much work you had when riding me at the crack of dawn every day and still going to work afterward. Before your brother arrived, of course,” I said, not knowing where the words had come from. “All that sex didn’t seem to hurt your work performance then, did it?”

“Jesus,” she said, stepping back and running her nails through her hair. “Suddenly, I’m reminded why I avoided doing this relationship shit for so many years.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“That I could get what I wanted from a man without all the fucking drama of a relationship.”

The words sent a bolt of lightning through me, but I did my best not to let her see how hurt I was by her words.

“Drama? Oh, you mean the shit that comes with being in a relationship?” I asked. “A relationship you seemed pleased about before we stepped off that goddamn jet.”

We stood there, silently measuring each other before she finally stood up.

“This isn’t worth it,” she said. “I’m going home.”

I didn’t say a word as the door closed behind her, feeling as though my chest had been caved in with an ice pick. I may have softened up a bit to try out this relationship, but I’d be goddamned if I’d chase a woman who wants nothing to do with me.

That is one tune I’d never sing.

CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

It was bullshit—all of it.

Once I got home, I filled up my oversized bathtub and spent a good two hours asking myself what in the world was wrong with me; why did I have these stupid hang-ups all over again? I booked myself a massage for the next day, but all the massages and bubble baths in the world couldn't mask that I was playing an avoidance game with Spencer again.

That wasn't true; I wasn't playing *any* games with him anymore.

I couldn't blame the man for being annoyed with me. Hell, *I was annoyed with myself*, and I couldn't see a way through other than to just keep working. I would not dwell on things I found negative about myself. There was no way I would fall into self-loathing bullshit, either. I was precision-focused on putting my mental health first. If the world around me went up in flames, then let it fucking burn.

I should've been more careful about what I wished for because once I walked away from Spencer, he didn't chase after me. If he had, it would've only pushed me farther away anyway.

Even though I wasn't convinced that he was over me, I was acutely aware that I'd fucked this up in a major way—

possibly permanently. If that were the case, I wasn't sure how to find my way back from that.

There was a reason why I hadn't been in a relationship in more than fifteen years; they were messy and not in the way that I liked. Most of the time, they involved the emotional messes that I actively avoided. That was why I swore I'd be single and happy for the rest of my life. Spencer was right about London; it was nice. It was comfortable, and it was a fantasy. But then, reality hit when my brother showed up on the steps of the office, a brutal reminder of my regular life. It wasn't Romeo and Juliet, and it sure as fuck wasn't wearing half-a-million-dollar diamond wedding rings and playing house like Barbie and Ken. I wasn't programmed to do this shit, and so I had no idea how to navigate through any of it.

All I knew to do was guard myself and avoid, handling shit alone without being accountable to anyone or anything. It's where I was safe and comfortable, even if I felt a bit miserable without Spencer, when fleeting thoughts of him washed over me.

After my bath, I grabbed my laptop and pulled up my real estate software, falling into the coping mechanism I'd started fostering as a teenager when my favorite pastime had been looking at the top real estate in Los Angeles.

I'd fantasized about buying a house that Shane and I could run away to, where our dad would have no say about what we did and with whom.

Of course, the home I'd fantasized about was still years away when Shane could admit to the kind of help he needed and, even more importantly, that he would be willing to accept it from me.

Just knowing that I continually tried to escape my father by searching for real estate told me the man still had control over my mental well-being, and it pissed me the fuck off. Even so, I continued to peruse palatial home listings while drinking a glass of expensive wine, hoping to quiet my mind.

After a second glass of wine, I climbed into bed and finally managed to fall asleep, somehow knowing that this night wouldn't be restful.

I was right.

As thrilled as I'd been to be back on my custom mattress in my eight-hundred thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets, I'd consistently woken up in the middle of the night, feeling like something was missing.

Well, not something. I couldn't get away with playing dumb when I knew exactly what I was missing, which was hilarious, considering how I'd always had so much trouble sleeping next to other people. Spending the night in bed with someone had always been something I'd seen as a side effect of hooking up with them, particularly if I wanted morning sex, which I usually did.

With Spencer, though, I never felt overwhelmed by his presence or by having his arms find their way around my waist while we slept. Yet, these days, my actions proved the opposite of how I truly felt about Spencer.

What am I doing to my life? Why am I sabotaging myself?

I curled into myself, trying to conjure that feeling of safety I'd always been able to create for myself since moving into my lovely condo.

And somehow, the bed felt too big, too cold, and too empty. I couldn't access that feeling of security I'd always

been able to tap into. It had drifted away, leaving me lost and lonely for the first time in my life.

More accurately, I'd chased it away, and even though I'd always been resourceful and could figure out my way around a problem, I couldn't seem to wrangle this particular one.

My usual problem-solving abilities seemed to have abandoned me, as I'd finally been presented with a problem that I never believed I'd be in a position to solve: How to win back a guy I'd cold-heartedly driven away.

Jesus, is this even my life?

I had no idea where I'd start tackling this problem, but I needed to solve it soon. Unfortunately, I had no fucking clue how to proceed, and when I didn't know how to proceed, the only thing for me to do was to dive into work, which was what I spent the next few days doing.

It was now Monday, four days since I'd pissed Spencer off for the last time, and I was trying not to focus on him or that night. I'd scheduled several meetings with our company's legal team to start rolling out the contracts to finalize the London deal—the one I'd been working on tirelessly for the last few weeks between falling in love, against my better judgment.

Finally—*finally*—we received the signed contracts back, but I was barely aware of it. I was busy looking over the appraisal report for one of the newest properties I had in escrow when Adam, my boss, sent me a text asking me to come into his office.

When I walked in, Adam was standing there with a bottle of champagne, which he popped as soon as I closed the door

behind me. I couldn't help the slight shriek of surprise that escaped me as the cork came off with a loud pop. It was almost like it woke me up and out of this zombie state I'd fallen into.

"Holy shit," I laughed more at my reaction than the fact we were celebrating with booze at eleven in the morning.

"This is for our number one real estate agent this year, both commercial and residential," he said with a wide grin as he filled two flutes. "Come on, let's toast your success and the beginning of many huge signing bonuses to come."

I couldn't deny that I was a bit shell-shocked as he stepped forward and handed me the glass.

"Did they—"

"Julie and the other gallery owners returned the signed contracts this morning. I'm surprised you didn't see them," he said.

I was slightly dazed as I lifted my glass to my boss's, accepting his salute and the praise for all the work I'd done on that crazy, turbulent trip that'd stirred up more than I expected.

"Now, all that is left for you to decide is whether you want your payout in one check or divided and added to each of your paychecks."

"Are you insane?" I asked. "I want my bonus now."

"Excellent," he said, grinning at me.

We clinked our glasses again, and I drank the bubbly liquid, surprisingly unable to taste the refreshing flavor.

I couldn't concentrate on my work for the rest of the day, and it wasn't because of the glass of champagne or the thrill of closing those deals. My mind just would not engage. So, I decided to pack it in early. After all, I had a huge check coming my way; what did I have to lose? Adam looked at me like I was insane when I informed him that I was taking off early, which I couldn't blame him for; I was never out of the office before six.

Once in my car, though, I called a number that'd been ignored for too long, which was particularly unconscionable considering how long I'd been home at this point.

"Nat!" My best friend's voice grounded me immediately, and I found myself breathing easier. "Are you seriously only calling me now after being back for how many days?"

"I know, I know," I said. "But in my defense, I did text the group."

"Yeah, you texted a mom of baby twins and two newly engaged women, asking if we want to go out and *party*," she said, and I could practically hear her eyes rolling.

"Okay, I'll take that," I said. "Regardless, can I come over and see my godsons?"

"For the love of God, please," she said. "You know you never have to ask to come over."

"On my way, then," I said, feeling like a weight was lifted a little bit just knowing I was going to be in the company of Bree and her family.

I wanted to get onto the freeway as soon as possible, so I didn't bother to stop anywhere until I was in Malibu. I promptly turned into the parking lot of a Seven-Eleven and bought three pints of Ben and Jerry's chocolate fudge brownie,

the flavor we ate so much in college that we could've single-handedly kept them in business. It was the perfect way to apologize for blowing off my best friend after returning from London.

When I pulled into the driveway of Alex and Bree's house, I shucked off my heels and walked up to the front door, letting myself in with the code I'd been given as soon as Bree had officially moved in.

"Hello, darlings, I'm home!" I called, walking inside.

I was hailed by Alex, who held his finger up to his lips with a slightly disapproving look.

"Happy to see you too, sunshine," I teased his shitty expression. "Sorry, I'm not trying to arrive unannounced. Bree said it was cool for me to stop by tonight."

"No big deal. It's just been a bitch getting Albert to sleep tonight," he said, reaching his arm out and pulling me in for a hug. "I don't think he woke up, though, so it's all good. All's well that ends well, right?"

"Always," I said.

"Speaking of," he asked, raising his eyebrows, "how are you and Spence these days?"

Something told me this man knew more than I'd care to think he knew about Spencer and me. And it wasn't because I got into the details with Bree, either.

"Hang on," Bree said, walking in with a sleeping Logan in her arms. "Hang on, hang on, hang on. There's no way you're telling this story when I'm not there to listen to it. Let me put this one in bed, and I'll be right back."

“You ladies enjoy yourself. I have a loose end to tie up at work,” Alex said.

“Wait a minute,” I looked into his little snake eyes. “What made you ask me that question, Alexander?”

He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Nothing,” he shrugged.

I found myself in a standoff with yet another billionaire CEO, and frankly, I didn’t have time for this shit.

“Yeah, remind me to play poker with you so I can kick your ass and take all your money. Your face tells a different story than your lips.”

He chuckled. “All I can say is that I never thought the day would come.” His handsome expression was more mischievous than usual.

“And which day is that?” I pressed.

“The day Natalia Hoover and Spencer Monroe would cry into their wine glasses over bumps in their relationship.”

“And I’ll admit, I never thought this day would come, either, wise ass. The day, of course, being when you say something so preposterous to me,” I smirked. “Let’s just hope it all passes and never comes again.”

“Careful what you wish for,” he said, a little cockier and more candid than I’d like.

“All right, I’m back,” Bree said, letting her hair down from its bun as she walked into the room. “What’d I miss?”

“Have fun,” Alex said, kissing Bree before heading up to the next floor of the mansion.

“God, men,” I rolled my eyes at Bree. “How the fuck did you manage any of this?”

“I see there’s trouble in paradise and so soon,” Bree teased with her dimpled smile. “Come on. Let’s take that ice cream out to the pool area. We don’t need Alex in earshot.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said, following Bree into the kitchen and wondering if this would be an informative conversation or one where all I did was bitch about the mess I was in.

“I’ve missed you,” Bree said, sitting on her opulent outdoor sofa surrounding the neatly crafted firepit.

“I’ll never understand how you can look so freaking beautiful in sweats and a tank top. It’s very annoying,” I teased, dipping my spoon into my ice cream.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said, raising her eyebrow.

“It’s so goddamn relaxing out here,” I said, glancing around at the pool, the waterfalls, the palm trees, and the furniture—you know, everything that one would buy to ensure their outdoor pool area looked like a five-star resort.

“I sat out here today while I worked from the house. It was pretty fucking nice.”

“Yeah, well, you designed it. If you ever get bored, you can always start imagining what you’ll do for my future backyard.”

She took a spoonful of ice cream and slid it into her mouth with a laugh. “And when do I *finally* get to do this for the new place you always tease me about buying but never do?”

“When hell freezes over, I guess,” I played back.

“Hell *has* frozen over, my friend. If you hadn’t noticed,” she said, tucking her legs underneath her and reclining against the throw pillows on her right side.

I leaned back and placed my feet on the granite surrounding the rectangular gas firepit in front of me. “How has hell frozen over?” I said, digging into more ice cream.

“Because I recall you always saying that hell would have to freeze over for you to be in a relationship. And not only has it frozen over, but I think it’s in a deep freeze given that you’re not just in a relationship but also seemingly stressed about it.”

“Last I checked, I didn’t come over to have a psychic reading, so relax with analyzing my life and hell freezing over. Let’s keep the crazy talk to a minimum,” I teased.

“Okay, no crazy talk. Let’s get straight to the *real* talk,” she said, staring me down. “You’re lucky I’ve been buried in work, or I would’ve lost my shit when I discovered that Alex knew more about this than I did. I haven’t heard jack shit from you, and Alex already has the dirt on the relationship.”

“Hold up,” I said. “Just what *does* Alex know about this?”

“He was at dinner with all the guys, and Spencer came in looking like hell. The men do what they always do when they start in on their sewing circle bullshit. They picked his brain and found out Spencer has a bit of a broken heart.”

“I’ve never known any men who sit around talking about relationships or problems all day like those fools do,” I shook my head. “Aren’t they supposed to only talk about sports and cars or something? You’d think they were all therapists.”

“Well,” Bree laughed, “you know those guys. They think they know everything about something. I think they just like

listening to the sound of their own voices.”

I rolled my eyes like I always did when it came to the guys. “Well, at least he got support somewhere. I’ve been a dreadful bitch to him.”

“Alex assumed that too,” she said, then laughed and held her hand up when I flashed her a confused look. “I’m only kidding; you were getting too serious too fast on me. I had to keep you with me. I know how you get when shit goes deep and emotional. You shut down, and I’m not going to allow that.”

“You know me too well. And sadly, that’s *all* Spencer knows of me these days.”

I took a deep breath and proceeded to tell her everything from Italy to now, starting with me not having slept with anyone else since my first weekend with Spencer, which was shocking in and of itself. Although she looked almost wistful as I told her about our time at Lake Garda, Verona, and London, she was speechless when I detailed my adventures with Heidi.

Bree’s eyes widened when I told her about Shane showing up in London with his face beaten practically into ground beef, and she’d put a hand to her mouth when I revealed that our dad had been the culprit. I finished the story by telling her how confused I’d been since coming back and how effectively I’d put my foot in it this time. Thankfully, she let me talk without interjecting any opinions, which was something I loved about her. She was a top-notch listener.

“So now, I have no idea how to fix this,” I said, resting my chin in my hands. “I’m not even sure if I want to fix it. I’ve been thinking of texting the guy we met at the White Sands festival since he’s going to be in town.”

“Let me get this right,” Bree said, sucking on her spoon. “Spencer told you he loves you, and you returned the sentiment, and then, when you were reminded that you have an actual life here in LA and that you have shit to shovel, you decided to sabotage it on purpose? And *now* you want to go hook up with that man from White Sands? You know what you’re doing, right?”

“Do I?” I answered, feeling uneasy.

“You hook up with men but never allow a relationship to form, so it’s easy to move on to the next with no guilt. This time, it’s different. If you go running off and sleeping with a man to cover your problems with Spencer, you’ll hurt him even more and brutally hurt yourself. I can see a look in your eye when you speak the man’s name, and I know he’s different for you. You actually *feel* something for him. You will hate yourself if you hook up with the other guy.”

“What if I just end things, then?”

“That’s different. If you end things, then fine. Go and do whatever you want to do. You’re a grown woman. I can only advise you.”

“And how would you advise me?”

“To stop allowing this stuff to drown you. You believe it’s a bigger problem than it is. You’re not used to having someone love and care for you, and from what I’ve ascertained from your story, that is what Spencer is trying to do. You’re like a wounded dog, biting anyone who tries to help you because of what your dad did after your mom passed away. You feel cornered, and you lash out. You need to stop and take a breath. Running into bed with another man will not make you feel better, but it *will* make it much harder to deal with your

problem. You don't see that because you learned to shut down that side of you a long time ago."

"What the hell is wrong with me? Honestly, Bree?"

"Nothing is *wrong* with you, Nat. You just have issues that you've never worked through. You probably have abandonment issues, and you definitely have trust issues. You might've gotten to the bottom of these things if you hadn't fired every therapist you ever had. You have to face those problems and stop running from them. You deserve to be happy and in a relationship with a man who adores you, whether that's Spencer or someone else down the road. But you will never know who that is if you don't stop running away and start to work through things."

"I don't know how." That was the God's honest truth.

"If Spencer wants to be there for you, then let him. If the relationship part scares you, be honest with him. Start as friends, let him be there for you as a friend, and see where it goes and if it grows from there."

I sighed, and the dairy in the ice cream was now enough to make me vomit. "I guess. I don't know. I mean, I miss him, but I don't?" I looked at her, confused. "I don't know if I want any relationship with him, friends or not."

"Nat, I've never seen you like this about a guy, ever, and I've seen you juggle plenty of them. But now someone is making you happy, and it's scaring you, and your first instinct is to fuck it up?" She shook her head. "I've seen you scared plenty of times, and you always stand tall and tackle it head-on. So, what's different about this time? Your feelings are involved? I don't buy it."

At that moment, my phone buzzed. I turned it over to see who it was, and seeing Spencer's name on my screen plummeted my stomach.

"Is it Spence?" Bree asked, looking at my phone.

"Yeah," I said, swallowing, "and I don't know how to avoid getting in deeper."

"No way to avoid that," Alex said, shocking me when he walked out and spoke. "Take it from someone who spent years dancing around, playing avoidance games. You can only get deeper, so it's time to swim or drown."

"Fuck," I looked at Bree. "And now, who's the jackass taking advice from the men at the dinner table? My dumb ass."

CHAPTER

Thirty

SPENCER

I finished walking through the office buildings of Jenkins Media and sipped the last of the coffee the secretary offered Jim and me thirty minutes after we arrived. If Howard Templeton wanted to be late to host the largest corporation in America, which was looking to acquire and grow his business by larger margins than he could imagine, that was his questionable choice. But I had a sour taste about Jim taking on this company.

I had no idea if I was picking up on something intuitively or if I was just on edge because of everything with Nat, but there was something here I didn't like. I was pretty sure it wasn't just because I was generally in a fouler mood than usual lately, which worked out great for me professionally. The more ruthless I was, the more Mitchell and Associates benefitted. And I was feeling extremely merciless these days.

"What's going through your mind?" Jim asked as we walked out of the elevator.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," a beautiful young woman said, batting her lashes at both of us.

My lack of reaction to this gorgeous woman might've taken me by surprise if I could manage to give a fuck. But, alas, I had no fucks to give.

What the fuck did Nat do to me?

“Good afternoon,” Jim responded, bringing her eyes to meet his, taking her fuck-me eyes off me. And, as all women did when they locked eyes with him, she nearly swooned.

This nonsense usually entertained me, but now, I had zero fucking tolerance for it.

I remained distant, watching the buzz of the atmosphere of this unique and lavish office building. The chandelier that hung in the large atrium where we stood sparkled in the sunlight that peered through the oval glass ceiling thirteen floors above. We were surrounded by plants, a marble fountain, leather sofas, and chairs to accommodate anyone who frequented this place.

As I looked around, I saw amenities and priceless works of art and sculptures. It was too much, it was foolish, and it was most likely half the reason this company’s deficits were ridiculous for no good reason.

There was no fucking way Jenkins Media should be so buried in debt. Regardless, Forrest Jenkins—a total bastard and eldest son of the late Delbert Jenkins—would come crawling to Jim for endorsements anyway.

“Jim,” I said, nodding in the direction of two men in business suits as they approached. One was tall and unusually thin with dark hair, reminding me of the cartoon version of Ichabod Crane, and the other was short and stout with blond hair and a ruddy complexion.

“This is Matthew Price and Frank Thomas,” Jim introduced Ichabod first, then his red-faced friend. “Matthew is the VP of Communications, and Frank is the VP of Production.”

“Gentlemen,” I nodded toward the men before I turned to Jim, needing to speak to him outside the company of these two snakes. “I need a quick word, Jim.”

“We were just telling Mr. Jenkins how fortunate we are that Mitchell and Company are willing to partner with us,” Frank said with more arrogance than his situation called for.

I eyed his smile, reading him like a fucking book. Any other day, I would’ve played with these bastards for a while, then got my hands dirty. Unfortunately for them, today was not any other day.

“Is everything okay, Mr. Monroe?” Matthew questioned, running a hand through his shiny brown hair.

This time I smiled. He was nervous, and I was like a fucking predator who enjoyed the fear of my prey.

“Mitchell and *Associates*,” I said, my eyes shifting back and forth between the two men.

“I’m sorry?” Matthew responded.

“I’m confused,” Frank stated, looking at Matthew in confusion.

“I’m correcting you on the name of the business that is *considering* acquiring—”

“Acquiring?” Matthew Price questioned.

“That’s what I said,” I responded calculatingly. “*Acquiring*, it’s a word that has quite a different meaning from *partnering*.”

“Um, I think—”

“Please, don’t think,” I answered Matthew Price while Jim took a call on his phone. “All you need to do is understand that

Jim Mitchell will not be taken advantage of as long as I'm at his side. I assume Mr. Jenkins opted to go to lunch with his secretary instead of being here?" I stopped and paused, watching their eyes reveal their secrets. Fucking too easy. "Either way, it's none of my concern. What *is* my concern is why you believe we are *partnering* with your business, and more importantly, why the hell are you treating Mr. Mitchell and myself as though we are clowns brought to your birthday party?"

"I'm seriously confused," Frank Thomas answered.

"It took me nearly ten minutes in our previous meeting with Mr. Jenkins to learn that this media company, which his grandfather started decades ago, is in desperate trouble," I said. "The more I listened to Mr. Jenkins spill his guts out for Jim while going through updated numbers, which were much different than the ones emailed to me by your company, shit started to add up."

"And?" Matthew Price said as if I were telling him a bedtime story. "What did you come up with?"

"How much do you think that chandelier that hangs above my head costs?" I asked, pointing up.

"No idea," Frank answered, obviously irritated with me because his face was getting redder by the second.

"What does that hunk of metal and glass have to do with this?" Price chimed in.

"It reminds me of a chandelier that sold for \$1.3 million through London's Sotheby's. It is said the chandelier that sold for that monumental price was part of a collection that Emperor Napoleon had requested. I won't bore you with history, but I will raise awareness that the lavish chandelier

above us is worth more than this company's earnings forecast for the next three months. Paying out companies, actors, actresses, and journalists—you can see where I'm going with this, I'm sure. So, I'll make my final point. This company is in desperate need of Jim's backing and endorsements. It's written on every financial statement I've come across and apparent in every priceless piece of art around you." I sighed and slid my hands into my pockets, "Oh, and embezzling is another fantastic reason this company is likely going under."

"Spencer?" Jim questioned, approaching after ending his phone call. "May I ask what this is all about?"

"I'm just stating some facts and observations to these gentlemen," I said, staring lethally at two pissed-off men. "This is only a wise business decision if you purchase the media company in its entirety and replace all executives in their chairs, including the two men standing in front of me."

"You're a son of a bitch. You know that?" Frank stated, looking like steam was about to blow out of his ears.

"Oh," my eyebrows rose to match the smile on my face, "trust me, I know."

"Gentlemen, if you'll excuse us. I just received word that I have a scheduling conflict, and since Mr. Jenkins hasn't seen fit to be here, I will turn my attention to where it is valued," Jim said, most likely realizing I was out of my mind with anger. "We'll be in touch."

Jim and I didn't say a word to each other as we exited the building and sat in the back of the Rolls Royce, waiting to take us back to the Mitchell and Associates skyscraper.

"Usually, if you sniff shit out this early, you handle it with the owner, but having a go at the two under-dogs of the deal?

I'm not sure what the fuck is wrong with you," Jim said.

I checked my phone after feeling the damn thing vibrating on silent and blowing me up this entire visit to Jenkins Media. My heart and my eyes had a love-hate relationship with my phone and checking notifications now. I wanted it so badly to be Natalia, but then I didn't. I was so fucked, and I didn't know how to deal with this shit except to take my frustrations out on everyone around me.

I subtly shook my head, and my lips pinched together in frustration when none of the notifications were from her.

I was so fucking pissed that I allowed myself to go *this* deep with anyone—especially her. I couldn't explain this shit. I never gave two fucks about someone getting back to me. And I sure as fuck didn't care if someone thought to dump my ass and move on. But now, here I was.

"Spencer," Jim said, snapping me out of my head. "Why didn't you tell me anything was wrong after we spoke with Jenkins?"

"I'm sorry about that. It wasn't my intention to withhold," I said. "It took me a lot longer to understand that Jenkins will fuck us in the end. He's bad news, and I suggest you make today's meeting with him your last."

"Is this because Nat hasn't called you?" Jim questioned.

"What? No," I said, pissed at my best friend's assumption. "I might be a bit more no-bullshit than usual, but that woman blowing my ass off has nothing to do with this. You either buy the company and its debt, fire everyone in a chief position and replace them, or never speak to that dick again. He's already buried in debt, and if you move about this the way he wants you to, we'll be dealing with law enforcement and undercover

stings from the Feds, guaranteed. I'm sick of you wasting money on these chump companies, using you to get out of the debt they believed they could afford."

"So, that's your official assessment?" Jim asked, nodding as he intently listened to my warnings.

"Yes, officially. Don't do this shit unless you purchase that place outright and replace nearly everyone in that overly lavish building. This is just a fucking nightmare."

"And if I purchase it and replace every living, breathing human in the place?"

"Then you start from the ground up," I answered, shocked Jim was this interested in the company.

"I would need a great CEO, that's for fucking sure."

"No shit," I answered. "One who could run that place with an iron fist and didn't have a problem dropping the hammer on people."

"Sounds like you," he teased.

I stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "I'm not going to head up that fucking media company," I said. "It would probably give me great pleasure to clean up shop over there, but fuck, I don't think I'm in the mood."

"Did you just say you weren't in *the mood* to become the CEO of Jenkins Media?"

"You heard me," I said.

"Well, consider getting into the mood. I'll see what I need to do to pry this business from that dipshit who's annihilating his family legacy. That company has untapped potential, and I want you to spearhead it. If all falls into place, moving pieces

on the chess board, of course, then there's a lot of money to be made."

"I think you're getting too greedy and using your heart instead of your brain," I answered truthfully.

"Nah," Jim brushed me off with that damn smile he had whenever he *won* something. "You're the one using too much heart right now. You want to talk about what's going on with Nat?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I answered him. "We're on separate paths. That's it. She either comes back or moves on. I, for one, am moving forward."

"How do you feel—"

"I'm going to stop you right there," I cut Jim off. "I refuse to talk about feelings with you. So, let's grab some lunch. I'm starved, and I think you've lost your goddamn mind, wanting to purchase that media place."

Buzz.

The harsh sound cut through the pleasant dream I'd been having about the beach outside my house, featuring someone with long blond hair and the most perfect body I'd ever enjoyed. In my dream, I looked up at my home, thinking someone was at the door trying to get through to the private beach and cove protected by my house. I blinked a few times as I tried to figure out who would've come over unannounced.

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

I groaned as I lifted my head off my desk. I raised my hand to my face and rubbed it over my eyes, trying to clear away

the sleep that'd accumulated on my face since I'd put my head down a few minutes ago. I think. Honestly, it could've been weeks ago, for all I knew.

I looked at the small clock on my desk and barely registered that it said one in the morning. I'd come home after work and promptly gotten ready for bed, but I'd found it too difficult to sleep, and it wasn't because Jim wanted me to take on that media company. It was *her*, and this was so fucked up I could hardly admit it to myself, much less anyone else.

The door buzzer rang again as I headed over to the small screen that allowed me to see whoever wanted to get into my house so badly.

I turned on the screen and felt my blood run cold when I saw Nat standing there, waiting to be let in as she fought off the cold that set in every night in Southern California. The sleep must not have worn off yet because I couldn't stop blinking as I stared at her before I hit the button that would allow me to speak to her.

“Nat? What are you doing here so late?”

I'd wondered how I would deal with talking to her again. I tried calling her last week, but she didn't answer. I didn't imagine this would be how I'd receive her, like a damn ghost in the darkness.

“I needed to see you.”

“Now?” I didn't imagine that would be my response to seeing her again, either.

“Can I come in? Please?”

I sighed before hitting the button that unlocked the front gate and went to the door to let her into the main room.

As soon as I opened the door, she rushed in, setting her bag on the small table and turning around in a circle.

“I’m sorry I’m here so late,” she said, putting her face in her hands. “I’m—”

“Is everything okay?” I asked, coming to her and putting my hands on her shoulders.

“Everything’s fine,” she asked, her words coming out clipped.

“No need to sound offended,” I said. “I don’t know what you’d think if I showed up at your house in the dead of night after not hearing from me in a while. This was unexpected.”

She paused, biting down on her lip. “I know. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I needed to talk to you, and it felt urgent to see you.”

“That’s okay,” I said, getting my bearings. “I don’t care about the time.”

She sighed heavily, and we walked into the living room. I had to be careful. One part of me wanted things to be the way they were before, and the other feared letting down my defenses again. She had proven to be my soft spot, and I’d felt weak long enough.

I wasn’t going to let anyone—not her, my mom, my family—hurt me. I was a lot of things, but I wasn’t a masochist. Fool me once.

“Do you want something to drink?” I asked. “Some coffee?”

“I’m already too wired,” she said, starting to walk around the living room, pacing as if she were trying to find something she’d lost. I watched her walk for a while, picking things up

and putting them back down, but her frazzled nerves were enough to put me on edge, and I couldn't take much more of this.

“Do you want to try sitting down for a while?”

“I'm not sure. I don't think I could stand to be still. My nerves are just everywhere,” she said. “And you *know* I don't do drugs, so no worries about me being coked up or tweaked out.”

I grinned. “I'll admit, it was my first assumption, but I know you better than that. How much espresso did you have before you came here, anyway?”

“None, actually,” she said, “but I passed out at Alex and Bree's after watching a movie with Bree tonight, and I suddenly woke up realizing I was right down the street from you. And then I couldn't stand being so close to you and not being in the same space. It was too much.”

Suddenly, it became extremely difficult for me to swallow with the lump in my throat. “Did you have something that you wanted to talk about?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. I sat on the couch, watching her pace back and forth as she struggled to find the words she wanted to say. All the while, the clock crept on toward two in the morning, and I was getting more and more exhausted.

“Look, you can say whatever you want when you find the right words, but for now, I'm going to bed,” I said. “You can either come with me or stay down here on the couch. It's completely up to you.”

We stood there for a bit, holding each other's gaze, and I sensed a significant point was being reached between us.

There was an intensity in this moment as if we were hovering over the blade of a knife.

“Okay,” she said, running a hand through her long hair.

“Okay, what?”

“Okay, I’ll come to bed with you.”

I was so shocked by the straightforwardness of her words that I just stood there, staring at her, for a good minute before she turned away from me and headed for the steps that led to my room.

It had been so long since we’d spent the night together that I could barely believe she was here. I wanted to tell her to get out of here. I wanted to go on a tangent about how I wasn’t going to put up with this fickle bullshit anymore, that I didn’t care *what* she had to say, and that I didn’t need this drama.

But I couldn’t. It seemed impossible because the truth was that I wanted her here with me more than I’d ever wanted anything in my life.

I moved slowly around her as if we were magnets with the same polarity, held apart by a set distance.

“Can I borrow a shirt?” she asked as she untucked her silk blouse and unzipped her pencil skirt, shucking off her heels.

“Feel free,” I said, gesturing toward the closet. It felt strange, having her ask to borrow clothes as if we were walking back all the steps forward we’d taken.

But then, we’d already taken those steps back before. So now, it was just a matter of finding our way back to each other, wasn’t it?

She grabbed one of my rattiest old T-shirts and a pair of soft rayon boxers, and I had to hold my breath at the sight of

her body. It physically hurt not to touch her.

She didn't look at me as she pulled back the covers and climbed into bed, turning onto her side the way she always did.

"You getting in with me?" she asked, not opening her eyes. The simple question spurred me into climbing into bed with her, and I turned over to switch off the light using the panel next to my head.

"I'm sorry," she exhaled shakily.

"I'm glad you're here," I answered, feeling my heart fall into a slower, more comforting rhythm. "Goodnight, Nat."

"Night," she answered.

The two of us lay there for a while—I didn't know how long—but sleep seemed to evade me.

"Can I ask you something?" she said, her voice low and soft as she stayed on her side. "And you can say no."

She said nothing for a while as if the desire weighed on her.

"Just ask, Nat."

I could practically hear her teeth pressing into her bottom lip as she weighed whether to ask.

"Could you hold me?"

Without another word, I turned onto my side and stretched out my arm, wrapping it around her waist. She settled her hand over mine, wrapping our fingers together, and all too soon, her breathing slowed, and soon after, I was sound asleep as well.

I was pretty damn sure any therapist or relationship counselor, best friend, or expert would tell both of us we were

insane for doing this but fuck them. I had the love of my life in my arms, and I was peacefully content.

Time would tell if this was a horrible miscalculation on my part.

CHAPTER

Thirty-One

I could only blame the sleepless nights for my actions the night before. No wonder sleep deprivation had been used throughout the world as a torture method because I was ready to have myself committed if I didn't start getting better.

After all, I'd never been the person to randomly show up on some guy's doorstep at one in the morning, and I'd never, ever been the person just to follow some raw impulse. I was, and always had been, a person who thought through the consequences of every action. I had to, given what the alternative would be if I had no plans about how I'd handle certain situations.

But not this time. This time, I'd simply rolled over on the couch, my eyes opened, and I couldn't tamp down the impulse that led me to leave Bree's house in the middle of the night and ring Spencer's buzzer like my life depended on it.

And the worst part?

I didn't even have an excuse for it. I hadn't been drinking, smoking, playing with an Ouija board, or doing anything that could cause a sudden and drastic change in temperament and decision-making. No, I'd been stone-cold sober.

I mean, who *did* this shit? For real? Up until last night, I would've never raised my hand and said that I did, that's for

fucking sure.

All these thoughts flooded through me about the strange desperation I'd shown last night, and yet, while lying in bed with Spencer, none of it felt as insane as my current thoughts made it seem. None of it felt like a wrong decision. None of it felt like a mistake.

I saw the light from the sunrise beginning to illuminate the waves outside the glass wall of Spencer's room, and the beauty took my breath away.

As I sighed, I felt Spencer's hand spread and flex over my belly, pulling me into his embrace, and I leaned into it, pulling his head down to my shoulder. He sighed into my neck, kissing me tenderly, and I went completely still for a moment as I tried to decide what to do from there.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. I could tell he was testing the waters with my mood this morning, and I didn't blame him.

"A bit surprised to be waking up in this room, knowing the last time I was here was after a weekend of sex and nothing more."

I felt him laugh. "Ah, the good ole' days," he said, his lips pressing into the top of my hair.

"What is that supposed to mean?" I playfully teased back, grateful that we were sort of reuniting in humor instead of anger or seriousness at the moment.

"Well, that's before we decided to get fake married, play with fire, acquaint ourselves with the dark secrets of our family, and this whole thing turned into a one-sided relationship."

Even though he was teasing, I could sense I'd hurt him.

“I warned you,” I said, knowing the teasing would only last so long before we addressed the real issues.

“I know,” he answered. “And I wouldn’t take back any of the things I mentioned, either.”

“I do *not* know how you can think or say that.” I finally turned to face him, his sleepy eyes making him appear more handsome than ever.

“Well, I guess I can say it because, in all relationships, there are lessons to be learned.”

“And in our relationship, which I fucked up before it could hardly even start? What did *we* learn? Or should I ask, what did *you* learn?”

He smirked at me, his eyes following the trail of his fingertips tracing across my forehead. “That everyone was wrong,” his eyes met mine again. “It appears I truly have a heart, and it’s not made of stone.”

“And all of this shit was worth that to you?”

“Still is,” he answered.

I rolled onto my back and stared up at his ceiling. “I don’t understand how it could seem so easy and doable until now. I’m the strongest woman I know, yet, in this department, I feel weak. And I hate feeling weak.”

“No more than I do,” he answered with a laugh.

I looked over at him and smiled, “God, I’m such a fucking mess. I didn’t realize that until recently.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” he answered empathetically. “Perhaps, it would help if you aired out what has been going on with you since we returned to California?”

I bit the inside of my cheek, running my teeth along my lower lip as I thought about what to say. How could I articulate what I'd begun to feel for him overseas and everything I'd felt since coming home, particularly now that my little brother was involved?

The only thing I could do was just start talking.

“When we landed, the first thing that came to mind for me was figuring out everything for Shane. I needed to persuade him to stay with me at my place, but I also knew he wouldn't likely agree, and I didn't want you to be there.”

He opened his mouth, and I could practically hear the arguments before they started coming out, so I held my fingers up to his lips.

“Hang on,” I said. “You asked me to talk to you about my feelings. If you start interrupting me, I don't think I'll ever get this out.”

He didn't fix me with any of the looks that showed his annoyance. Instead, he brought his fingers up to my hand, holding my fingers to his lips and kissing them gently.

“Go on,” he said, tracing his fingertip up and down my arm. “Don't mind me.”

I gave a slight nod before reaching out and running my thumb under his eye. “I know that you and Shane kind of got close in London and that he confided in you some, but I also knew what kind of reaction he would have to me telling him that he needed to stay with me. I didn't think much about running it past *you* because whatever we are to each other, it hadn't been going on for that long at that point; you have to admit that.”

He nodded, but his mouth spread into a wide smile. He looked as though he were trying to keep from whooping in triumph.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “What’s that face for, Spence?”

“I think that’s the first time you’ve acknowledged there being something between us beyond just a charade for my family’s benefit.” He leaned toward me and kissed my forehead, “That, and it feels like an eternity since you called me *Spence*.”

I smirked, “Keep it up, and I’ll start calling you *Sexy Spence* again to refresh your memories on our *first night* of fucking and answering cell phones.”

He rolled his eyes. “Well, I find it very nice to hear you refer to us as being in a relationship instead of the days when something like that was furthest from my mind.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve acknowledged we were more than a fake couple, married or not. You’ve heard me say our relationship was real to Shane—”

“But that was an explanation for Shane’s benefit,” he said, reaching forward and setting his hand on the curve of my waist again. “This is purely between us, which makes it even better, and more official. Unless we’re broken up?”

“We’re only broken up if you understandably don’t want me back in your life in that manner.”

“If I didn’t, you wouldn’t be in my bed, gorgeous,” he teased. “Okay, go on. I keep interrupting you.”

“Yes, you do,” I responded. “If this takes me two hours to spit out, I’m prepared to blame it on you.”

“I’ll take that blame,” he said, grinning at me. Then, leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to my collarbone. The moment his full lips touched the smooth skin of my neck, it took all my concentration not to let my eyes roll up into the back of my skull.

“How do you expect me to focus if you keep doing that?”

“Mmm.” The moan turned into a veritable grunt of defeat, and his forehead slumped against my shoulder. “Here, let’s do this.”

He sat up, pulling me up with him and sitting with his legs crossed in front of him so we could look directly at each other. He wove the fingers of our hands together so they lay on our knees, which touched as we sat in front of each other, finally disconnected enough that I could think through what to say to him.

“Anyway,” I said to him sharply, but it was quickly tempered by a smile and my laughing tone, not to mention how I brought our hands up as I held them palm-to-palm. “When we landed in LA, all I could think about was how I needed to get Shane in a safe place, and when I looked at you, all I saw was a distraction.”

I felt like shit, not just for saying that out loud, but for saying it to Spencer, of all people.

I could see the words forming on his tongue, knowing he was itching to interrupt, but he bit the inside of his cheek, looking annoyed at my words. Still, he held back and gestured for me to go on.

I brought his hand to my lips, letting my mouth linger over the strong knuckles in a grateful kiss. “Thank you for letting me get this out.” When I looked back at him, annoyance faded

from his face, and a hint of sadness replaced it. He nodded at me to continue.

“Shane’s reaction was pretty much what I expected it to be. He was furious that I told him he needed to stay with me and I would have all his stuff sent to my place so he wouldn’t miss any work.”

“And he didn’t appreciate you going out of your way for him?” Spencer asked with a frown and a warranted look of disgust.

“No. He said if I did that, he’d take off, and then I wouldn’t be able to control what he did. His parting words were that I’d have to get over my controlling ways if I wanted to keep *you* around because no man wants to be with a controlling, meddling witch.” I shook my head at the memory of my brother’s words, trying to get over the pain that had lingered in my chest ever since I heard them. “When he said that, it took everything I had not to fall apart in front of him. It got messy for a good minute, and I had to get fully angry at him to avoid an outright panic attack. It was—” I bit my lip hard before looking at Spencer with a watery smile. “Well, it’s just a good thing you weren’t there because I think you would’ve likely kicked his ass after the fight we had, and that would’ve served no one.”

“No,” Spencer said, pulling his hand into his lap and running his thumb up and down my wrist. “I don’t think that that would’ve served anyone. All around, it would’ve been a shitty situation.”

I could see the lines hardening on his face, an obvious sign of his anger that I’d gotten to know well in Italy due to his mother’s issues.

“One of the reasons I’ve been shutting you out for the last few weeks is that I—” I swallowed hard, thinking about how to phrase my words. “I don’t know what you want from me. You said you love me, and I believe you, but I don’t know how to meet the expectations you have of me. It’s so hard for me to understand how to be true to myself while in service to another person.”

“Nat.”

I stopped at the force in Spencer’s voice, looking up into his eyes and surprised by the depth of feeling I saw. There was a wealth of warmth and pain that I knew was on my behalf as well as his.

“Nat, I never wanted or expected you to be *in service* to me. I know why you might think that; I mean, what else would you expect, given everything your father said and did to you after your mom passed away? But being in a relationship with me has never been about that.”

I swallowed, doing my best to maintain contact with his steady brown eyes. “Then what is it about for you?”

I felt foolish, trying to figure out what a real relationship was for the first time in my life. I didn’t like feeling ignorant, but that’s the best word for what was happening inside.

“I want to be with you for who and what you are. I know you have the shit you deal with and the stuff you’ve carried every day since you were a kid. I’m not asking you to put aside any of your pain or burdens. That’s not what this is. I’m asking you to share them with me the way that I was able to share mine when I took you to Stephen’s wedding. You were there for me every moment I needed you; it was more than I could’ve wished for. Watching you go head-to-head with my

mother and take on her shit was one of the things that made me fall in love with you in the first place.”

I felt a lump swell in my throat as his words began to register.

“When I said I love you, I didn’t mean that I would force you to tell me everything. It’s not about that. It’s not about me imposing my will onto you, making you do anything you don’t want to do,” Spencer said with a sympathetic look. “It’s about you, feeling *safe* enough to tell me things, and for you to be able to share the dirty details of life without being afraid that I’ll run away. I want you to trust that I’m strong enough to carry those things with you, if not entirely for you, baby.”

My eyes watered, and I reached up to wipe the dampness away so none of it would betray me and my stupid, softening heart.

“When I said I wanted you here with me, I didn’t just mean for a night or two because it’s not just the sex I missed. It was you, all of you, and it’s all of you that I want with me forever. I don’t care if we argue because I know we’ll be able to make up afterward. I don’t mind if you shut down sometimes, so long as you let me in eventually. I hope that makes sense.”

“It does.” The words came out in a harsh whisper as I spoke through tears. “It makes perfect sense. I wish someone had explained relationships to me better when I was young, so I wouldn’t be so quick to run away from it.”

“It’s not your fault you ran away. All you saw was shit, so you didn’t know how to expect something good,” he said, bringing my hand to his mouth and pressing his lips to the back of it. “But will you believe me when I say that all I want

is for you to trust me and that I love you and want you with me?”

I nodded, getting up onto my knees. I wrapped my fingers around his neck, running them along the nape, dragging my nails through the short hairs there, and grinning as I heard the sharp little gasp of arousal I'd missed since we'd been apart. “I do believe you.”

He looked down into my face, reaching up to drag his thumb along my chin. “Does it scare you when I tell you I want you for the rest of our lives?”

“It terrifies me,” I said, willing myself to tell him the whole truth. “But the thing is, it's not you that I don't trust. It's myself.”

“That's okay,” he said. “I can be there to make it easier for you. Let's just take *us* step by step.”

I reached up, wrapped my arms around his neck, and pressed my mouth to his, allowing his lips to move with mine in the slow, delicious way that preceded lovemaking. Then, without removing his lips from me, he skated them down to my jaw and then down my neck, pushing me into the mattress as he covered me with his weight. I sighed in contentment for the first time in weeks as his teeth pressed into my neck.

This was home to me, and it would be for as long as I could hold onto it.

If I didn't do anything to fuck it up.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

SPENCER

That moment, when she came to me in the middle of the night, marked a turning point for Nat and me. Thank God we managed to move in the direction of her trusting me just enough to open up to me.

After that, there was hardly a night we didn't spend together, either in her bed or mine. I was thankful she'd made the trek to my place, particularly because her place was much closer to her office, and I knew how much she loved it there. Hell, what wasn't to love? I loved the damn place so much that I decided to turn my home in the Hollywood Hills into a vacation rental spot for people looking to rub elbows with the rich and famous.

I hadn't spent much time there since meeting Nat, anyway. When I thought about it, that was merely where I'd spent many nights wasting time with numerous women after long nights out. As exquisite as the estate was, it only reminded me of a life I never wanted to return to again.

Now, my home was truly this beach house. It's where Nat and I seemed to start this relationship and where we were keeping it growing.

Wow, all this romance had turned me into one hell of a sentimental son of a bitch.

“I love waking up to the sun’s reflection sparkling over the waves of the ocean,” Nat said, sitting on the chaise next to the window, pulling on her tall boots.

“I love watching the sun on the waves, all sparkly and shit,” I said, running a towel through my wet hair, smiling at her, “while your sexy ass sits as the focal point of the most impressive view in this room.”

“That’s a mouthful,” she teased, standing up and turning to admire the view before work took her away from me for the day.

“We should call in,” I said, walking up behind her, feeling my dick harden at the idea of her reaching around and taking advantage that I had only a towel wrapped around my waist.

“Call in?” She laughed. Then she turned to face me. “We’re practically our own bosses. We should just fuck, start the day, do the day, fuck during the day, order takeout tonight, then end it all by licking dessert off each other’s bodies.”

I smiled down into her teasing eyes and kissed her nose. “It’s good to have you back, baby. Everyone would blame me if your funny, dirty little mouth never returned because you got too serious.”

“Oh, *that* side will never leave me, honey,” she flirted with her long eyelashes. “It’s just that I haven’t been in the mood to speak all my wisdom lately.”

“My point exactly, and they’d all kick my ass for that,” I said, bringing my hand over her perfect tight ass. “Let’s say we play it your way.”

“Yes?” She held onto that word like the sexy vixen she was.

“Then, perhaps we can squeeze a short visit to my office today. This skirt is begging for me to bend you over my office desk and—”

Her eyebrow arched, prompting me to halt my request and refrain from laughing because I knew she had *something* smart-ass to say about this.

“If I wanted to play *the boss fucks the secretary* games, I would’ve done that with you long ago, Mr. Monroe. But you should know that even though I like the idea of you fucking me, I’m not a woman who likes to be bent over dominant boss’s desks.”

“I wasn’t trying to play *that* particular game,” I teased back. “I was more or less trying to play the *hot real estate agent* who wants to fuck the VP of Mitchell and—”

“Stop,” she said, walking passed me and slapping me on my ass. “Now, we just sound corny.”

“I thought it was fantastic foreplay.”

“For what? Your dick and ego? No. I’m not going to your office because you need a piece of ass. To me, that’s trashy.”

“You’re adorable.”

“You’re too much,” she said. “I’m heading out to have breakfast with a client. Perhaps I’ll think of some creative way to fuck the VP of Mitchell and Associates later.”

“Creative way? My office is—”

“*An office*. I prefer you to meet me on the company yacht, or the helicopter perhaps. You know, go a little crazy breaking the rules. The climax is much more intense when a thrill is involved.”

“Good to know,” I said. “I’ll keep my phone on, in that case.”

She chuckled in her cute Natalia way, and God, it was so wonderful to have *all of her* back, no matter how silly the banter was.

“Keep the phone on, but on vibrate and close to your dick,” she arched her eyebrow at me. “That way, if I back out on your handsome ass, you’ll get some excitement when I notify you. Can’t leave you wanting, of course.”

“Get your cute ass out of here before I bend you over that bathroom sink, gorgeous.”

“Keep it on vibrate, lover,” she taunted as her voice trailed behind her heading down the stairs to the bottom floor.

Every day felt new to me now, and it humored me to delight in the little things I learned about her as each day passed. Each new thing about her felt like a tiny revelation, like how she preferred her eggs to be scrambled in a way I considered grossly overcooked because she was overly worried about contracting salmonella poisoning. And when I roasted chickens on the barbecue rotisserie, I discovered she had an aversion to eating meat off a bone. Watching her eat so delicately struck me as hilarious, especially when I compared it to how wild she was in every other way. The way she ate me up every night would never have clued me in to her dainty habits.

On the few nights that she didn’t spend with me, it gave me a weird rush to wake up and see the stuff she’d left at my house; her underwear in the drawer and the excessive amount

of face creams and strange concoctions she left on my bathroom counter, which she faithfully slathered onto her face every night like clockwork.

The first night I saw her do it, I watched from the doorway and couldn't help chuckling as she doled out little dollops of cream and oil here and there, taking the process very seriously.

So strange how one's life can change completely when they fall in love. It was thrilling to know that I appreciated things I'd always taken for granted in one way or the other. Hell, I felt lighter in my step half the damn time now too.

How could *locking down* into a relationship with one woman feel so liberating and freeing? One of life's many mysteries, I assume.

The next few weeks seemed to pass with ease as Nat and I found our stride within the relationship. Instead of growing concerned when she got quiet or kept to herself, I learned that this was just part of who she was. Things would pop up now and then, and she would have moments where she froze. But instead of getting ass-hurt about it, I gave her space and time to work through whatever was on her mind.

She hadn't made any progress with Shane, who continued to hold her at arm's length, despite all her calls and texts. He'd give one-word responses here and there, but it was seldom more than that, and I knew it was driving her up the wall.

I sat on my sofa, perfectly content after the delicious lamb dinner I'd prepared when I got home from work. I was full and utterly satiated as I reviewed some numbers on the latest acquisition Jim was looking into. Fuck, this was bliss. I'd

never appreciated the majestic view from this home until I learned to appreciate the finer things in life. Falling in love apparently helped you love everything, and I wasn't mad about it.

A text from Nat popped up on my computer screen, and like a schoolboy in love, I smiled when I opened it.

Nat: *You coming?*

I stared at the selfie she'd sent me. She lounged in the large rectangular bath upstairs, which was situated between three glass walls to take in the entire ocean view. Her golden blonde hair was pulled over one shoulder, and bubbles formed just over her breasts, teasing my cock as I imagined their perfect fullness soaking in the bath. Her smile was warm and seductive, my dick growing as I imagined her full lips wrapped around it while her brilliant blue eyes were lit by the last of the sun before it slid behind the horizon.

Spencer: *I'm practically coming now...*

Nat: *It took you long enough to respond. Jerking off to my picture?*

I grinned, stood, and readjusted myself before heading toward the kitchen to grab a bottle of wine and two glasses. Far be it for me to turn down an invite to a sexy sunset bath.

Could shit get any better on a Thursday night? No.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

I smiled when I heard my phone and slid it open without thinking it could be anyone but Nat calling to get my ass into the bath with her.

“You know I don’t jerk off to your pictures anymore. I—”

“Well, I should hope not,” Jake responded.

“Jesus Christ. *Why*, of all the people in the world, are *you* calling me?”

“Well, I was hoping to invite you to a surprise birthday party for Jimmy, but now that you’ve openly admitted to jerking off to my pictures, I’m not too sure I want you there.”

“Listen, dipshit,” I said with a laugh, reaching up and grabbing two wine glasses to take upstairs, “I didn’t check to see who was calling. I thought it was—”

“So, you’re jerking off to *everyone’s pictures* now?” he said, feigning offense. “You’ve cut me deep, Spencer.”

I rolled my eyes. Wasting my time with this man on the phone was not something I wanted to be doing right now, and he could go on and on if I let him. “Well, naturally, you’re hurt by this admission of guilt. Hopefully, you’re not too wounded, though, because I’d like to get to the point of this call.”

“You’re too serious sometimes, Spence,” he said. I could tell this was probably his final call from his office at the hospital before he left for the night.

“Compared to you and Collin, everyone is too serious,” I laughed. “I wanted to be more like you two clowns, so I had to find myself a lady.”

“I still have bets against your ass on that, by the way,” Jake teased.

“Are you just bored and waiting for a fucking cardiac call, or are you trying to get me to fuck things up with Nat tonight by staying on the phone with you?”

“As I said, I have a bet to win. And I don’t wager good money unless I know I will win.”

“Jake, text me the time and place, and you know that we’ll be there for Jim’s party or whatever the fuck you idiots are planning to surprise him with.”

“Perfect. And yes, try not to forget your boss has a birthday coming up.”

“I’ll make sure I remember that since Jim’s birthday must be celebrated. Hopefully, the rest of the circus will be there for you and Collin.”

“You know it,” Jake laughed. “Okay, buddy. I’ll text you the time and place. Later, gator.”

“Good. We’ll see you then.”

The call ended, and just before I turned to place some strawberries on the wooden serving tray with the wine and glasses, my phone rang again.

“Sweet Jesus, Jacob. Just text me the—”

“Well, that is certainly *no way* to talk to your mother, now, is it?”

Of all the fucking times I decide to stop checking to see who’s calling in, it would be today.

“Heidi,” I answered, my tone as lethal as I felt about having answered without checking to see if it was her. “What

is it that you need?”

“I need to speak with my son. Of course, that is if his *wife* is not around to eavesdrop on our important conversation.”

“I would put you on speaker phone just so she could hear because she is my wife and may listen to anything you have to say to me.”

I managed to pull my ass back into the whole fake marriage bit. Now that I was in a *real* relationship, I was more focused on navigating that part of my life correctly instead of faking shit. But I’d started this whole shit show with Heidi, and I had to manage this if I had to speak to her again.

“Speaking of my wife,” I said, “she and I are busy. I would rather deal with you later when I have the time for it.”

“Son,” she said, switching famously back into her victim role to keep me on the line. “I truly need to speak with you. It’s about the woman you call your wife.”

“Her name is Natalia, and if you can’t accept that, then the conversation is over.”

I hung up, my nerves tenser than they really should’ve been. Just hearing that woman’s voice repulsed me, and the *only* reason she wasn’t blocked from my phone was in case something happened to anyone else in my family. Other than that? She was lucky she had my number.

I walked into the bathroom. The sun had already slid below the horizon, but the golden hues of the sky still painted the entire ocean and shoreline in a beautiful color.

I smiled at the one thing that could outdo the beauty of the sun setting on the Pacific.

“About damn time,” Nat said, reclining back with her eyes closed. “I was hoping for that massage you promised me?”

“Sorry about the delay, gorgeous,” I said, kissing her forehead. “Jake called, then apparently Heidi returned to the surface of the earth and called directly after.”

She smirked at me as I poured her a glass of wine. “I’d prefer to know what Jake was calling about; however,” she took the glass of wine and sipped it, “I’m sure I should ask about your mother first.”

“You should never feel as though you need to ask about that woman. It’s never good news, and it’s not worth another thought.”

“And Jacob, then?”

“Yes,” I said, shrugging off my button-down shirt and unbuttoning my pants. “It’s something to do with a surprise party for Jim. He’s going to text me the info. It’s probably this weekend if you want to go?”

“Oh, right,” she said as I stepped into the large stone tub behind her and sat with her between my legs. “Avery mentioned something to Bree and me at the spa this afternoon. They’re having the party on Jake’s yacht this weekend. You up for going?”

I rolled my eyes as I began to massage Nat’s shoulders. “Why they have to do this shit on a yacht is always beyond me,” I said, kissing her neck. “Those fucking guys and their *yachts*.”

“Because they’re *billionaires* like you, babe,” she chuckled. “Aren’t all of you one-percenters supposed to own *at least one* yacht?”

“I hate to let you down with how I view wealth, but flying in private jets is the extent of how I use my *billionaire* status.”

She laughed again. “A massive letdown,” she said with a soft moan as my lips brushed over the surface of her shoulders. “How am I supposed to land a role as one of the next Housewives without a goddamn yacht to flash around?”

“What the fuck is that?” I said with a laugh.

“If you weren’t always working or falling asleep on the sofa, you’d know. I really need to get you into these reality TV shows.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

“There,” she said, rubbing her hands over my knees, “now you’re acting like a billionaire. You don’t have any clue what’s going on in the real world.”

“How does not watching a reality show make me out of tune with what’s happening in the real world?”

“Because if you’re not watching those shows, you’re not seeing why these beautiful women are marrying ugly billionaires like you and then jockeying for status and position as the biggest bitch on the show.”

“Ugly billionaires like me?”

“You should be less concerned about your looks and more about whether I’m going to be one of *those wives*.”

“Nah,” I smirked. “There’s no fucking way you’d be that type of woman. My ugly ass wouldn’t hear of it.”

She chuckled, then spun around to face me. “Good. Now, let’s take this to the next level, handsome.”

All frivolous conversation halted when her lips found mine, and my heart began to pick up the pace, knowing that sex with Nat and bubbles *always* turned out to be a good fucking thing.

The next day I felt more revived than the previous day. That's another reason I had a pep in my happy little step. I was grateful for my joy; however, my happiness wasn't all I was after these days. I was starting to grow more concerned for Nat's. She seemed happy and content, but I knew being out of contact with Shane was bothering her.

I had to do something. There was no way I would waltz around like a happy mother fucker while she was burdened.

It took weeks of Shane dodging my texts, but I finally got her brother to agree to come to the Mitchell offices downtown to meet with me. It was perfect timing because it was Friday, and tonight we were all heading to Jake's yacht to celebrate Jim's birthday with a four-day cruise along the coast. So once, I got this out of the way, I'd use our time away to fill in Nat on any progress I'd made with her brother.

I would be lying if I said Shane didn't look like a strung-out homeless man when he walked into my office. His blond hair was a mess, and his jeans were torn in so many places they were practically hanging off him. Seeing him like this broke my heart for whatever the fuck he'd been through and what it would do to Nat. He looked so thin that I almost didn't recognize him, and I wanted to reach out and hug the kid.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that move would've been unappreciated and probably just make him angry. I knew

it took courage for him to show up in this state, looking like this, and meet with me.

I dismissed my secretary with a nod and led Shane over to the leather sofa in my office.

“Shane, I’m happy you’re here. Nat really misses you,” I said as he sat down.

He snorted. “Trust me, I know. She never lets me forget it. It gets very annoying.”

“Listen,” I took the leather chair across from where he sat, “you can be pissed off all you want, but don’t be an asshole. Your sister only wants to help you. So do I.”

“Did *she* put you up to this?”

“No. She has no idea about any of it,” I said. “All of this is completely off the books.”

Just as I was ready to get this shit moving forward, Jim walked into my office.

“Hey, Jim,” I said. Jim wore his usual dark expression reserved for business situations and people he didn’t know, especially on the top floors of his skyscraper. It probably intimidated the shit out of Shane. “This is Shane, Nat’s younger brother.”

Shane sat up from his slouched position on my couch as Jim walked toward him. “Shane,” Jim said, reaching over to shake the kid’s hand. “I’m Spencer’s good friend, and I—”

“Holy shit! You’re James Mitchell, aren’t you? No way.” He shook his hand nervously, looking jittery, sweaty, and almost starstruck.

I wished I could’ve laughed, but Shane being obviously high on something and treating my best friend as if he were a

celebrity made me feel embarrassed for the kid. Fortunately, I knew Jim well enough to know he'd dismiss all the bullshit and see that the kid needed help more than he needed judgment.

"Jim's going to help us out a bit. He has the connections we need to get answers to your issues and get them fast," I said, moving on.

"What can you tell me about your dad?" Jim asked, easing into the conversation.

Shane froze, looking over at Jim. "My dad? What is this all about? I thought—"

"None of this is an attack on you, Shane," I said, gripping his arm reassuringly. "But it affects you and your sister. It has for years, and we want to help you with it. It's time we put these demons back in hell where they all belong."

Shane looked between my friend and me, caught off-guard, his soft brown eyes like a frozen deer. Then, slowly, the skin between his eyes began to unknot, and I saw his breaths start to come more easily.

When he finally nodded, I sighed quietly in relief. Then, the three of us put our heads together, talking about how shitty his life had been growing up with that monster they called their dad.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

I finished viewing three properties for Jon-Michael Forten, a billionaire investor who lived overseas, and now I had my work cut out for me. I knew the man would disapprove of the location of the homes and their lack of privacy even before I went, but he insisted I look anyway.

He had a particular taste, down to the position of the toilet in relation to the bathroom sinks and the exact distance of the indoor pools to the spa and sauna, and the list just went fucking on. Outside of the amenities he expected to have inside his potential home, the outside was expected to come complete with tennis courts, basketball courts, infinity pool with a *glorious* view, and, needless to say, I was not finding *anything* to match his demands.

The last option I had was the suggestion of a complete interior renovation, which would only work if I could meet his specifications outside. So, instead of calling to tell him these houses weren't going to cut it, giving him a chance to assume I failed at my job even though his expectations were extraordinary, I was going to get creative. I never failed at anything, so I'd be goddammed if a diva billionaire was going to trip me up.

I needed to get to Spencer's place, which wasn't far from the house I was leaving, and figure this out. And I knew who would be able to help me with my problem.

"Bree?" I said after she answered my call as I pulled into Spencer's driveway.

"Hey. Are you okay? You sounded pissed in the voicemail you left me."

"I'm sorry. I was frustrated after being let down for the millionth time today, looking for property for my client. This shit is wild. If I could miraculously find something he *would* like, which seems impossible at this point, the damn places are selling so quickly that I can't even get in to look at them."

"That never seemed to be the problem before," Bree said through her car phone with a laugh.

I rolled my eyes, stepping out of my Range Rover and walking through Spencer's garage as the door rolled closed behind me. "Yeah, well, that's before I was with Spencer. It's easy to get a heads up on a killer listing when you're banging multiple brokers in the area." I laughed as I turned to ensure the door from the garage into the house closed behind me before I walked inside.

"I wish I could say I'm surprised." A feeling of dread rolled up my spine when I heard that voice, one I never thought I'd hear again. My jaw might as well have hit the floor when I came face-to-face with Satan's sister.

"How the hell did *you* get into this house? Does Spencer know you're here?" I questioned. I couldn't tell which emotions were pulsing through me, but it was probably a combination of shock and horror. I couldn't comprehend how Heidi was here.

“I have a key and all the security codes, of course,” she said, looking at me like I’d asked the stupidest question of all time.

“Does Spencer know his *mother* is here?” I questioned, knowing he’d hung up on her the night before.

“Nat?” I heard Bree say in confusion. “Is everything okay?”

“Um, I’m going to have to call you back,” I said flatly. “Spencer’s mother has made a rather surprising appearance at the beach house, and since he hung up on her last night, I’m more than a little surprised she’s here now because she didn’t take the hint. Or maybe I’m completely in the dark here.”

“Spencer is not expecting me,” Heidi said coldly.

“So, he doesn’t know you’re here?” I couldn’t imagine how angry I’d be if someone let themselves into my house without asking my permission, so I could only guess how furious Spencer would be, especially when that someone was your evil mother.

“Bree, I’m sorry, but I need to call you back,” I said before ending the call.

I didn’t hesitate to call Spencer while standing off with this bitch.

“Lovely. Straight to fucking voicemail,” I said.

Heidi smiled. “Well, I didn’t expect the honeymoon phase to last long for you two, and I was right. Perhaps you can call one of those brokers you just spoke of—”

“Listen to me,” I said lethally, taking control of this chaotic situation. “I’m not here for you to toy with, lady. I could easily see from the moment I met you that you find no

worth in your children or anyone else. Well, I will not have that shit in my home,” I said, falling into my fake wife mode. I truly hated that we started this relationship with a lie for *this vile woman*. Either way, she was in my country now, and my city, and in my fake fucking married home. “And since you have zero respect for your children and see no value in them or their time, you wouldn’t understand why your son’s phone went straight to voicemail.”

“And you would?” She arched her eyebrow at me with her slippery, red-lipped smirk. “Do tell me, how *exactly* do you know about my son’s worth?”

“I’m his goddamn wife, for starters,” I said.

“Ah, and in this little open marriage of yours, do you have sexual relations with all of these other men for services you need to be rendered, or is it confined only to—”

“I’m not listening to this shit,” I interrupted her. “You will leave my home right the fuck now if you continue insulting my husband or me. But if you can manage to mind your manners, you can sit your insane ass on my sofa and wait for my husband to get home.” Her beady little dead eyes were chilling, but not as much as her expression. She looked at me like she was imagining eating my liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti. That probably would’ve bothered me the last time I saw her, but this time, I wanted to slap the taste out of her mouth. I chose diplomacy instead. For now. “I swear to Christ, if another negative, shitty, passive-aggressive, snide, nasty, spiteful, or malicious remark comes out of your mouth, you will be walking to the next fucking hotel.”

“Don’t you think we should let Spencer decide if his severely jetlagged mother gets thrown out of his home after her long flight from Milan?”

“I don’t give a fuck how jet lagged you are, Heidi,” I said, surprised that was her only response. “It makes no difference to me if you wait on the fucking front porch for Spencer to get home. The point I’m making is that I didn’t dare to insult you in your home, so I expect you to dig up some of your proper English manners, and if you can behave like a human being, you may sit on that sofa and wait for Spencer.”

“My son would not approve of this hospitality,” she said, walking toward the sofa.

“Oh,” I said, walking over to the liquor buffet in the living room, pulling out the scotch without a single fuck to give, “I’m sure Spencer and I share the same opinions of rude behavior in our home.”

“Scotch?” she said with an arch of her eyebrow. “A pretty strong liquor for a woman who demands she is treated like a *lady*.”

I arched my eyebrow at her, wondering if she even knew when she was being passive-aggressive after so many years of spewing bile. But then, I decided to let her remark slide because I wanted to get to the bottom of why she was here, and I would.

“It’s a shame you don’t have what it takes to appreciate whiskey,” I said, sipping my eighteen-year-old Macallan. “Can I offer you something to drink after your long flight? Perhaps a glass of wine?”

“Oh, thank you, dear,” she answered, looking almost pleased suddenly. “I adore a good Spanish red.”

I turned around and opened a bottle of Rioja, wondering if this woman legitimately had multiple personalities, changing them situationally with whatever point she was trying to make.

I handed her the glass and took a seat from across her, along with another much-needed pull of dark liquor.

“You know,” she started, looking through the floor-to-ceiling windows toward the gorgeous ocean view, “so many people prefer hard liquor due to guilt.” Then, she looked back at me, where I stared at her deadpan, “It seems that might be an affliction for you as well.”

Her tone made me wonder if she’d uncovered the lie about Spencer and me. Personally, I would give the secret up without shame, but this was his story, and he’d be the one who dictated how it went. I didn’t care either way.

“Your silence tells me I’m correct in that assumption,” she said.

“What assumption?”

“That you’re nervous in my presence. You know, guilty.” She nodded toward my glass, “That’s why you’re drinking the liquid courage.”

I took another sip boldly and without diverting my eyes from her. “Well, no,” I said, swallowing the warmth of the soothing liquid, “I’ve had a bit of a long day, and I certainly didn’t expect *you* to be here when I walked into the doors.”

“Interesting,” she said.

“Nothing *interesting* about it.”

“Hey, baby, I’m home,” Spencer called out cheerfully as he walked through the hallway that led from the garage. “Are we ready to get this mutha-fucking yacht weekend started?”

“Oh?” Heidi said, eyes wide toward me as she turned to see Spencer’s reaction to her unwanted presence.

“What the *fuck* are *you* doing in my home?” Spencer said, his face dark with confusion and anger.

I remained seated, knowing our weekend just went to hell. God only knew what Spencer would do with this cockroach that’d manifested in his home.

His eyes went to mine. I shrugged, the liquor already working its way through my system. “Welcome home. Care for a drink, honey?” I said to him, knowing he was just as shocked as I was that his mother was here without warning, notice, or permission.

“Ah, so I see my grandchildren will have both parents as drunks,” Heidi said as Spencer placed his leather briefcase on the ground.

He was in shock, and I wished I was half drunk already when the fucking doorbell rang. This situation might’ve been comical if it weren’t so fucking weird.

“You need to leave my home,” Spencer said to her.

“I’m not leaving, darling,” she said. “You see, I did a little digging, and I’m not quite sure you and this woman were being truthful with me regarding your matrimonial situation.”

Spencer’s eyes narrowed at her, and I saw something shift and change in him.

“I’ll get the door,” I said as I stood, thankful someone was here to distract the fact that I had no idea where any of this would go from here.

“If it isn’t the woman we never thought would settle—”

“Jake,” I said, impulsively reaching out and covering the tall man’s mouth.

I shut the door behind me as soon as I heard Heidi call after who was at our door. I swear this woman was a nightmare that'd seeped into reality.

“*What* is happening?” Jake said, stepping back, his vivid blue eyes bright and wide with shock that I would do something entirely out of character.

“Listen,” I said in a low voice, “I can’t explain fast enough, but hopefully, you heard about me and Spencer faking a marriage, yeah?”

“Of course,” Jake said with a goofy smile, “and we’ll never let either one of you live that down.”

“Good,” I responded quickly, “because the devil’s lover, aka Spencer’s mother, is here and trying to sniff out that lie. You know, about being fake married.”

“You want me to play along? You know I’m down for that, but Ash is waiting in the car, and you guys are supposed to be following us to the yacht.”

“You’re going to have to do the whole birthday shit without us,” I said. “I don’t know what is with Spencer’s mom being here unannounced and uninvited.”

Jake’s grin turned into that mischievous smile that came before he and the guys were about to fuck shit up. “Invite that woman along,” he said.

“Have you lost your goddamn mind?”

“Yes,” he said with the expression of a hungry wolf, “let’s fuck with her.”

I arched my eyebrow at that idea and smiled my own little evil smile to match Jake’s, and then I recovered my maturity.

“I don’t think anyone will want anything to fuck up Jim’s birthday, especially Spencer.”

“Bullshit,” Jake said. “This will liven the entire night. You know that, I know that, everyone knows that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not sure Spencer will dig this shit. This woman can be evil.”

“You *do* know who will be on that yacht, correct?” Jake questioned, slipping his hands into his pockets. “Let’s put this nonsense to bed and perhaps keep her out of her element long enough that she’ll call for a helicopter to pick her up and take her to the airport.”

“Teach her a lesson?” I said, liking the idea of that more than I should.

“Easily,” Jake answered, “if the woman is as nasty as you say, then I say we end that and get her out of your business.”

“I’m not sure this will work. Spencer is pretty pissed.”

“I’ll call ahead to everyone. We’ll be ready, so bring the woman, and let’s teach her that it’s rude to drop in on your son and play games when he’s just trying to lie to you to get you out of his life.” Jake eyed me, “Listen, Nat, she’s likely here to prove you both aren’t married, so let her come around all of us. We’ll play the fake marriage thing up for you guys and kill all her sneaky investigations.”

“I hate this shit,” I exhaled. “Fine. Make sure everyone knows we were married in a tiny little chapel just after Easter, and that’s it.”

“You don’t want to enhance that shit a little?”

“No,” I said. “Keep it simple, and she won’t catch anyone lying. I want her uncomfortable and completely out of her

element. Spencer does not want her here, and as a *good wife* and the good friends you all are, we'll get her to leave town as quickly as she showed up." I ran my hand through my hair, "I just hope Spencer will go along with this."

"Tell him it was my idea for Jim's birthday present."

I shook my head.

Jake chuckled, turning to leave. "Spencer will understand without me ever telling him what our plans are. Trust me, he'll be indebted to my ass for a long time after this."

"And if it doesn't work?" I said uneasily.

"If it doesn't work, I have no idea how you'll get that woman out of your lives. Now, see you on the yacht in a few," he turned and waved as he hopped down the steps, leaving me standing there, tapping my teeth with my nail.

I stood there watching Jake walk away, wondering if this was the worst, childish idea in the world. What a fucking ambush this woman delivered, and yet, I felt we could own this shit—and her—by allowing our friends to play this whole fake marriage game with us.

If it worked, she'd be out of here, and we wouldn't have to worry about this shit anymore. God, who *did* shit like this?

I turned and walked back into the house. I heard Spencer speaking in a low voice to his mother and her annoying as fuck tone, talking back in response to him.

"Spencer," I said with a fake smile. "I need to speak with you alone for a moment."

Spencer rose, and *Mommy Dearest* carried a look of curiosity.

“I’m sure whatever you have to say can be spoken in my presence,” she started. “My feelings aren’t easily wounded.”

“Allow me to remind you that you’re in our home and not yours,” I spoke before Spencer could open his mouth. “And in *our* home, we discuss private matters *in private*.”

“I know this matter is regarding my presence here.”

“Stop,” Spencer cut in before the catfight broke out. “Allow me a moment to discuss your rude, uninvited arrival with my wife. Unfortunately, she had no idea that her future mother-in-law would be *this* intrusive in our lives, and I sure as hell had *no idea* you would behave this way myself.”

“Oh, good grief,” she said, sipping her wine. “Go speak to each other in another room, and I’ll wait out here as the reasonable person I am.”

“Indeed, Heidi,” Spencer said, his hand reaching my lower back, guiding me to the stairs to the master suite, “you are quite the reasonable person.”

When we reached the top of the staircase, we turned and walked into the bedroom. “Okay,” I said once the door was shut tight, “Jake wants your mom to join us on the yacht this weekend.”

“Jake is out of his goddamn mind. No,” Spencer said. “I don’t want Heidi being here to destroy your weekend, so I plan to stay behind with her.”

“Well, if you have to stay behind with Heidi, that means she’s still destroying my weekend.”

Spencer ran his hand through his hair and exhaled, “Nat, please, just go with our friends and enjoy yourself. Don’t make this harder than it already fucking is.”

“That is a hell of a fucking thing to say to me,” I said. “No, you’re going with me. We’re enjoying this with our friends. It will be harder to do this separately than together. And we’ll even have our friends help to drive home our little marriage lie. She’s only here to catch you and me in this lie, I presume?”

“You presume correctly,” he said. “My mother has never done something this insane, showing up on me like this. Of course, it’s only because she’s trying to catch me doing something. Or not doing something.”

“What point does it serve to her if she does? This all seems so above and beyond to me. Will she get all your money if she finds out you’ve been lying to her or something? Is there some clause in the family will that forbids lying?”

He smirked. “No, she’s just trying to get you to run as far as you can from me. Seriously, she wants me settled down with a woman she can use to manipulate to have access to my money and steal the personal freedoms I fought for to keep her out of my life.”

“Yet, here she is in your life, and I’m *married* to you. She’s already manipulating things, and you are falling for it, not me.”

“How the fuck am I falling for anything?”

“By sending me away to deal with her on her own when you have an opportunity to allow your friends to help us end her curiosity about the marriage. If you try to take this on yourself, she will never stop, and she will keep on like this.”

His face twisted into a look of defeat. “Fuck,” he said, looking out the windows. “You’re right.”

“I always am.” I smiled and crossed my arms. “Let’s just enjoy that we have amazing friends who *love* to give bad people hell for trying to destroy the peace of others.”

“This can go any fucking way. You know that, right?”

“I need to know if it is really *that* horrible if she finds out that we’re truly not married.”

“No, it’s not,” he said. “However, at this point, I’m holding onto my pride. I just don’t want that woman to know I gave her so much power in the situation by lying to her about my marriage. Fuck, if she knew *that*?”

“She would see you as weak and scared of her?”

“Exactly,” he let out a breath. “I am neither, but I did this because I didn’t want to deal with her mouth at the wedding, ruining everything for my brother and Nadia.” Then, he stopped and smiled at me, “And maybe it had something to do with being the perfect excuse to spend more than just a weekend alone with you.”

“Well, I don’t want her thinking she has that kind of influence over you. She’d be over the moon to know you went to the trouble of finding a fake wife for her benefit.”

“I’d rather give her the money and buy her out of my life before I give her that sense of self-importance,” he said with disgust.

“I agree.” I walked toward him, “Let’s go fuck with her a little with everyone on our side, shall we?”

He eyed me, “Are you confident you want her on that yacht with all of us?”

“More than. She’s in our territory now.”

“God help us. Jim will murder me for ruining his birthday shindig,” he said, shaking his head.

“As Jake said, Jim will enjoy making your mother uncomfortable, especially because it means helping you solve your problem.”

“All right. Let me tell her she can join us on the yacht or leave my home.”

“How the hell did she get in here, anyway?”

“She manipulated my brother in her usual ways. So now, I must speak with him about his willingness to give up my address and security codes because *Mummy* was concerned for my safety or whatever lie she told to fool him into giving up the goods.”

I stared at Spencer in shock, “Jesus H. Christ, does anyone in your family know how to set a boundary? Would Stephen really do that?”

His eyebrow arched, “I told you she is the master of manipulation and shady tactics. She conned him into doing something, knowing I’d never speak to him again if I found out about it. So, at the risk of me cutting him off, he gave her what she wanted, and that’s why you ended up walking into this today.”

“She’s like a character in a horror movie,” I said, wondering what it must’ve taken to get Stephen to do that.

“And we’re bringing her on the yacht with our friends...”

“Thank God they are who they are.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re wealthy, powerful, smart, and above all, ruthless when it comes to burying the bastards.”

He chuckled, “Yeah, we shall see about that.”

“I have a feeling that this will work,” I reassured him. “Let’s forget the bullshit and enjoy that they’re going to help us.”

“Well, then,” he eyed the bed where my suitcase lay opened, “If you’re finished packing, I will call a driver on my way to tell Heidi what’s happening.”

“I’m packed,” I said, walking over to my suitcase and zipping it up with a smile. “Now, let’s go enjoy the weekend, husband.”

CHAPTER

Thirty-Four

SPENCER

As my chaotic luck would have it, the private detective I hired when we returned from London to investigate Nat's family situation called as I descended the stairs to where my mother awaited on the first floor of the beach house.

Now is not the time, Jeff.

I quickly sent his call to voicemail and stared at my phone, wondering how the fuck I was supposed to get this information in the presence of the Evil Queen. There was no fucking way this shit could've transpired at a worse time.

"You seem upset that I'm here," Heidi said, her delusional comment flaring my irritation to a point I didn't usually reach.

"Fuck," I said, growling under my breath when Jeff called again.

"Spencer, darling," I heard Heidi say, her voice cutting through my head like shattered glass, "you look peckish. Of course, I would have one of your servants tell the chef to prepare you something but imagine my surprise to find that you have *no staff* attending to you at this home. I simply cannot imagine why not, although that is a conversation for another time." She raised her eyebrows in disbelief that anyone could live in their home without the help of fifteen people to wait on them hand and foot. My mother hadn't made

a bed, emptied a trash can, done a single load of laundry, or even made herself a meal in her entire life. “Perhaps Natalia could arrange for food to be catered?”

“No,” I said, looking up at her and slipping my phone into my back pocket. I would handle the call with Jeff from the yacht after I delivered *this birthday gift* into the hands of my buddies, and I had about a fifth of fucking whiskey in my system. “I hope you haven’t unpacked.”

“No, of course not. As I mentioned, no one was here upon my arrival to assist,” she said indignantly. “I will warn you, however, that there will be consequences—mentally and karmically—if you plan to kick me out.”

“Spare me your convenient spirituality and karmic bullshit, Heidi,” I seethed, second-guessing the decision to bring her around my friends, *karmically* fucking them over for four days on a ship.

Of course, *if* she fucked with me, she could always accidentally fall overboard—*Fuck, Spencer. Pull your sorry ass together. Now, you’re thinking about throwing her ass off a four-story yacht? Imagine how that will look in the news. Five fucking billionaires and one of their mothers—*

“If looks could kill, son,” she said with a menacing chuckle. “The expression on your face would have me buried at sea.”

“If only,” I sighed as she rolled her eyes. “I have a car arriving to collect us and bring us out for a four-day cruise in the bay on my good friend’s yacht.”

“Collect *us*?” she questioned.

“Yep,” it made me physically ill to even imagine this, much less say it out loud. “You will be joining Nat and me on

a birthday weekend with my closest friends. I expect you to respect that you are a guest on their boat and are in the presence of extremely wealthy and powerful people.”

“Why must I join this celebration? These are people whom I have never met.”

“Then make a good first impression,” Nat said, walking down the steps and clasping her delicate watch onto her wrist. “As you did with me, of course.”

I grinned at Nat’s beautiful, bitchy smile, thanking God she and I had survived all the weird bullshit of her being shut down with me. I couldn’t imagine not having her sassy spirit back, especially when I currently needed it so much.

“I don’t understand why I must join you two. They did not invite me.”

“You don’t *need* to understand, Heidi,” I said, feeling a bit better about bringing her now that I’d witnessed her immediate discomfort at the idea. “You didn’t need an invitation to show up here unwelcomed either. I know you lied to Stephen for him to give you all access, too, and I will speak to Stephen later about his breach of confidence.”

Her lips turned up into a smile of sheer evil. “Now, that is the last thing I wanted, you boys fighting.”

“The driver is here,” Natalia said, snapping me out of the dark place I was spiraling into with the woman in front of me. “Let’s go. Avery texted and said we’ll take the helicopter to the yacht if they leave port before we get there. I’d love to board the yacht from shore, myself.”

“I’m sure you would, dear, so everyone can see you enjoying your friends’ wealthy lifestyle. That is why you’re married to my son, of course, for the life of luxury?”

“Not another word, Heidi,” I growled. “I’m serious as fuck when I say that your rudeness toward my wife will not be tolerated, so if you have manners, now might be the time to start using them for once in your pathetic life.”

We boarded the yacht just after eight in the evening, and with the *warm* reception from my friends, and the ladies taking Heidi and Nat into their possession, I felt the last couple of hours of chaos fade faster than the booze could’ve worked to calm me down.

“Nat and Heidi seem to have formed a picture-perfect mother-in-law and daughter bond,” Collin teased.

I took another sip of my bourbon, allowed the crisp night air of Southern California to breeze through my hair, and inhaled the salty fragrance of the ocean before responding.

“I swear to God I never meant for *this shit* to follow me out here,” I responded to Collin, where he’d caught me at the bar.

“Yet, here we fucking are,” he smirked. “Listen, Jake filled us in. Your mom will likely behave herself or find herself locked in a stateroom crying into her mink coat.”

“That’s what I’m concerned about,” I said. “I don’t need her shit anywhere around my friends or me. This is fucking ridiculous.”

“Oh, chill out,” Cameron said, his smile mirroring Collin’s.

I grinned at him and Collin, “So, the two top neurosurgeons are going to solve all my private family issues, and I have nothing to fear with that woman embarrassing Nat

or me tonight?” I took another sip. The reality of Nat and I finally getting along well, our relationship moving smoothly before this blasted me tonight, was a reminder that I was scared shitless that Heidi could fuck it all up.

Why the fuck did we bring her along again?

“It’s Nat, man,” Cameron reminded me. “I’ve yet to meet *any* woman who can shake her. She’s fucking impervious to people trying to cause any kind of trouble with her.”

I smiled, appreciating Nat’s beautiful smile from where I stood, then looked back at the two men standing with me. “Natalia has already had enough of what my mother has to offer. Trust me on that. You haven’t met Heidi, and I dread introducing you to her.”

“Have another glass, Spence,” Collin grinned. “Relax a little. We’ve all got this.”

“It’s what I’m afraid of,” I rolled my eyes, then checked my phone when it lit back up again.

Stephen, you fucking dick! I thought. Seeing my brother’s name light up my phone reminded me that I needed to ring back the private investigator. Steve could wait for me to chew his ass out later, but it was a great excuse to dismiss myself from the stern of this yacht for a short time.

I walked over to where Nat stood with the ladies. Shockingly, they all talked pleasantly while my mother fawned all over them.

It looks like the lone wolf can’t hunt alone, I thought, knowing Heidi was outnumbered in wealth, status, and intelligence. She might’ve come from old money, but she’d never accomplished anything alone, unlike these women.

“Steve just called. I’m going to speak with him for a moment in our room. Will you be okay with her while I’m gone for just a moment?”

Nat turned and walked me toward the door leading to the ship’s interior.

“Listen,” she started, “don’t start feeling like you need to babysit my emotions around your mother.”

“It’s not you that I’m worried about babysitting if that is how you see it. Although, I haven’t forgotten how she got to you the night of the wedding, and you never told me why.”

“It was nothing. I was just starting to fall for you or something like that, I’m sure. I was vulnerable, and she said the right thing at the right time. I was fine then, and I’ll be fine now.”

“Nat,” I went to argue, “she’s calculated.”

“I know that,” she leaned up and kissed my chin. “The night of the wedding, she just struck a chord at a time when I wasn’t expecting to be deep into my feelings. Don’t worry about that now. Go and do what you’ve got to do.”

Nat winked and walked away, leaving me to stare at her graceful figure and the perfect way she held herself as if she were the owner of the yacht and not Jacob Mitchell.

I blew out a breath, my stress flowing out with it, and I walked into the yacht toward the elevators of this floating palace. Thank God I was calmer, most likely due to the liquor and the delicious fragrance working together to soothe my frazzled soul.

At least I could think now, and that’s exactly where I needed to be to hear whatever Jeff had to say.

I rang him back and was relieved when he picked up my call on the second ring.

“Jeff here,” he said.

“Hey, it’s Spencer Monroe,” I started. “Sorry, I’m just getting back to you, Jeff. A lot of random shit came up today. I don’t mean to disturb your Friday night.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re pretty high maintenance, Monroe?” his low, rough voice came down the line.

“Yes,” I responded. “My girlfriend loves to remind me.”

“That’s the same girlfriend whose dad I’m working on?”

“Very same,” I responded, “and we’re coming down to the wire on this, so whatever you’ve dug up, I need you to send it to me as soon as possible. If it’s more money you need, and that’s why you called two times in a row—”

“It’s not more money, but the records aren’t pretty,” he said. “If she isn’t already aware of what I’ve found out, I hope you know what you’re doing by telling her.”

I sighed, taking in the PI’s words. I didn’t blame him for his concern because I felt the same. And once I had the chance to look things over with Shane, I knew there was more to the story than I could uncover on my own.

“Well, whatever you’ve found, I need it, and tonight if possible. There’s double what I’ve already paid you if you can send it to me within a half-hour because I need to figure out the best way to tell my girl.”

“Ah,” he said. “Okay, I’m on it. I’ll send you the file now.”

I had to know facts and didn’t have time to waste with Heidi slinking around. Heidi had never had inside information about anything in my life, but when she showed up with

security codes to my home tonight, I was reminded that I'd better get on top of shit.

I was never more grateful than now for hiring a PI to look further into Nat's father; I was hoping it would be a source of closure and healing for Nat and Shane. They needed it, especially if Heidi was armed with any harmful knowledge.

If Heidi wasn't, I was concerned about nothing, but I wouldn't assume she didn't have an ace up her sleeve. I was smarter than that, and Nat didn't deserve to be ambushed and hurt further by this bitch, all because I used her as my fake wife.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Five

After Spencer disappeared into the yacht to handle matters with his brother, I returned to find the fakest and most disgusting version of his mother. Swear to God, this woman was a chameleon.

I stood there, listening to Heidi regale us with tales of when she was our age and how Spencer's dad swept her off her feet. Of course, her stories included all the other ultra-wealthy, desirable men she turned down and how she was the single-most sought-after debutant of her time. She name-dropped the royals and movie stars who'd attended her wedding and gushed about how she was the talk of the town. And after an hour of this vapid bullshit, I was ready to vomit.

Fortunately, Bree knew enough about Heidi to let the ladies know what they were dealing with ahead of time. Although, I'm not sure it was necessary. Bree, Avery, Ash, Jessa, and Elena were nothing like the pretentious, wealthy women Heidi was accustomed to rubbing elbows with, so it made her self-aggrandizing monologue somewhat entertaining because she was embarrassing herself, and she didn't know it.

The girls cast me and each other glances now again, probably trying to assess if this weirdo woman was for real. I

couldn't blame them; I'd never seen anyone try so hard to be impressive, and these stories were the peak of ridiculousness.

When Spence returned, I decided I would let him take over babysitting his mother. I needed a normal conversation with the ladies and a stiff drink.

Sadly, it wouldn't work out that way because just then, the pastry chefs walked out with a giant birthday cake for Jim, which was a replica of the Tower of London. I had no fucking clue why, but I was confident the most desirable debutant of 1976 would ask.

In a way, I felt sorry for Spencer. This woman was an embarrassment, but she also served as a great lesson in understanding why Spence was the strong, bullshit-sniffing businessman he was. No wonder a billion-dollar empire trusted *him* with their secrets, sniffing out their thieves. It was apparent he'd developed keen skills in sensing deceit as a defense mechanism of growing up with the looney-toon who was one dry gin martini ahead of the rest of us.

"It's where they first met," Spencer said in a low voice while Avery teased her husband about the cake she'd surprised him with.

"Well, that cake would be more appropriate for an anniversary—a prank, of course—but *not* for a birthday. How very odd," Heidi whispered back to Spencer.

"Does it fucking matter, Heidi?" Spencer's voice rose loud enough that the laughter from whatever Avery had said to a blushing Jim had stopped, and everyone's eyes focused on where Spencer and I stood near his mother, away from the group. "It's a small group of friends celebrating a birthday; that's fucking it."

“There is no need to get hysterical and cause a scene. It was merely a statement of fact,” she snapped back.

We’d barely joined everyone on this yacht, and I’d already seen three or four of Heidi’s rotating personalities. I couldn’t believe how draining she was or how I would manage another minute near her, let alone multiple days.

“I can’t believe we made it three days on this damn yacht without throwing ourselves overboard,” Spencer said, turning on his side to pull my ass into him as I was rousing awake. “Good morning, sweetheart.”

I smiled when his lips went to my neck. This had turned into my favorite thing...when we were just waking up, and Spencer—who was always awake before me—would surround my entire body with all his strength and muscle. I felt safe, loved, warm, and protected in his arms.

“Me neither. Remind me to thank Jake later for paying his pilots to stay aboard just in case we need to emergency airlift your mother off the yacht.”

I felt Spencer chuckle, “I have to wonder if he *did* pay them to stay on board after tying down that chopper because we were bringing the Wicked Witch of the West with us. However, I think it’s on standby because the real mothers on this yacht want instant access to shore in case any of the children come into trouble.”

“True, and regarding *your* mother, she’s not the wicked witch,” I said, turning to face him, “she’s the devil’s concubine.”

He chuckled and kissed the tip of my nose, “Oh, I don’t think Lucifer would ever allow that. He’s probably terrified of her.”

I couldn’t hold back my laughter. He was probably right.

Once Spencer and I enjoyed our usual wild morning sex, burning enough calories to replace a workout, we were showered and headed to breakfast ten minutes late.

Of course, I was sure Heidi would have something to say about that, but I couldn’t care less. Tomorrow was our last day on the yacht, and I didn’t want any of the weirdness from the previous night to ruin what little time we had left to enjoy ourselves. So, the plan was to visit Catalina today, and I eagerly looked forward to it since I’d never been.

Who knew? Maybe we’d accidentally leave Heidi here. God, I hated that this woman brought out the murderous, all-around hateful bitch in me. Honestly, the negative thoughts I kept having about her were becoming increasingly dark with each passing hour since she’d appeared on Friday evening.

“Good morning,” Avery said, walking past us toward the elegant dining table. “You two are so cute; you look like you’re enjoying a honeymoon. I mean,” she rolled her icy-blue eyes and grinned, “your second honeymoon.”

Jim eyed Avery’s slip-up with a grin of his own to match mine and Spencer’s, but then his expression went dark when he looked over at Heidi. She sat at the table smugly, slicing into her fruit and eyeing us as if we were to be strung up at high noon.

“Is everything okay?” Jim asked her, not wasting a second.

Heidi met the most serious man of the bunch with an eyebrow arch as Spencer's hand tightened around mine. He was picking up on the same shit that everyone around the table was sensing, waiting for this pleasant morning to go sideways.

Heidi's true menacing self was about to emerge, and the sick feeling in my stomach told me I was the one she was about to sink her fangs into.

"Everything is perfectly fine." She slowly set her fork and knife next to her plate and folded her hands. "Though, I'm curious why all you brilliant men, my son included, think it's appropriate for me to be entertained by such childish, foul-mouthed doctors and CEOs?"

"That's enough," Spencer ordered.

"No," Alex said. He was the silent-but-deadly type, primarily quiet compared to his friends, but when he spoke, he was brutal. "I want to know why you believe us to be childish."

His dark eyes, coming from his handsome Johnny Depp look-alike face, were enough for me to remain silent, hoping that Heidi would excuse herself.

But she wouldn't; instead, she used his question to fuel her fire.

"You entertain lies, and you believe I am foolish enough to as well," she said, picking up the linen napkin from her lap and dabbing the corners of her mouth before continuing. "Spencer and his *girlfriend*, Natalia, have conned all of you into lying to me. Who knows, perhaps you all enjoy being lied to as well?"

"What the fuck are you talking about, lady?" Collin spoke up, his wife, Elena nudging him in the side with her elbow,

hoping not to bait the woman more. “Why do you think we’d give two fucks to lie to a stranger?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s something you’re quite accustomed to, Dr. Brooks,” she mocked him. “I’m confident that as a neurosurgeon, it is part of your job to deceive. Give false hope and such.”

“You’ve said enough, Heidi,” Spencer said, taking control of the conversation. The woman was currently out for my blood, and anyone who spoke now would have their words used against them. “You’ve officially worn out your welcome after these insults, and I think it’s time you remain in your room for the remainder of the—”

“Come now, Spencer. I’m not trying to insult anyone more than *I’ve* been insulted. But, now, it’s time for the truth to emerge finally, isn’t it? This goes beyond silly lies of matrimony,” she said, looking directly at me.

I remained silent, not knowing where this was going and not wanting to, either.

“Nothing to say?” she hissed at me.

I fixed my gaze on her with as much venom as I could muster, trying to match her force with my own. “I’d like you to say what you’ve come across the world to say, and then you can promptly return to where you belong,” I snapped.

There was nothing this woman could reveal that would bother me. So, the big secret was out; she knew Spencer and I weren’t married. Whopty-fucking-doo. It wasn’t exactly a scandal, in my opinion. What could she have discovered that my friends already didn’t know about me? That I’d enjoyed a plethora of sex partners throughout my life, or that my brother

was a drug addict? My dad was a dick? The whole world already knew all that.

“Disrespect comes so easy to you,” she murmured, shaking her head as she fixed me with a look that hid nothing of what she thought of me. “Didn’t your mother teach you any manners? Oh...” I saw the evil glimmer in her eyes as she pretended that she’d *accidentally* brought up the most painful thing in my life. She brought her fingers to her mouth, covering it as if she were embarrassed, but I could see the hideous happiness in her eyes. “Forgive me. I seem to recall that she passed on when you were quite young; is that right?”

“Well, you did your research,” I said, everyone’s eyes on me. Spencer remained silent after my eyes pleaded with him to allow me to end this entire charade between his mother and me.

“Indeed, I did, girl,” she said with disgust. “I also learned that your mother’s passing has to do with why your brother is such a cock-up.”

“Mind your words carefully, Heidi,” Spencer said, clenching his jaw tightly. “Rest assured, I have no compunction about calling the police about you intruding into my home. There are plenty of ways to restrain you from being in my presence for entering my home without my permission.”

“My dear, you might not think much of me, which is why you’re resistant to the truth I will reveal—”

“I’ve had enough of your threats,” Spencer interjected.

“Now, now,” Heidi said, reaching for her glass of water. “There’s no need to leap to presumption. I believe you’ll change your mind once I’ve had my say.”

“Then have your goddamn say, and then go,” I said, frustration seeping out of me. “Everyone is waiting on pins and needles for your *big reveal*. But don’t be too let down when nobody reacts the way you want them to. There is nothing a stranger can say about me that they don’t already know.”

“A stranger, eh?” Heidi looked at me with a gaze as if I were pinned to a corkboard by her eyes, “One might say the same about you and the family you came from. That *father* of yours,” she tsked a few times. “He was a foul specimen, wasn’t he?”

I could handle this woman delivering news that my father was a prick in front of all our friends; however, what I didn’t expect was the fear that grabbed me when it registered that this woman *did* research my family. The look on her face was downright sinister, and it gave me the sinking feeling that she was about to reveal something I didn’t want to know.

“Enough,” Spencer boomed.

“No,” she eyed her son. “Natalia just told me to say what I came to say.”

“And *I’m* telling you this is enough, and this conversation is over. I will not hear another foul word spoken about Nat or her family in front of our friends.”

“What do you know, Heidi? How do you know *anything* about my family?” I growled. I was incensed by this woman’s audacity to intrude on my life’s personal details. “Let her speak, Spencer. I’m sick of this shady shit.”

“Right,” she nodded before she locked her gaze on me. “Did you feel sorry for her?”

“Who?” I growled, forgetting we were with everyone aboard the yacht in the breakfast room. Right now, it was just me and this ruthless, sociopathic bitch.

“Why, your poor mother, of course,” she said, her face taking on a falsely piteous look. “She had a most untimely end, didn’t she? When your little brother was so small, leaving you to be raised by your father alone?” She shook her head again. Her sympathy sounded genuine, but her demeanor told a different story. I’d never seen someone relish in recounting another person’s tragedy, and as I listened to her, I was reminded of the part in horror movies where the villain speaks fondly about the bad things they’d done. “What an awful situation.”

“I don’t know how you found out about any of this,” I muttered, surprisingly flustered by what was transpiring. “More importantly, I don’t know why you’ve come all this way to tell me things I already know. I was there, Heidi. I know what happened.”

“I don’t think you know *all* I have to tell you, deary,” she said.

“No, that’s true,” I responded. “I knew you were cruel in Italy, but I had no idea you were a fucking sadist.”

“Nat,” Jim said, trying to catch my attention, “this does not need to be said.”

“The hell it doesn’t, Jim,” I said. I didn’t care what kind of scene this was causing, and I didn’t care if everyone on the ship heard me. I looked back at Heidi, “Quit fucking around, Heidi. Tell me what you gain from being here and treating *me* as though you are reading my last fucking rights?”

“I’m just a mother,” she said, holding her hand to her chest as if I’d mortally offended her, “who’s trying her best to protect her son from the daughter of a *murderer*.”

I could hardly hear anything over my heart pounding in my chest, but I saw Bree scoot back in her chair like she was ready to get up and fight.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Bree nearly shouted. “How dare you imply such a thing?”

“It’s not an implication, my dear,” she said, looking smugger than anyone I’d ever seen. “Do you think I wouldn’t have my people investigate the random *nobody* my son decided to bring to our family estate, claiming to have married? Do not presume to think I am a fool. I am not stupid. I’ve known who my son is from the moment he was born, and there isn’t a woman alive who could change that leopard’s spots.” She stood up and turned to face Spencer, finally allowing me a break from her sadistic gaze. “You can’t really think you could get away with that silly lie that you were married and not expect me to look into it, did you?”

I could tell Spencer was struggling to keep his anger on a leash, and I couldn’t blame him. If our roles had been reversed, I would have had difficulty restraining my temper. However, I’d silenced everyone here to get this woman to speak *her truths*, and now I stood here in shock, feeling more and more dissociated.

“And what did you find out in your valiant search, Mother, other than so many things that are none of your business? Nat’s business is not yours, and you’d do well to remember that.”

“How is this woman’s history none of my business? You brought her into my home with a lie about your marriage to

keep from me what's rightfully mine, when all the while, you've been harboring someone whose father committed an outright murder to get his hands on what wasn't rightfully his. So, I'd say I have a right to be just a bit cross over this, darling."

It was almost impossible to find words as I struggled to process what I'd heard from her.

What the fuck was she talking about, my father murdering my mother? It wasn't what happened. No. No, no fucking way. None of this was true. My mother died in a car accident, coming home from a benefit when Liz and I were home babysitting Shane.

"My mother died in a car accident," I said softly, trying not to make it sound like I was second-guessing that fact suddenly, though my confidence had been entirely shaken.

"Have you never thought it suspicious, *Miss Hoover*?" Heidi said, finally turning her gaze back toward me. "That car of your mother's, which was top-of-the-line according to the reports, suddenly had an issue with the brake fluid level when your mother was, by all accounts, such a diligent and careful person? Spencer?"

I watched as Heidi looked at her son, hoping for a reaction while I was fighting back the urge to vomit. I wanted to snatch up Heidi by her Hermes scarf and tell her to get the fuck out of my life with these ridiculous allegations, but I was frozen to the core over one thing: I knew my father and what he was capable of. And the thought that she could be telling the truth was almost too much for me to comprehend.

"What do you think of this, Spencer?" she urged.

“Nothing much,” Spencer said. “All this is just typical Heidi, hurling vitriol at Nat and saying ludicrous things about how she’s a *nobody* who doesn’t belong here. It’s something I expected of you because you’ve been threatened by her from the moment you first met.”

He was nonchalant, emotionless, and hardly engaging in anything she’d just proclaimed. Perhaps he just wasn’t feeding this fire with emotion, I had no idea, and I couldn’t pull myself together enough to care about anyone’s reactions.

“Ah.” Heidi held up one finger as though she’d hit upon a jackpot. “Yet you say nothing about the allegations about her father.” She tilted her head to the side. “It’s almost like you were expecting me to say it. You’re entirely unfazed, not defending or opposing what I’ve learned. Almost as if this is not news to you?”

Her words rattled through me, and I looked at Spencer.

I wanted him to deny it. Everything in my body repelled the words she’d said to Spencer, and I seemed to be having a visceral reaction to them as I went over it in my mind.

The truth was that he hadn’t been surprised by anything Heidi had said, not about my mother, the brake fluid in her car, or the implication that my father had something to do with it.

“Did you know?” The words fought their way out of my throat. “Is she right, Spencer? Did you know any of this about my parents?”

“Nat—”

“It’s a yes-or-no question, Spencer.” I could barely withstand the tension, waiting for an answer I knew would break me.

“Yes, but Nat,” he said, reaching out to grab hold of my arm. I pulled away from him before he could touch me, holding up a hand as if to ward him off. “I know it sounds incredibly awful, but hear me out. I wasn’t keeping anything —”

“Bullshit!” I yelled at him. “Bullshit, you weren’t, Spencer! You had my family investigated, my parents, and you never told me? Because you knew that I’d say no!” I turned away from him, holding my hands up to my face. I had no idea what to think as I processed the layers of betrayal. I’d never felt this way before, and it was the loneliest feeling I’d ever known.

“I fucking knew it,” I said, turning back to him. “I knew I couldn’t trust you. All your words were just empty, weren’t they? All of it was just empty promises.”

“Nat—”

“Spencer. Stop,” Bree said, her voice firm. “Give me some time with her. And if you care to regain a modicum of trust after going behind Nat’s back and hiring a fucking PI, you need to remove that woman from this yacht.”

It was all fucking burning to the ground around me as I heard voices in the distance, and I struggled to get out to the deck for fresh air. If anything, I wanted the fuck off this ship and away from *everyone*. I’d never felt more betrayed, used, and played in all of my life.

He’d hired a private investigator to investigate my family without my permission or knowledge? What kind of arrogant, disgusting, wealthy fucking pig does that?

I know, Spencer Monroe. Fucking bastard.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Six

SPENCER

The room was so quiet that I could hear the waves splashing against the hull of the yacht as it moved through the sea.

I should've told Nat what I learned from the PI when I called him back, but she had been so unnerved by my mother's presence that I didn't want to add one more bombshell to make her head explode. I wanted to tell her at a time when she felt safe, far away from my vulture of a mother. But because of my hesitation, Heidi landed a death blow to whatever trust Nat might have had in me and probably our entire relationship.

As much as I wanted to blame my mother for this, I was responsible. I'd hired a private investigator without telling Nat, and from the look on her face, that hurt worse than the delivery of the news of her parents. It was painfully clear to me that I'd crossed a sacred boundary, and there was no *safe place* I could've delivered this information which would've made things okay. Heidi or not, *I* was the one who'd hurt her.

"I'll need you to notify the helicopter pilots that I will pay them double for a flight to LAX departing within the hour," I said to Jake while staring at the woman I'd never hated more than I did at this moment. "Heidi, you will wait in your room until the flight is ready to depart."

"Spencer," Heidi said crossly, "this is for your own good."

“I do not need or desire to hear your opinions. Get the fuck up and follow me.”

“Apologies if anyone has been offended today,” she said, standing.

“I don’t speak for myself when I say the only person you should be apologizing to is no longer in our presence,” Jim said while Jake returned to the room and looked at me.

“The pilots will have the chopper ready for departure in ten minutes,” he said while I nodded in return.

God only knew what everyone at this table thought of my sorry ass. There was no fucking explanation, as far as anyone could see, for why I would think to hire a private investigator to look into Natalia’s family because of how Heidi laid it out.

I felt like the worst person on the planet. Luckily, my friends were understanding, and we could talk about what had happened. We were all a bunch of screw-offs, but we were friends—all of us. And that included their friend I’d hurt, Natalia.

I guess when they all wagered that I would fuck up this relationship, they didn’t put their money on this being the way it happened.

“You are making this a much bigger issue than need be,” Heidi said while I walked alongside her silently and full of blistering rage. “I understand that embarrassing you in front of your friends has most likely upset you—”

“Not another word, Heidi,” I said, stiff and unable to diffuse my rising anger. “You will board this helicopter, and it will take you to the airport. If you want to call Marco, Vincenzo, or whomever your assistant is these days to arrange a private jet, you should get busy doing that. Or you can take

the redeye to Milan or sleep in the fucking airport for all I care. What happens to you now is of no interest to me. I wish never to see you or hear your voice for the remainder of my life.”

“Don’t you want to know how I learned you weren’t actually married?” she continued, ignoring everything I’d said.

“I don’t give two fucks how you figured that out,” I said. “It was merely a way to distract you so I could enjoy Stephen’s wedding without your incessant bullshit. I honestly do not care that you learned I deceived you. The only person I care about is the woman you hurt for reasons I am not diabolical enough to understand.”

“She doesn’t belong in our family,” she persisted.

“She’s not *in* this family, and after today, I can’t imagine she’d ever lower herself to join it.”

“You insult us,” she said.

“You’re the most delusional woman I have ever known,” I turned to her. “My father may have chosen to marry you, but I am *only* attached to you through genetics. That is all. Once I am assured that you’re on the next flight out of the country, you will forever be only a memory. We are done.”

“And if the rest of the family? If they determine you are wrong to cut me out of your life? Nonna? Becca?”

I stopped just before exiting the room and looked at her.

“The problem with you,” I started, “is that you’re careless with the people you piss off.”

“Natalia will do *nothing* to me, I assure you.”

I grinned with the menacing spirit I currently felt, “Oh, that’s not the person I’m referring to. You see, my job in life,

which has made me an extremely successful man, is to sniff out the foul people within companies and to determine if companies are worthless or if there is profitable gain potential. I do this purely based on instinct and am one-hundred percent successful with my methods. Which brings me to *you*.”

“And?”

“And, when I’m done with you, every dark secret will be uncovered, and you will be begging to have anything to do with the Monroe family. You are an evil woman, and I have sensed it since I was a boy. You deceived my father and everyone else, including my grandmother. I will ruin you, Heidi *Whitcomb*; I promise you that.”

Her eyes told me everything; I was correct to assume this woman had betrayed more people than only my father in this family. For years, I’d looked the other way and ignored the issues, not wanting to put my family through the grief of following my intuition about my mother, but I didn’t give a fuck anymore. I would burn this shit to the ground, leaving no stone unturned in this case.

This had gone on far too long, and turning my head in the other direction, allowing this fucked-up status quo was wrong.

My father was responsible for the mess he left behind with this woman; now, it was my job to clean it up. Someone had to. And while I bragged about the fact that I could sniff this shit out and protect Mitchell and Associates from people trying to hurt the company, I should be ashamed that I boasted about *that* and yet couldn’t say the same for myself with my own family. It was unacceptable, and because I’d let it go this far, it eventually hurt me where I never imagined I could be wounded.

I would not stop until I fixed this shit, no matter how long it took.

A week had passed since the disastrous bomb blew up on Jake's yacht, and I was still laser-focused on burying Heidi. I didn't have much to fucking work with, though, given that the woman wasn't stupid.

She'd successfully turned my brother and me against each other finally, and there would be no changing the final severing of my relationship with Steve. What Steve admitted to doing, giving Heidi all my security access with only the excuse that *Natalia would ruin my life*, proved to me that Heidi had brainwashed my brother more than I realized.

"You going to hide in here all week or surface for air and return to life as you once knew it?" I heard Jake say.

I glanced up from my desk, setting down the final report I'd been reading from the investigator I'd hired in the UK to dig up everything he could on Heidi. I was sick with defeat, seeing that the woman had her nose clean, and I couldn't legally end her like I'd wanted to.

"Life as I once knew it? Which one?" I said while Alex and Jim filtered into my office as well. The three of them stood before me like they had staged an intervention. "The one where I was aiming to live happily ever after, or the one where I die single and miserable?"

"For fuck's sake," Jake said, casually sitting on the corner of my desk. "I didn't realize you'd turned into a bitch in hiding."

“We should have never let this shit go *this* far,” Alex said as he chuckled and sat in the desk chair in front of me. “And don’t look at me like I’m some asshole who wants you to eat me alive just because I sat in your chair.”

I grinned at him, “Then don’t look so appetizing for starved nerves. I’d give anything to take out my frustration on someone.”

Jake laughed, “Okay, Hannibal. Give Clarice over there a pass, okay? We come in peace.”

“Let’s cut to the chase, shall we?” Jim said, folding his arms and standing at the end of my desk. “You’ve yet to apologize to your beloved for going behind her back and putting a PI on her case, correct?” Jim was the only man I would allow to get away with this shit in my current mood. “Let’s start with *that* before we help you out of this state of depression you’ve found yourself in.”

“I don’t need help with anything,” I insisted. “Seriously, if you can’t find a way to bury my mother and put her ass behind bars for what she did on the yacht, there’s not much you can do—”

“Spare me the dramatics,” Jake said. These guys wouldn’t let up until I pulled my shit together. “Own *your* part in this, man. Your mother didn’t make you sneak behind Nat’s back and pull some fucking entitled rich boy move. That shit is on you.”

“Fuck that,” I said. I firmly believed this would not be happening if it weren’t for Heidi. “I planned on telling Nat about the PI, trust me. I had *no* intention of researching her family with—”

“I’m going to stop you right here,” Alex said while Jim poured a glass of bourbon for himself and returned to sit next to Alex across from my desk. “Allow me to educate you on something, my friend. Rule number one in *all* relationships—soulmate or not—never, and I mean never, do a little *digging*,” he said the word with air quotes. He leaned forward and looked at me like I was a fucking idiot, “Does *that even* register with you? If at any point you feel the need to hire an investigator, don’t date the chick.”

“It wasn’t that, dammit!” I said, standing up, turning, and looking out of my top-story window while I ran my hand through my hair in frustration. “I was looking into her family to help her brother get some closure and help with his drug addiction. Something is fucked up about their father, and I was merely trying to figure out where it all broke down.”

“Being a controlling sociopath doesn’t put your ass too high on the everlasting relationship scale,” Jim said.

I turned back to the men, my frustration apparent because I knew they weren’t getting it.

“I wasn’t controlling fucking anything, man,” I said with defeat.

“How is it not controlling to take the resolution of their deep-seated issues into your own hands? Did they ask you to do this for them? Seriously, Spence?” Jim questioned with a genuine look of confusion. “What the fuck were you thinking, doing this without Nat’s knowledge? I could understand if she knew about it, but it’s pretty insulting and intrusive to go behind her back, regardless of whether your heart was in the right place.”

“You’re right,” I conceded, knowing they were right. “It was an absolute dick move on my part, even if it wasn’t

intended to be. I truly had my heart in the right place; I swear to God, I did.”

“No doubt about that,” Alex said with a smile. I’m sure he was surprised they got through my stubbornness quicker than anticipated.

“We know your heart was in the right place,” Jake said. “Your brain just fucking wasn’t.”

“And it bit you in the ass,” Jim added. “Now, we’re going to help you fix this shit.”

“How the hell do you plan on doing that?” I questioned, sincerely wondering how I could ever regain Nat’s trust. How many times had I told her I’d be patient? Instead of waiting for her to come around and initiate things on her own, I bypassed her completely and told myself I was doing it for her and Shane.

“That’s a hard one,” Alex said. “You know my story, right? My father inflicted untold abuse on me, and I buried that trauma deeply for self-protection. Then, when that trauma and all the memories came bubbling up, it nearly knocked me on my ass. It takes a lot of mental work even to begin to accept things, and only then can we move forward. I’m still working on it every day, and if Nat’s dad was anything like mine, she needs your support, not control disguised as help.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said. “There’s no way I can make this right or fix what I’ve done. I can’t even imagine what Natalia is going through after hearing about her parents like that. Then, my betrayal to top it off. I’ve been so ashamed of how everything unfolded that I haven’t even attempted to reach out to her. I can’t imagine she’d have anything to say to me anyway, so I buried myself in trying to bring down Heidi.”

“It’s called hiding from your issues,” Jim said. “And while you’ve been hiding, Bree and Elena have been working with Nat to deal with what her father has done.”

“I should’ve been there for her,” I said.

“Uh, no,” Alex said. “You’re pretty much an enemy at this point. You’ll have to pray that Nat can deal with this shit, get through it, and then forgive you. Then, hopefully, if she is willing to trust you again, she can determine if she wants to be with you.”

“Fucking facts,” I admitted. “I would never forgive this shit.”

“Now we’re getting a little somewhere with a lesson in humility,” Jim said with a grin.

“How can you smile?” I said.

“Because I’ve been through it.” He pointed his thumb at Alex, “This dipshit has been through it, too. We’ve all been through it.”

“I believe mine is worse. Unforgivable.”

“That’s relative,” Jim answered. “Everyone is different, and every situation is different. Trust is a hard fucking thing, and when it’s broken, you need divine intervention to help put those pieces back together.”

“The good news is this,” Alex said. “You and Nat are barely learning how to navigate a relationship. Things were just starting to move forward, and sometimes, issues must arise so you guys can figure shit out together. There’s a chance this can work.”

“Yeah. Right,” I said, as hopeless as I felt.

“You’re going to have to apologize, but first, her friends need to help her not to bolt out of the room at the mention of your name,” Jim said.

“I’ll call or text her,” I said, unlocking my phone.

“Hold up,” Alex intervened. “Don’t be stupid. Do you want her to forgive you or hate you?”

“I have to say *something*.”

“You missed the chance to get cussed out for *that* apology about a week ago,” Alex said. “That ship has sailed, buddy. Going silent fucked you on that opportunity. So now you have to wait until she can handle the thought of you before you apologize. She can start the process of her hating you then.”

“There’s a possibility she won’t hate you,” Jim said. “She may even listen to what you have to say. But, for now, this is how you need to work your way back.”

“I’m not sure,” I said, leaning forward in my chair. “The more I acknowledge how this looks, hiring a PI to dig into the issues my new girlfriend was too embarrassed to talk about, the worse I feel.” I shook my head and stared at my hands, “It’s so messed up. There’s honestly *no way* I can get her to trust me after this. How will she believe I was ultimately doing this to help her and Shane move forward and put that bastard behind them?”

“That’s exactly how you’re going to fix this. You’re going to help them mend it all. A man who truly loves a woman will stick by her side, even if she hates him for fucking shit up. Your heart was in the right place; your mind just wasn’t at the time. If your heart is telling you to help them, then listen to it.”

“How can I help them if Nat isn’t speaking to me?”

“Help her brother overcome his demons,” Jim continued. “It’s what you set out to do in the first place.”

“True. I haven’t even returned his calls yet,” I said, feeling like a bastard for ghosting him too.

“Yeah, well, thank God we’ve wrangled the kid while you’ve been on a mission to punish your mother,” Alex said. “How’s that working out for you?”

“I’ve got nothing on her, and now, my brother and I are no longer speaking to each other.”

“How do you feel about losing your brother over this?” Jim asked.

“Horrible, like this is one big fucking mess,” I answered. “I just need to prioritize. I can’t lose Natalia. I need her in my life. We barely began a solid relationship before I burned it to the ground.”

“Forgiveness is a beautiful thing,” Jim said, “and it all starts with humility. You need to start somewhere, and I think working with her brother is the *only* way you’ll get yourself back in her life.”

“Then that’s where I start,” I said. “I’ll fund any program he needs.”

“Stop throwing money at things,” Jake said. “I know we’re all born and bred to use our wealth as an answer to everything. But, trust me, you want to be helpful in a hands-on approach and go from there. If money is needed, then use it, but stop instantly assuming that financing anything will help them. Got me?”

“I’m with you. I need to meet with Shane and figure out where he’s at with everything. You’re sure I shouldn’t contact her?”

“What does your gut tell you when you think about doing it?” Alex questioned.

“That if I don’t try and reach out, then she’s got nothing. She at least needs me to do something to show my heart is still with her, whether she loves or hates me. I won’t rest easy if I don’t.”

“Text the woman,” Jim stood, “and then get ahold of her brother. And while you’re working on that, let’s get some dinner and talk about the Yarmin Company.”

“Right behind you guys,” I said as the trio stood to leave. “And thank you. I appreciate it.”

“We just want to ensure you’re both happy,” Jim said.

“Gotta get that lady back,” Alex said before they disappeared from my office, leaving me to pack up and pull my shit together.

I knew what I needed to do; if I lost Nat, I lost her. However, I would not allow her to suffer without me trying to be there for her.

I was worried that her father was her enemy, and in my determination to figure that out, I also became an enemy. Fuck. Being a fixer had bit me in the ass this time, but if I wished for Nat to forgive me, I needed to find the strength to forgive myself first.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Seven

I walked out of the showing with my clients, completely satisfied with how it went. I turned back and smiled at the newlywed couple who, from the looks on their faces, were already deciding which room would be the nursery.

“And I’m sure you’re both going to want to place an offer as soon as I get back to the office,” I said presumptively.

“I think we should probably discuss this property a little more,” the young man said, daring to look at his wife for her reaction to his comment.

“Listen, Travis, I need to level with you since your beautiful wife here has eyes that are begging me to be the bad guy in this,” I teased, glancing at her subtle nod. I looked up at the beautiful home nestled in Hollywood Hills, knowing this was the right place for them. “It’s got everything you want: the pool, the feel of privacy, and multiple rooms to accommodate a growing family. I could go on and on, but as we’ve discussed over the tour, it meets every need you both have. That said, you need to know that at least four other couples love this house and its amenities as much as you do.” I’d worked with too many couples like this to count, and I didn’t want this house to slip away from them. “Now, I can get your offer in as soon as possible. I happen to be great friends with the listing

agent, and I know she'll put in a good word for us, but we can't wait too long."

"I know what you're trying to do," Travis said as his wife—who owned a boutique clothing store on Rodeo Drive and could single-handedly fund the acquisition of this home and then some—clung to him, pleading for him to say yes.

"Oh, you do?" I questioned with a smile. "You mean, place pressure on you, so you make a decision that will get you laid tonight?"

Travis coughed, and I chuckled. Thankfully, these two were fun and had a sense of humor, or else I couldn't be my usual self.

"Well, if that's the case," Travis eyed his adorable wife.

"I assume this is our home, then?" Natasha finally broke her silence and allowed us to hear her soft French accent. Her excitement was understated but infectious.

"This is the home for you," I said. "Waiting and overthinking will cost you in this market. Houses are moving fast; if a bidding war commences, it might sell over the listing price. But if you truly love it, and it *feels* like the place you can see yourself growing your family, that is the only guide you need. You each know what is right for you, and you don't need my nonsense to encourage the right idea."

"Seems you're good with home purchasing and relationships?" Travis said, bringing his wife to his side.

"I would love to tell you I was an expert in relationships, but sadly, that is not my department. I can say this, though, your relationship is what you both make it. Your home is your refuge and something that is yours together. It's where you can shut out the world and just be together. You both seem to love

everything about the home as if it fits both of your tastes, and I honestly think it's the correct decision. But only you two—”

“We'll offer the full asking price and go from there. Call the listing agent now because I want my wife to be reassured that this home is hers.”

I smiled at Travis. “Give me a moment,” I said, already knowing the particulars of their financing and how to structure the deal.

I'd been looking at properties for myself on and off for years, but I had yet to come across anything that spoke to me the way this home spoke to Travis and Natasha.

It was a beautiful thing when the potential home was perfect for the couple, and I always had a sixth sense for guiding people to the right home. Call me strange, but I could feel the pull that certain people had to properties. Perhaps I just liked the idea that every house was waiting to embrace a happy family because I wanted both of those things so desperately as a child. Home never felt warm and comfortable to me; it was always a place of anguish and despair. As an adult, I'd assumed I'd never find my perfect match either in a home or with a man. But then there was Spencer.

Spencer was the perfect fit for me; however, I wasn't sure I could ever forgive how he went behind my back to get answers. It was mortifying to think about him doing that. The worst part was that he hadn't bothered to tell me he was even thinking about it. I couldn't reconcile how he'd gone from being patient and understanding to making the executive decision of digging up all the dirt on my family. What kind of fucking leap is that?

It was disturbing, and I'd never felt so insulted in all my life. And now, after distracting myself all day with Travis and

Natasha, I was going to end up where I started, feeling this knot in my stomach again.

Fuck this shit. Spencer was living rent-free in my head whenever I'd let him, but that bastard could go fuck himself along with the text message he sent me an hour ago that I deleted without reading. My sexy ass was worth more than a text after a week of going dark on me as if *I* were the one who massively fucked up.

I reached over and turned on my classical music playlist, something I did to elevate my mood whenever I felt myself spiraling. I would *not* allow these particular demons to get a hold of me and destroy anything good in my life.

I needed to hit the kill switch on the Spencer thoughts and get to meet up with the ladies for dinner tonight. There was a good chance he would be brought up, given I would be out with the wives of all his friends, but I was hoping they wouldn't talk about him. I'd already vented my frustrations to them and grieved the loss of the idea that I'd found the only man I wanted to commit to fully. I'd closed that door and dead-bolted it, so I would be shocked if any of them brought Spencer up tonight.

I planned to talk about my two successful real estate closings tonight, and I would keep the conversation there.

I sipped the last of my wine and studied the bottle, debating whether I should pour myself another. Ah, fuck it, I deserve it.

"Damn fine meal, ladies, and damn fine wine," I said as I poured my wine glass half full.

“Well, after today’s successful events for you,” Ashley, Jake’s wife, said with a smile as sweet as she was, “you deserve it. If only I could talk my clients at the art gallery into buying my canvases like you talk your clients into purchasing homes.”

“Honey,” I grinned and sipped my wine, “one will never be able to talk anyone into purchasing anything in the ways that I do.”

“That’s the truth. Who knows, though? Maybe someday you’ll face your Everest, and you’ll be stumped,” Avery added with her usual sass.

I arched an eyebrow at her. “I wish I could agree, but hell, I could sell a vibrator to a nun during church.” I sat back in my seat as the ladies laughed.

The wine was hard at work, relaxing me and pushing my mind into some carefree way of thinking that usually got me in trouble if I wasn’t too careful. Lately, I made a point not to drink at all because I knew it would bring up the topics I’d been desperately pushing out of my mind, and I would not let it come to *that*.

“So,” Bree interjected, “why don’t we all jump in the car and drive up the coast tonight?”

We looked at her calculatingly, each of us determining if being so carefree on a Tuesday night was a good idea.

“I have a showing early in the morning,” I said as soon as I felt that knot return to my stomach.

I had these strange moments when I felt a rush of sudden emptiness or deep sadness. I couldn’t decide which. All I knew was they were there, and they weren’t welcomed

feelings. I could hardly stomach them, so I couldn't process them, or I would go straight to panic.

I stood. Just the acknowledgment of these thoughts made me anxious. I couldn't bear this, and I wouldn't.

"You know what?" I said, trying to cover for myself, "I think the wine has gotten to me tonight. So, I'm going to go ahead and leave."

"Not without me," Avery said, standing.

"You okay?" Bree asked.

"I'm fine, honey," I assured her. "I'll be just fine."

"No," Bree sighed.

"Bree," I snapped, the anxiousness making me lash out like a caged animal. "Please, don't. I'm fine."

Ash eyed me with a sorrowful expression that was too much for me, and I turned to leave without even considering paying for my share of the meal.

"Fuck," I said, my heart in some electric spasm, racing faster than a rabbit.

"It's cool," Avery said, directly on my heels to the point that I turned and nearly ran her over.

"I need to leave some cash," I said.

"Bree is handling it. Let's get you out of here," Avery said, somehow picking up that I suddenly wasn't going to make it.

"Don't, Av," I ordered her. I felt like I was in full-blown survival mode, praying that my mind would slow down and my lungs could breathe in the oxygen they so desperately were starved of.

I marched out of the restaurant, nearly plunging into the valets, unable to pull myself together enough to ask them to retrieve my car. I didn't want to talk to anyone; I wanted to run. I wanted to be alone. I wanted fucking oxygen and peace.

Goddammit.

I had no idea how we got there, but Avery and I ended up on the top of a small hill overlooking the restaurant and parking lot. The grass was so cool compared to my body, which was scorching hot. I wanted to fall back on the ground and transfer this hot, horrible energy into the earth.

Instead of rolling in the grass like a piglet, I pulled my legs into my chest and collapsed over my knees. I inhaled and exhaled in silence, feeling tears streaming down my cheeks and allowing the sobs to become more than just silent.

I felt a warm hand on my back, and the rhythm it ran over me soothed me to my core.

"Thank you," I said finally, after what felt like five minutes of sitting here and trying to pull myself together. "I promise I'm not a wreck like this. I don't know where it came from. I've never been prone to panic."

"Don't you dare apologize," Avery's scratchy voice said.

I sniffed and looked up at the trees that hung over where I sat. "Ugh," I said, hanging onto the word. "Damn *him* for this."

"How is she?" Bree questioned as she and Ashley walked up the hill.

"*She* is fine," I said, tears still filling my eyes. "She's probably going to call this place her home now, too." I glanced around, seeing all the litter left behind by whoever had

occupied this spot previously. “We really need to do something about the homeless problem here, you know?”

A lamp lighted Ashley’s expression in this quaint park-like area where I sat. “Well, we successfully have gone from you selling nearly ten million dollars’ worth in homes today to you believing we need to find homes for everyone.”

“It’s sad.” I looked around and wondered if there was a possibility my brother was among these dark shadows I saw off in the darker areas of the park. “There are so many people struggling, feeling like they’re drowning and can’t get to the surface for air.”

“I know the feeling,” Avery said. “While you may not be the type who panics, *I* have suffered from panic attacks for most of my life. It’s much better now, almost nonexistent, but they were constant and awful before I met Jim.”

“What seemed to calm them?” I questioned, desperate for answers so this never happened again.

“Getting back the control I’d lost in my life was the problem. At first, I believed it was the comfort of having Jim with me, but after I lost him for a time, I realized he was just another crutch I used to hide behind my fears.”

“Ha,” I rolled my eyes and looked to where my other two friends sat in front of me. “Well, I think it’s safe to say that Spencer will take no part in me having a crutch to get through the anxiety.”

“Your feelings for him, coupled with the pain he caused you and the trust he broke, is partly the reason for this,” Bree said fearlessly.

I grinned. “Sorry I mentioned him.”

“You hide from it, Nat,” Bree said. My closest friend in the group was saying what she’d been holding back for days. “You have *got* to stop doing this. You’re only hurting yourself and hiding from the issues. That is why you’re dealing with this panic, and Avery is correct. This stems from a loss of control. I won’t let you continue to bury this.”

I sighed, “But I’m making such good money by burying this and working instead.”

Ash chuckled. “If *only* money were the solution to our karmic problems.”

“Don’t you dare start going into the Universe, past lives, and karma on me, you little spirit chaser,” I teased.

“Hey,” she held her hands up, “take it for what it’s worth. The bottom line, karma or not, is that you have to face your issues, deal with them, learn from them, and heal from them.”

“And here comes my session,” I playfully poked back. “Listen, I know I have issues with that man. The sound of his name coming out of my mouth makes my stomach twist. I hate the memory of him, and I hate the goodness I saw in him. I hate that I can still smell him and hear his voice. He haunts me like a nightmare, and I don’t know why I can’t just get it out of my system and let him go?”

“It’s because you fell in love with him,” Avery smiled at me. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There *is* something wrong with that,” I answered. “The man is a fucking bastard who didn’t trust me enough to tell me he was privately investigating my family. I’ve honestly never been so insulted and mortified in my life.”

“That’s because these men are all fucking dipshits,” Ashley said in a way that forced a laugh out of me.

“That’s one way to put it,” Avery added.

The tone changed entirely for me at that moment.

“I know your men all put you guys through hell,” I said, “but I don’t think they went near what Spencer did.”

“No,” Bree said, “but the degree of offense doesn’t matter. Each of us felt the same knife through our hearts that you’re feeling now. You’re not alone. They’re fucking idiots who’ve excelled at their professions but failed miserably at different points in their relationships.”

“It starts with bragging that they’ll never fall in love,” Avery paused and rolled her eyes as if she’d been a fly on the wall in each of their conversations.

“Then they raise their glasses to toast the next fallen asshole,” Ashley added with a laugh.

“I also swore to myself I would *not* be a victim of love. I don’t know how this even happened to me,” I said.

“You think you’re the only woman out there who put walls around her heart to protect herself from a man?” Avery said with a smile. “Babe, none of us went searching for a love like this, especially with *these* men who were known for using women for their pleasure because of their wealth and looks. We certainly didn’t volunteer to be the guinea pigs for these doofuses to learn their hard relationship lessons.”

“But you did, and so did I, apparently.”

“Don’t look at it like that, Nat. You didn’t *sign up* to fall in love with Spencer,” Ash said. “You know, when I heard you were doing this fake marriage idea, I thought it was cute but dangerous.”

“I don’t see how it could be dangerous. It was founded on being fake. There was no way in the world I would’ve seen a relationship coming from this,” I said.

“Spencer is as handsome as they come,” Ash continued, “and he started the thing off by asking you to do something to help him, knowing he would be in a vulnerable state. He subconsciously chose you because I think he needed a powerful woman at his side to face off with his bitch of a mother.”

“You think he was afraid of her?” I said, somewhat getting her point but also confused by it.

“I believe he needed a partner to help him be in her presence and deal with her bullshit. You were the perfect match for him, and he knew it. What both of you didn’t know was that this would be a bonding event,” Ashley answered.

“But the reality is that we are two players who played with fire and got burned.”

“True,” Bree said, “but you either lick your wounds, heal, and get back up and fight or stay down and stay out of control. Whether you and Spencer can heal from this together or apart or whether you get back together is in your hands. But first, you need to heal.”

“I never imagined that I would be the one needing these support talks. I always took my problems to bed with me and a vibrator, and I was healed by that night,” I laughed. “And now, I’ve found a man who—”

“Hurts worse than when the vibrator runs out of batteries?” Avery teased.

“No,” I eyed her playfully, “a man whose dick is more magical than any vibrator ever invented.”

“Dear God,” Bree said. “I should’ve known somehow you’d begin bragging about his dick to all of us.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s only because this is the *rare occasion* where the man’s penis is smarter than his brain,” I said, standing up and feeling more like myself. “Now, I need to seriously go get in a hot bath after all this girl talk.”

“Why don’t you let me drive you home?” Bree said.

“One day, you’ll be the mother to those twins only, and stop including me as one of your children,” I said. “I’m fine and feel much better now that we can all agree these men are dipshits, and I’m the newest victim.”

“Love will always come out of nowhere,” Ashley said. “Every time. What you do with it and the lessons it sends your way makes the difference.”

“Well, I will tell you all this; what I will *do with it* stands to be decided. I will not be hurt again, and I promised myself and Spencer that I would have his balls on a silver platter if he ever hurt me. He obviously didn’t take that threat seriously.”

“Before we start thinking about cutting off balls, let’s take this a day at a time. You’re coming over tomorrow to go over the plans for that beach house, correct?”

I looked at Bree, “So long as we’re not bringing up relationships, yes. Because I think I will make an offer on that home. I’ve got more than enough money saved, but for some strange reason, I’m starting to think my asshole boss, Adam, is fucking with me and stealing my commissions. Jesus, where is Spencer when I need him? He could sniff this man out in a heartbeat. It’s a damn shame he concerned himself with sniffing out me and my family issues instead.”

“Let’s go home,” Bree said. “I want to show you what I have designed for the place.”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Avery said, “before we end up in a turf war with those people over there.”

“Thank you all for being there for me tonight. It did help, no matter how messed up the entire situation.”

After we left, I drove home with a bit of peace, but one glance back at the homeless people spending their night in the park made me wonder if I was leaving my brother on that hill or somewhere in the dark with no place to call home. I had no idea and had no way of processing how that made me feel. It would be nice to hear from him again and know if he is okay.

How was it that over the course of a month, I’d managed to lose the only two men I loved? I didn’t understand what was going on with my life.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Eight

SPENCER

I rolled my pen through my fingers, studying the file Jeff, the private investigator, had sent over. My eyes roamed over all the evidence, which should've been looked into further after Nat's mom passed in her car accident, but something had put a stop to the investigations.

"The fucker probably paid off a dirty cop," I said softly, swiveling in my office chair before I turned to face the windows behind my desk.

"Don't they all?" I heard Jim say, announcing his presence in my office.

I turned and rose to see Shane standing at his side. The kid looked like Jim plucked his sorry ass off the closest park bench and brought him up to me.

"How the hell are you getting by, man?" I asked, deeply concerned for him.

"I'm paying the price of being an addict who hasn't hit rock bottom—"

"Oh, fuck off with that," I said while Jim nodded and took his exit. "I don't want any excuses. I want solutions."

Shane rolled his eyes, and if I didn't have any love for Natalia in my heart, I would have asked his disrespectful drug

addict ass to leave my presence. But I loved the woman and had a soft spot for what she and her brother went through with their shitbird of a father.

“I see you’re currently high,” I said. “Sit down. We need to talk.”

“How would you know if I’m high?” he growled.

“Because only someone high as fuck would be brave enough to walk into my office and roll their goddamn eyes at me,” I answered, walking around my desk and sitting on the edge. “Let’s get straight to brass tacks about how we’re going to drag your ass to rock bottom and get you back up on your feet again.”

“Man,” he said, tears forming in his eyes, “I’m trying. I’ve tried. I don’t know what to fucking do. My life feels hopeless, and whenever things start to feel great, I fucking bottom out. The drugs keep me alive; they get me through. They—”

“It’s all a lie, man, the drugs *and* what you believe they do for you.” I sighed. “I’m not an expert in addicts and why certain people tend to abuse substances for their perceived survival, but I know that it’s all an illusion you’re creating. So, every time the high wears off, and the façade falls, you hurry to your next fix instead of looking at your reality.”

“How would you know if you’ve never been down this road?”

“I’ve never been down that road because I never wanted to look the way you do now. You look like death, yet you sit here and tell me that shit breathes life into you so you can go on another day.” I stood and exhaled, not knowing where to start. “I want to help you. We discussed this last week, but you fell

off the face of the earth on me,” I waved my hand toward his appearance, “for obvious reasons, I see.”

“I just don’t know—”

“Just how high *are* you?” I asked. The kid looked like he was half asleep.

“I’m doing good. I keep everything at a base level, always the same amount.”

I stared at him in shock. “Base level? So now you’re regulating your drug abuse? How the *fuck* does that work?”

“I take normal doses.”

“Normal doses? What exactly is a *normal dose* of an illicit narcotic, huh?” I had to stop myself from yelling at his ludicrous fucking logic. “Okay, this shit isn’t going to work for me. Until you get sober, I cannot have an adult conversation with you.” I stood and walked around to sit at my desk. “By the look of you, I assume you still have not communicated with your sister?”

“No,” he said, blowing out a hard breath.

“Jim,” I said, ringing his desk intercom from mine.

“Right here,” he answered.

“I need Avery to text me some numbers of good rehab centers while I have the kid with me. I’m driving him there instead of taking his word that he’ll check in himself this time.”

“Got it. There is an excellent center she works with at her women’s center. You want to check him in?”

“Right. Have Av send me the numbers.” I looked back at Shane. It probably wasn’t the right time to talk about his dad’s shady shit. “Avery will get me the number I need in a few minutes, but what I want from you is your word.”

“My word?”

I nodded, “You seem like the type to keep your word, high or not? Yes?”

“Well, I—”

“What I know from others who’ve checked themselves into centers—or in your case, had a wealthy individual care enough to fund an all-expense paid vacation to one—is that they all seem to have something in common.”

“What’s that?”

“A will to live and desperation for a second chance at life,” I said. “Is that something you’re interested in? Do you want to live strong and independently or remain in this illusion of drugs being your life support system, which is blindfolding you on your way to an early grave?”

“I do, but fuck,” he started to get agitated, “you have no idea how hard it is. I’m not sure I can do this.”

“The center Mrs. Mitchell recommends won’t be an uncomfortable place, I assure you. They’ll have everything you need to keep comfortable as you detox and learn to start over without the drugs.”

“It’s not that. It’s just—when I’m sober, I see it all again. The night she died. Then, I feel the pain and emptiness of losing my mom,” he said, tears streaming down his face. “How am I supposed to function, knowing nothing can ever take that pain away? I don’t want to feel it.”

My heart ached for him, and I knelt in front of where he covered his face in his hands. The smell of the kid made a dumpster seem sanitary. “I don’t understand anything of *your* grief, the horror of not being able to grieve properly, and then the nightmare of an abusive father.” His hands pulled away from his face, and his eyes locked with mine. “My father was my idol, and when he died, my sadistic mother was not exactly nurturing to my siblings and me. I don’t say this to compare grief but to let you know I understand the loneliness of losing the person who loved you most. We handled our pain differently, as all people do. It doesn’t make it right or wrong. Me becoming a workaholic wasn’t exactly a *healthy* coping mechanism, I’m sure, so I’m not passing judgment.”

“I’m sorry about your dad. Is your mom really that bad?” he asked.

“My mother is a stone-cold sociopath,” I said. “My father died of a heart attack, but part of me wonders if that woman was responsible for it.”

“You think she killed him?”

Fuck, that came out wrong, given what I’d discovered about his parents.

“Do I think she gave him something to induce a heart attack? No. But she pushed and pushed him, insisting he work harder to secure *their* future. The irony is that my father was one of the most successful businessmen in Italy, so he did not need to work as hard as he did, if at all. Who knows? Maybe he was just trying to avoid her all that time,” I said with a slight laugh.

“Your father was Italian?” Shane asked with a look of confusion.

“Very Italian,” I said. “I know what you’re thinking; Monroe is *not* an Italian name. My father’s family has lived in Scotland for more generations than I can count. His father met my Nonna on holiday on the Amalfi Coast, and the rest is history. Suffice it to say that my grandfather preferred the weather in Italy to the Scottish Highlands, and they made their fortune in the olive oil business. My father expanded that business and became a self-made billionaire in the process.”

“He sounds impressive,” Shane said with a look of melancholy. “I wish my father could’ve been like that.”

“He was a force, and I worshipped him,” I said, seeing my father in my mind’s eye and missing him immensely. “My mother’s incessant manipulations wore him down, and soon after his death, it didn’t take long for me to hate everything about her. I knew instinctually that she wasn’t trustworthy, and I spent the better part of my childhood observing and analyzing her behavior out of self-protection. Flexing those mental muscles and observing every micro-aggression or weird vibe from an early age is why I am so good at my job. Perhaps my intuitive ability is a gift, I’m not sure, but with this sixth sense, I can see that you’re a good person, Shane.”

He looked away from me and shook his head, “Don’t bullshit me, man.”

I chuckled and stood, looking down when his eyes met mine again, “Trust me, I’m not the type.”

“Are you trying to score points with my sister?”

“I think that game ended before it started,” I said, feeling an emptiness in my gut that I hated. “Your sister and I are no longer seeing each other.”

He laughed with disgust and rolled his eyes, “Let me guess, she ran off with another guy. A relationship was too much for her?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Your sister is a beautiful soul, and I fucked this one up, buddy.”

“How the hell did you do that? You were a full-blown clinger with her. I’m positive you scared her off.”

I stared at him in disbelief at his likely true insults. “I probably was a bit much in the beginning, and I’m sure of that. However, I betrayed her trust, and from what I’ve gathered, that’s not something easily earned back.”

“So, you’re fixing me to get her back?”

I smiled. “I would be lying if I told you *no*, but after sitting here with you, I promise this is more than that. I see a good person who fell into a void, and I want to give him a hand and help him out. You’re a good kid, Shane, and I want to help you get back on your feet where you belong. You, your sister, and even I deserve to be happy in this life, despite what our fucked-up parents have done to derail it.”

“Yeah?”

“That and after this week, I no longer have a relationship with my brother. Perhaps I’ll take your ass in and work my way into your sister’s heart from there.”

“Glad I can help.”

My phone dinged, and it was probably Avery’s text.

“Let’s stop worrying about everyone and everything else and give you the help you need.”

He stood up, nervous.

“You can do this, but you need to do this for yourself above anyone else,” I said, trying to be his number-one cheerleader. “Do it for her memory.” I watched him stare out at the sprawling city that went on forever from the vantage point of my office window.

“Who?”

“Your mother,” I said, a bit nervous that I’d overreached on that statement.

He turned back to me, tears in his eyes, “She’d be so upset with me.”

“We’re not doing *that*,” I said sternly. “None of that shit, you hear me?”

“It’s the fucking truth.”

“That’s fine,” I said, “but you need to talk about the positive.”

He shook his head, “I don’t know how the fuck you find anything positive in that truth.”

“The solution is where you’ll find the positive.”

“The only solution is to make her proud. The opposite of what I’m doing.”

I nodded. “Let’s go make that fucking happen, then.” I extended my hand toward the door and felt a little bit more confident this kid might do the time and get straight.

While Shane was cleaning up his act, I was going to finish getting answers on Natalia’s father. She was already angry with me, so the least I could do with my fuck-up was give her information that could be useful to her. There was more to her father and what he’d done; I just didn’t know what that was.

I vowed to Shane that I would be there on his meeting days and any other time he needed a friend or someone for mental support. He didn't want to inform Natalia about checking into rehab because she'd seen him be unsuccessful many times before, and he didn't want to make any promises he couldn't keep. And that only fueled me to stick through this with him.

The loss of Natalia was a constant and steady tear in my heart, but I was learning to ignore the pain. How could it hurt to lose someone when, looking at it in the rearview, I'd never really and truly had her? The demons of our past swarmed around us the moment I introduced her to my mother.

I'd seen Nat as great sex and personality, which is why I believed it was okay to put her up against my mother. In the end, that burned my ass to the ground. But I didn't care what it did to me. I cared that it hurt an innocent woman who, no matter how strong she appeared to be, was only human.

CHAPTER

Thirty-Nine

SPENCER

I paced through the office, having just returned from a session with Nat's brother. After only a month, the kid's progress was blowing my mind. He was conquering his demons and slaying the shit out of everything that'd held him down for too damn long. Of course, I knew he had a road to travel before we could celebrate, but I didn't hold back my acclamations every time I was there.

He'd switched from drug use to cigarettes, and I'm sure Nat would've kicked my ass for being his outside supplier, but I wasn't complaining. He'd come a long way, and we'd work on his nicotine habit down the road.

I got to the office early, stopped in the café to get my morning cappuccino, and went to my office.

"So, when are you going to tell Nat?" Jim asked, standing in my doorway and glancing down at a portfolio in his hands.

"Tell Nat what, that her brother needs a nicotine patch now? He's alive and well, and that's what matters. It's not that I don't have the courage to tell her myself, I was just—"

"What?" Jim said, looking up from the paperwork in his hands and staring at me like I was an idiot. "No, dumb ass. How can you possibly think I give a fuck about his addiction

to cigarettes? I'm referring to the information Jeff sent over last night. You know, the PI you're *still* using."

"Yeah, well, I'm working on that."

"If you think this will play out like some fucking romance movie or something, you're wrong. You need to sit down with her."

"I know that. I just wanted to handle this when her brother is out of rehab and sober."

Jim seated himself across the desk from me. "This shit can't wait. You *know* this can't wait. Stop doing undercover shit behind her back like she's a company we're investigating, hoping to use the element of surprise before we start getting people arrested."

"Why must you always come at me like I'm trying to treat Natalia like she's business?"

"Because that's what you're doing. You're in this position because of it, and you *continue* to do this shit behind her back, not being upfront about anything. She's a woman—*your woman* if you play this right—so don't keep fucking it up."

"I understand, but I didn't have all the information I needed until last evening. I didn't want to go waltzing up to the woman, who is probably itching to cut my dick off, and tell her I learned something else after investigating her mother's death behind her back."

Jim sat back in his chair and studied me, "When you think about it, you're fucked either way. She's going to be even more furious that you continued researching her."

"So glad you're making me feel better about this," I answered.

“Not my job to make you feel better. It’s my job to make sure you don’t keep fucking it up, and I think I slipped on that part.”

“Jim,” I said, nervous now, “what the fuck?”

He grinned. “Love is a beautiful thing, man,” he said, “and if she loves you, she might forgive this. However, you might be right to show up with her brother gift-wrapped and sober. And speaking of which, don’t you think she should know that he’s safely off the streets and in rehab?”

“You’re seriously mind-fucking me right now. What the fuck do I do?”

“The right thing,” Jim answered, “and only *you* know what that is.”

I sighed. “Yeah, thinking I was doing the right thing got me into this shit storm. I think it’s obvious that my right and wrong meter is broken.”

Jim chuckled and stood up, “Seems like you’re on the right track, though, admitting to your faults and wrong choices. You can only learn and grow from there.”

“Get the fuck out of here, dude.”

“It’ll all work out, just try not to force it. Follow your heart.”

“Again, my heart fucked me the last time too.”

Jim shook his head, “Stop being a bitch.”

I chuckled, “Now, we’re getting somewhere.”

After Jim left my office, I resumed studying the file Jeff had sent over.

Why the fuck did I let Jim leave? I needed to run this shit past him. So, I called him on the intercom and asked him back in.

“Some of us are trying to run empires and shit, you know? What do you need?” he asked, stepping back into my office.

“Check this shit out,” I said, feeling more comfortable investigating hard facts instead of trying to work out mental love-life situations in my head. “As you know and have reamed my ass about, I’ve done more digging on Nat’s dad. In my defense,” I said as Jim smugly raised his eyebrow at me with disapproval, “I only did so because if the bastard did murder her mom like everything seems to indicate, I wonder if he wouldn’t do the same to his kids. I mean, you should’ve seen Shane’s face when he showed up in London, Jim. He didn’t just have a black eye; the kid was brutally beaten by his father.” Jim’s demeanor softened as I continued. “It turns out, this shady bastard has been up to *no good* when it comes to his daughter.”

“No good, as in what?” Jim answered.

I glanced at my laptop and then at Jim. “The real estate company Nat works for has a mysterious investor that caught my attention.”

“How the *fuck* did you go from researching her mother’s death to investigating the company she works for? Are you *trying* to get her to murder you?”

“On the surface, it does appear extremely obsessive—”

“Just a little,” Jim answered sarcastically. “God help you when Nat finds out you’re researching her company too.”

I rolled my eyes, “This sounds like I’m some creep investigating my girlfriend, but that couldn’t be further from

the truth. You know how I get when I sense something isn't right. And knowing her father is responsible for her mother's death was enough to get me on this bastard's trail."

"Well, you are a bloodhound when it comes to following your instincts about peoples' dirty deeds. Okay," Jim held his hands up, "without asking further questions or judging your sorry ass, please continue. You got on his trail, and what has been dug up?"

"He's the top investor in the real estate company Nat works for. He all but owns that fucking place." I shook my head, feeling sorrier for Nat than anything at this point, "Which means he still owns her ass, and she has no idea."

"So, *Triton Realty* is owned by her father?"

"Looks like he's a silent partner in the group. When I noticed the name *Hoover* as an investor from the Bahamas and Dubai, you know I went deeper."

"Right," Jim answered. "I'm positive you didn't stop there."

"No. As secure as those offshore accounts typically are, Jeff was able to break through the firewalls on them and confirmed the name attached to the accounts is Hoover."

"You're sure it's her father?"

"Yes, and there's more," I answered. "From the correspondence on his server, apparently, the partnership with the company only lasts for as long as Nat works there, so *they* have a vested interest in keeping her."

"Well, what the fuck are you going to do about it?"

"The only answer is to pull her from that company and watch it and her dad fall," I answered him.

“What then?” Jim questioned. “Perhaps this is the part of you trying to help where you *really* fuck it all up.”

“Because it’ll cost her job?”

“Yeah,” he answered while I contemplated getting Nat away from that company and her father. “All because her billionaire boyfriend was feeling meddlesome, wanting to solve the puzzle driving him crazy, so he investigated her family *and* her company, and now she no longer has either. You solved your puzzle, though, right?”

“I get it, Jim,” I said, completely unsure of what to do now. “I promise you this isn’t because I’m bored and can’t let something mysterious go. You know me better than that.”

“I know. You just need to put yourself in her Louboutins and imagine how it looks from the outside,” he said, eyeing me. “Lucky for you, we’re friends, and I’m a big enough prick to take the heat off you.”

“What do *you* all plan to do to make *my* fuck-up right?”

“I plan to say that *I* hired another investigator and put his ass on the case after learning that her bastard father potentially murdered her mom.”

“Yeah, that won’t work.”

Jim smirked at me. “And I hired that investigator only because my best friend fucked shit up by doing so behind her back, and I wanted to fact-check his mother.” He sat back and studied me. “I know you want to make this right with her again, but this is something you can’t do on your own. Let me step forward on your behalf and talk to her and let her see that it’s in her best interest to distance herself from that company.”

“So, I could come riding in on the white horse and save the damsel that is broke and without her career? Because my best

friend advised her to quit her job?”

“Although that’s a beautiful sentiment, no. Instead, I’ve had a plan for a real estate division through Alex and Bree’s firm under the umbrella of Mitchell and Associates for a while. I just didn’t have the candidates I wanted to head it up yet.”

I grinned, “She would do a phenomenal job.”

“You would, too,” he said.

“Can you imagine what this will look like then?”

“Like you used your best friend to hire her and work alongside you as a partner at a new firm?” Jim said. “Do you think she’d get insulted at the signing bonuses I’d offer to secure her as my top agent?”

I rolled my eyes, “You *are* the king of making people offers they can’t refuse.”

Jim laughed, “Let’s work the details out later. I want this firm to happen, though. You and Nat would be excellent business partners, but we need a solid plan that makes sense because I want it to work. One thing I know is that she cannot hear that her father is a silent partner for that company *from you.*”

“I don’t know how we’ll do it?”

Jim’s lips twisted. We were trying to figure out the best way to deliver this to Nat, and once Jim and I put our heads together, we’d derive a faultless plan. Even if I didn’t get Nat back, she’d finally be free and clear from her father.

“I don’t want to spearhead that company,” I said while Jim typed something on his phone.

He looked up at me, “What’s that?”

“Natalia needs to be assigned the big seat,” I said with a smile. “It’s been her biggest aspiration since she was a girl. She’s as sharp as it gets within her industry, and no one fucks with her. She’s the one you want leading that if you want Mitchell and Associates to have a firm with Brooks and Stone.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Jim said, laughing.

“You’re going to be if you keep talking like a cowboy,” I chuckled. “I’m serious, though. Give her that company and let her build it. She’s already got a broker’s license. She’s got everything it takes.”

“And you? She’ll be making more money than her *boyfriend*.”

I rolled my eyes. “I could only be so lucky to be her boyfriend again.”

“Send me over the files you got from the investigators if we’re going to propose this to Nat. And because I want to be truthful about my involvement, I will put another PI on the case. I don’t think it’s right that her mother’s case was left unresolved, and I don’t feel bad about insisting upon it.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes,” he stood up, more serious now. “If we’re going to get her and her brother closure, let’s do exactly that without fucking around.”

“Putting that fucker behind bars may be the only closure that truly needs to happen.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jim answered, turning to leave my office.

I checked my watch again, “Shit, I need to get to Shane’s meeting.”

Jim laughed at me, “Look at you, being the best man and all.”

“Always,” I answered him, closing my laptop. “I have to work my way back into that woman’s arms somehow.”

“Nothing like the old high school trick, eh? Befriending the brother to get his older sister?”

“Works in fucking romance novels, so I figured it could work for me too.”

“You read that shit?” Jim asked as I walked out of the office.

“How the fuck did you think I landed the sex goddess of the world? I know where to go to find what the ladies want.”

“Fictional characters? God help you, man.” Jim shook his head, walking ahead of me and looking over at my paralegal, “Hey, Cherie, your boss was just mentioning how you lovely women love fictional men? Is this true?”

She smiled wryly, “I love Mr. Darcy even more than I love my husband.”

“Poor Phil never stood a chance, eh?” Jim said with a laugh.

Jim looked back at me, and I shrugged, “Better start reading before Avery decides to replace you,” I said, feeling like my usual cocky self as a sense of relief washed over me, knowing that this was going to be okay.

What didn’t kill me always made my ass stronger, and I wasn’t dead yet.

CHAPTER

Forty

I was in utter disbelief—ear-ringing shock—feeling the nausea that would be the prelude to the rest of my fucked-up fucking life creeping up on me.

“This isn’t happening,” I whispered before I yelled in horror. “Oh, my *God!*”

“Oh, shit,” Bree said from the other side of the door. “Nat, let me in now.”

I numbly walked toward the door and unlocked it, and tears spilled out of my eyes as I nearly collapsed into my best friend’s arms.

“You know, the stories will always be the best part,” she said.

I dried my tears, now pissed as I stepped back and stared at her. “There are no *best parts* about me, carrying Spencer Monroe’s child.” I stopped, looked at the test again, and then looked back at Bree. “I’m going to need to try every test from the store, and then I’ll book an ultrasound with my gynecologist.”

“Slow down,” Bree said. Her eyes were filled with humor, glistening through tears. Tears of goddamn joy, of course. At least one of us was feeling joyful. It sure as *fuck* wasn’t me.

“Just take a breath. You and I both know taking more tests, looking for the one that might come up negative, won’t change the reality. What you need to do is schedule an appointment with your gynecologist. Then we’ll have better knowledge about—”

“Do you realize that *everything* I’ve done with that man has resulted in disaster, all because I was caught up in the moment?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Think about it, Bree. This has ended up a nightmare because of my lapse in better judgment. I allowed my heart to get hurt because I was foolish enough to trust him with it,” I said. “And now this?” I waved the pregnancy stick in the air. “This is the *worst* lapse in judgment of all time, letting myself get caught up in some marriage fantasy. God knows what else I may have from not using protection.”

“You need to calm the fuck down,” Bree said in a tone only a mother would use and get away with on me. “You’re going to spin out, imagining this stupid shit because you’re operating strictly out of fear.”

“How the hell would *you* operate if you were in my shoes?”

“I probably *couldn’t* operate,” she chuckled. “But that’s me, and this is you. Natalia Hoover, you are the strongest woman I know. Now, clear your damn mind and get a grip.”

I rubbed my forehead, “What am I supposed to tell people? I’m pregnant because I decided to enter a fake relationship?”

“Since when do you care what people think?” she said with a look of bewilderment.

“I don’t *actually care* what anyone thinks about it or me, okay?” I said, annoyed that I had to take a moment out of my self-pity to clarify. “Obviously, I’m well aware that my life is no one’s business, but can you allow me a moment to blow things out of proportion, for Christ’s sake? I think this goddamn moment calls for it.”

“Nat, your relationship with Spencer was anything *but* fake. So, get that thought out of your head.”

“This isn’t happening to me,” I said, genuinely believing this would be the final straw before I took a long walk, changed my name, and never returned.

“Let’s sit by the pool so you can get some fresh air, and we can think this through. You look like a ghost.”

I exhaled. “I feel like death, so I don’t think I’ll argue with you.”

I walked into the gynecologist’s office reluctantly. My day had already been shot to shit when I woke up, knowing I was here six months prior to my scheduled annual visit. Nevertheless, I took the closest seat to the door in case I had the sudden urge to run out of there like Usain Bolt.

I was in the midst of a full-blown identity crisis. I never wanted children. How was I expected to care for a little one when I had no mother as a role model? I’d raised my brother, and look how that little mother fucker turned out. I had no idea who I was anymore and even less of a clue about how I was expected to deal with this. How did I allow myself to get into this mess with Spencer Monroe?

Stop! I ordered myself.

Instead of being alone with my thoughts, I figured I'd log into my long-forgotten Facebook account. The last time I used it was after I set it up a decade ago. Watching old acquaintances from high school whining about politics or sharing posts that threatened you with bad luck if you didn't share them was not my idea of entertainment. Nevertheless, today, I needed the distraction. It would give me something to hate other than my situation.

Fuck, they've changed everything on here, I thought.

I smirked when I saw a post from Jerimiah Bowland. *Looks like this dumb bastard's wife finally filed for divorce.* I scanned through the page of the top jock from high school and rolled my eyes at his perfect profile picture: three adorable kids, no wife, and a cheerful smile, trying to make himself look like the perfect dad for the attorneys to see once they went to social media for evidence. *Oh well, he was a piece of shit in high school. I'm sure he's a piece of shit now, too.*

I couldn't do this. I couldn't do pregnancy, but more than that, just seeing people on this social media site, told me I couldn't do this shit either. I closed the app, more irritated than when I opened the damn thing. None of this was me and I was about to lose my shit right now.

"Fucking hell," I said before noticing the two pregnant women on each side, who were probably unappreciative of my foul mood and language. "Apologies." I was flustered and totally out of my natural environment.

"It's fine," the young woman on my right said. She was about my age, and I couldn't help but be humored that she had her cell phone and keys resting on her very pregnant belly.

Her demeanor was warm and pleasant, and I felt utterly drawn to the good vibes she was emitting.

“When are you due?” I asked, feeling less like myself in that statement than I’d ever been.

“Two weeks,” she answered with a brilliant smile. Then she rubbed her stomach, “Little Hayley will be my first.”

“Are you married or on the same road I’m traveling?”

She gave me a perplexed look. “I’m married. Which road did you say that you’re traveling?”

I rolled my eyes, “The *dad’s a dick* road?”

She scrunched her eyebrows together, processing what I’d said and probably wondering if she was sitting next to a lunatic. Spoiler alert: she was. “Well, my husband can certainly act like an asshole sometimes, but I wouldn’t say he’s graduated to complete dick,” she said with a chuckle.

“Give him time, sister,” I muttered under my breath.

I needed to get the hell out of here. I was in foreign territory. I’d only ever come here to ensure my vagina was still good to go and preventative measures were being taken to ensure a long and healthy sex life, but now, I was in the deep end. I didn’t even want to *think* about my vagina, having to be stretched from here to—

“Goddammit!” I bolted out of my seat and walked up to the receptionist. “May I ask why I’m waiting thirty minutes past my scheduled appointment? Dr. Patel is never late, which is why she’s my doctor.”

“She’s in a delivery right now,” Maggie, the curly-haired brunette answered with more attitude than I was capable of

withstanding right now. “Dr. Aster is seeing her in between his.”

“And when am I in line for this Dr. Aster character?”

“Miss Hoover?” I heard a nurse call from the door she’d just opened. “We’re ready for you.”

Of all the times I had to do this, it had to be when my usual doctor was out. Strangely, I wanted Spencer to be here, and I felt some unwanted emotions surface at the thought of doing this alone.

I tried to keep my mind off my bare ass, sitting on the paper barrier covering the exam table, and I focused on the task at hand. Falling apart was not an option right now. Period.

I heard two soft knocks at the door before it opened to reveal a tall, tanned specimen of God’s glorious creation.

“You must be Natalia,” he said. “I’m Dr. Aster, and I’ll be treating you today.”

“The hell you are,” I said, seeing how stupidly gorgeous this man was. His chestnut hair set off his bright hazel eyes, and underneath his lab coat, he wore suit pants and a tailored button-down shirt that clung to his chest, leaving too much to the imagination. “Listen up, Doc,” I smiled, trying to reason with him as best I could, wearing nothing but this paper towel for a gown, “by the looks of you, you must’ve graduated college yesterday, and I’m your first patient.” I inhaled, ignored his humored yet annoyed expression, and went on. “And while I may be ideal for your first exam of the female vagina and breasts, this shit is not going to work for me.”

“I assure you that—”

“I don’t want to make this any more uncomfortable for you and your assistant, Farrah,” I smiled kindly at the young nurse

who entered the room behind Dr. Gorgeous. “All I can say is, this is not going to work. I will *not* let a man as handsome as yourself *work* on my female body parts.”

“Ma’am,” he insisted.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I stopped him, holding up my hand. “There is no *ma’am* here, okay?”

His expression might’ve been charming, but I was in no mood to be charmed. “Of course not, Ms. Hoover,” he conceded.

“Unless you’re gay, I don’t want you poking around me with those things,” I waved at the equipment he was about to use to examine me. “So, are you gay?”

“Um, no, I’m not,” he stammered, clearly caught off-guard by my defensiveness.

“Well, then,” I said, raising my eyebrows and crossing my arms over my chest.

“I think we started on the wrong foot,” he said, putting his hands in his pocket and staring at me squarely. My God, he was an Adonis. “You are clearly uncomfortable with me examining you, so I think it might be best to wait for your doctor to return from delivery.”

I should’ve felt mortified, but I wasn’t. “I’m sorry if I made this awkward, but my emotions aren’t doing too well. I’m very—I’m just—”

What the fuck was happening to me?

I held my hand up, my cheeks burning red, as I struggled to sort through a flood of emotions.

“Shit,” I said, gripping each side of the exam table, dropping my chin to my chest as the tears flooded out of me so

abruptly that the doctor had to wonder what was wrong with me.

I felt a hand rubbing my back and focused on the soothing motion as I centered myself.

“There you go,” Farrah said, standing at my side. “Just relax your mind for a moment.”

I didn’t try to respond; I just followed her instructions. Finally, when I gained the courage to reopen my eyes and look over at the beautiful, onyx-haired woman, and saw that we were the only ones in the room.

“Dr. Aster excused himself,” Farrah said.

“To save himself from further nonsense from me, I’m sure,” I answered, rolling my eyes at myself. “God, I feel like such an idiot.”

“It’s perfectly fine. I’m glad you’re doing a little better.”

“He gets this a lot, doesn’t he? I mean, you can’t be that fucking gorgeous and choose this line of work. There should be laws against such a thing,” I said.

She gave a big chuckle. “Nah,” she brushed it off. “I’d find it kind of boring to date him if I’m honest.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. She was exquisite, like a Persian princess, with creamy olive skin and almond-shaped eyes the color of glowing amber. “Really?” I pressed.

“Really.” She turned to move the tray filled with examination tools to the corner of the room. “Think about it, would *you* be into a man who works all day with—” She turned back and eyed me, most likely to see if I’d bust her for this type of talk behind the doctor’s back.

“Go on,” I grinned, all panic, tense nerves, and stress slipping away from me now. “Who works all day *with vaginas?*”

She laughed and nodded. “Exactly. I imagine my boyfriend coming home exhausted from a long day of prodding vaginas, and I think, does he want to see one more after dinner, or is he off the clock?”

“Oh shit,” I laughed loudly. “Oh, my God. Yeah. I feel sorry for whoever he’s involved with. I like to think my vagina is magical, but when your man plows through ten a day, there’s just no magic left.”

“I’m sure not going to take the chance,” she said with a big sassy smile.

I smirked, “I like your style, Farrah.”

“One must be smart in the dating pool these days, or broken hearts are your only reward.”

“I had the dating thing figured out,” I sighed. “I was as confident as you are now and then stupid enough to give my heart to a man.” I took a deep breath, “The worst part is that I let my guard down, and now, here I am, pregnant with his child.”

She smiled at me, “We get a lot of women in your situation, and if it helps, you’re not alone. Perhaps that’s why you freaked out a minute ago?”

“Yes,” I answered her. “I’ve never not been in control. Losing it is the scariest thing in the world. I just have no idea where this all ends up, and that scares the shit out of me.” I stopped my incessant whining. “God, I’m so sorry. Listen, thank you for helping me get calm and giving me some much-needed laughs. I think I’ll call my friend down here and cry on

her shoulder while I wait for my doctor. Thanks for hanging back after I chased the good doctor out of the room.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay with you?”

“Positive,” I answered, knowing I would probably dump everything on this poor soul if I didn’t stop talking now. “It was lovely to meet you, and thank you for your help with this mess. Now, be safe out there in that dating world.”

“I’ll be just fine.”

My eyes followed her as she left the room, and I smiled at her confidence. Oh, to be young, naïve, and foolish again.

CHAPTER

Forty-One

After I had walked out of the doctor's appointment, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The only thing I knew to do was what I always did when times got rocky, and that was to throw myself into work.

I drove onto the 405 Freeway with all the ferociousness of Sandra Bullock, driving a bomb-rigged bus, and I floored it all the way to Beverly Hills. Once I stepped into my office, I would be fine.

Unfortunately, however, as I sat in my office, I was anything but fine. Work couldn't pull me out of this biological hole, and my downward spiral felt like it would plunge me into the middle of the earth.

I laid my head down on my desk, feeling the coolness of the polished wood against my flushed cheek, and then I heard a soft knock on my door.

"Give me a minute," I said, not wanting anyone to see me like this.

"Nat," I heard Adam say as the door eased open. "Jesus Christ." He flipped on the lights I'd kept off to keep my brain from sensory overload and walked in with a concerned look.

“Fuck,” I snarled, covering my eyes like a vampire blinded by the light. “What is it?”

“Are you okay?” he said as he rushed to my side.

“No.” He knelt by my chair, put his hand on my back, and I crumbled into a weeping heap onto his shoulder. “My life is a fucking wreck,” I admitted. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

My sobs busted loose, and any chance of ever redeeming my strong qualities in front of *this* man again was lost. This asshole and I had already gotten into it more than once over many things, namely when he was making adjustments to the bonus and commission structure. I was *not* the person to let anyone fuck with my money, and he eventually got that loud and clear.

I worked too hard for some greedy prick to try to pull one over on me. He was why I’d procured my broker’s license, so I could eventually open my own agency. The only thing that was stopping me was that I was too fucking busy to switch. If I tried to leave now, I wouldn’t get my commission because the contracts were legally Adam’s since he was the broker, and I’d be damned if I didn’t get every cent from the deals I had in escrow.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I was at myself for showing weakness in front of him. I had no idea how I’d pull myself together and show him I was still the powerhouse who would take his ass to the cleaners if he tried to screw me.

“I need some time off,” I demanded.

That was the truth. I needed to get my shit together. I thought I could work through everything so long as I

continued to do my job, but the number of times I'd broken down today proved that was not possible.

"Yes, of course," he grinned sympathetically. "Take the next two days off. I want you back and refreshed to land this huge opportunity that hit my desk about an hour ago."

Typically, I would be all smiles and starved for a new challenge, but not today.

"I'm going to need more than just a couple of days," I said. "I have a lot of shit on my plate that I need to sort out."

"Do you want to talk about it? Perhaps that will help you?"

I frowned, wondering why this bastard was being such a stiff ass with me instead of giving me what I asked for. "No," I said with irritation. "I'm not talking about my problems with *you*, of all people."

"I can't lose you for more than a week, Nat. In fact, I *won't* lose you for more than a week. So take the rest of this week and see how you feel. Then, I'll send info on the property we're looking into for an impressive client. I want you on this. The commission is well over five million with included bonuses."

I stared at him. "Speaking of commissions and bonuses," I started, with no tears or smiles. I was just rigid and pissed. "I didn't see those *bonuses* before I went to Europe, and I haven't seen any since I've been home. They haven't been added to any of my commission checks, so where the fuck *is* my money?"

He rolled his eyes, "Go home and rest. We can talk about it more when you get back."

"Are you serious? No," I said, sitting up in my chair and crossing my arms. "Why do you keep dodging the question,

Adam?”

“Nat,” he said, seemingly nervous, “please.”

“Don’t fucking *please* me. I’m the reason this company can afford rent in this part of town, and you know that. So, do *not* piss me off or lie to me. Are you stealing my money?”

“There’s no way in hell I would do such a thing,” he said, as firm and stiff as I was now. “I just haven’t had Lisa add them to the payroll. Quarterlies come up, and then I’m—”

“Excuses, Adam,” I snapped. “If you hadn’t noticed, I don’t tolerate them from anyone. I don’t even tolerate them for myself. I handle shit.”

“Maybe you should take the time you need,” he said.

“Avoiding me now?”

“No, I just need to get together with Lisa and get your money to you. It’s going to take some time. I believe it’s only been six weeks—”

“*Months*,” I corrected him. “Six months. I have at least half a million dollars wrapped up in bonuses you failed to pay because you can’t do your fucking job. I have no idea how you own this fucking company.”

“I understand your frustration,” he said.

“You have no idea how frustrated and *used* I feel at this point. I told you I had enough of a lot of shit going on in my life,” I rose, “and I wasn’t lying. You’ll have my fucking money to me by the end of the week. For now,” I shouldered my handbag, feeling strong, powerful, and in desperate need of tying up loose ends, “I’m off to handle my business. You should do the same.”

“I think you need to slow down. You look like you’re on the warpath.”

“You have *no idea* what kind of warpath I’m on, and do *not* tell me to slow down. I want my money, or I quit.”

“You can’t do that,” he said, edgier than I expected him to be.

“Watch me,” I said. “I have an excellent attorney, so don’t fuck with me.”

He was jumpy, and I could’ve sworn I saw him break a sweat. “I’ll report you to the board for unethical behavior, all your fucking around with other brokers and pocket listings, and I’ll get your license suspended.”

I inhaled sharply. “You think you can *blackmail* me, you slippery little weasel?” I nearly shrieked. I don’t ever think I’d been as furious as I was now, and if I didn’t get out of here, I would punch this mother fucker in the face.

“You can’t quit on me, Natalia,” he said.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want.”

That was the last thing I said before I bolted out the door. I might’ve engaged in activities with other brokers that looked unethical on the outside, but I took my career very seriously, and I’d never breached any code of conduct. If Adam was willing to twist things and bring things to light that made me look bad, jeopardizing my career, I had to wonder if it was worth the fight.

As I pulled into the parking garage of Mitchell and Associates, I realized this might not be such a great idea. Leaving Adam the way I did had me even more fucked up in the head. I had

too much to deal with for my career to hang in the balance. How the fuck did I allow anyone to have something to hold over my head?

In the glamorous art of knowing exactly who and what I was, I stepped out of my Range Rover, handed the keys to the valet, and walked into the Mitchell and Associates building with more pride and focus than I believed I was capable of having at the moment.

The elevator stopped on the top floor, where I had to be cleared by security, informing Jim Mitchell I was on my way up to see Spencer. Apparently, Spencer had just returned from his lunch, and I'm sure he was prepping himself to see me for the first time in what felt like months.

"May I assist you?" a beautiful woman asked. She had bronze skin, perfectly blown-out hair, and was dressed immaculately in a white Dolce and Gabbana suit I'd been meaning to buy for myself.

"I'm here to see Mr. Monroe," I said.

"Mr. Monroe is with a client. I'll notify him that—"

"With a client?" I said, my blood pressure rising with this little gatekeeper lying straight to my face. "That's bullshit, and you and I know it."

"Excuse me?" She raised her eyebrows, clearly unappreciative of my tone.

"Inform Spencer that Natalia Hoover is here to see him and remind him that I do not like to be lied to or kept waiting. He's most fortunate that I'm even here."

"Miss Hoover," she said. "I can have security escort you from these floors and—"

“It’s all right, Monica,” I heard Jim say as he approached from behind where this woman and I were in some weird standoff. “Natalia is a close friend.” Jim walked over to me, the handsome man grinning with a hint of arrogance, “How are you, Nat?”

“I’d be much better if I didn’t have to argue with everyone that I crossed paths with today,” I said as he greeted me with a kiss on the cheek.

“You’ll have to forgive Monica,” Jim said, smiling at Spencer’s secretary, “she’s exceedingly good at her job.”

“Forgiven,” I said, nodding at the woman. I was, however, feeling smug as fuck that I’d won the showdown. “Anyway, I need to speak to Spencer. It’s sort of urgent.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, leading me down the hall. “He and I have some urgent issues to discuss with you as well.”

“Really?” I said, confused. “Why the hell would you *both* need to discuss something with me?”

“Well,” he said, opening one of the double doors that led into his exquisite office, “are you comfortable here? Perhaps I can give you some information before Spencer arrives. It might help ease some tension in your reunion.”

“There is nothing in this world that’s going to help this reunion with Spencer.”

“May I inquire why?” Jim asked, motioning for me to take a seat as he sat on the edge of his desk.

“Because I need to speak with him about something before it spreads through our mutual friends. Unlike Spencer, I prefer to discuss personal matters privately, not drop truth bombs in front of our friends.”

“I guess it would’ve helped if Spencer gave you a heads-up about the private investigator.”

“Jim,” I said in a lower voice, “do not play coy with me. You know damn well that Spencer should’ve told me he was investigating my family and me, hoping to continue or deepen our relationship.”

“I completely agree with that, and so does Spencer.”

“You speak for him now?” I felt my irrational irritation rising again.

“No,” he answered with a laugh, “but he and I have discussed it at length. Obviously, the dipshit didn’t know how it would look, hiring a PI on his new girlfriend, but he was only trying to get information to help you and your brother. I’m sure it didn’t seem like that, and I *know* it didn’t look like that. However, when you withdrew from him after your return from the UK, it fueled his desire to help and understand what you and your brother were dealing with.”

“I understand I wasn’t so open with him about my family, namely my father, but that’s just who I am. He should’ve known that and let it rest. It wasn’t up to him to try and dig up what I wasn’t sharing, which was that my dad was an awful human being who ruined his children’s lives. He damaged us in more ways than I care to share, and Spencer should’ve respected that boundary.”

“I understand. He does now, too; trust me on that.”

“I’m glad he does,” I said, “hopefully it’s a hard lesson learned, and he won’t be so bold with his next girlfriend.”

Jim nodded. I could tell he was done discussing this behind Spencer’s back and probably sick of speaking on Spencer’s behalf.

“Now, can you call Spencer in?” I stopped and stood from the fancy leather chair. “You know, I prefer to speak with him alone.”

“Understood,” Jim said. “Allow me a few minutes of your time, and when Spencer arrives, I’ll leave you to discuss the issues which brought you here. But, trust me, I need you to hear what I have to say.”

“You seem quite concerned about something?”

“I am,” he answered. “And forgive me if I’m also out of bounds, but after I read what happened with your father regarding your mother, I became quite concerned and knew the day would come when you would want answers as well.”

“What are you talking about, Jim?” I was exhausted at the thought of going through this again, and I was confused about why Jim had anything to do with this.

He nodded, “Before I start with my end of things, I want you to know how dreadfully sorry I am about the loss of your mother.”

“Well, it’s been a very long time, but okay. Thank you. Now, go on,” I said, not knowing how I felt about where this discussion was headed.

Thank God I knew this man well enough to know that while he was a fierce mother fucker, he was also an extremely sensitive teddy bear when it came to his family and friends. Jim was as solid a man as it comes, and there was no doubting that. My trust in him was absolute, so I knew any information he may have gathered without my knowledge was not done in malice; it was to fix things.

“What did you do?” I said, almost as if I was let down but still loved him for trying to cover for his friend.

“I asked Spencer to allow me a moment to look over what his PI found. I’m not sure if you know Spence as well as I do when it comes to his intuition about people?”

“I know he can usually sniff out the dirt on someone from a look or a tone in someone’s voice,” I answered, rolling my eyes that I had to pay Spencer a compliment for being a badass.

“Precisely. With that said, after he received the reports from the investigation, which was only done to help you and your brother gain closure—”

“You can save yourself from going into the reason for him being a complete jackass, trying to fix my brother and me without telling me first,” I answered.

“Right,” he nodded. “Anyway, after he received the final reports on that, he noticed something about a certain *partner* or co-owner for the company where you work.”

My stomach dropped. If Jim was about to say there was some shady shit going on with my job, I was most likely going to throw up all over the man’s desk. How many hits can one person take in their lifetime, much less a fucking month? It was as if someone had tipped the dominoes in my life, and they all just fucking took off, collapsing all around me.

“Go on,” I said through clenched teeth.

“He wanted me to see if it was worth looking further into. He believed that enough damage had been done to you at this point and didn’t want to make things worse.”

“At least he was right about one thing.”

“I agreed with him; however, some things cannot be ignored, and in my vast experience in business, it was evident that this was one of those things. Spencer had caught onto

something that could be damaging to you, and I felt it best to hire one of my best investigators to ensure no one was trying to hurt you, as Spencer believed was happening.” He exhaled, and I could tell he was uncomfortable. “Nat, we have concluded that your father has your boss, Adam Brinkler, by the balls. He’s the shadow partner in the company. Your father has a money-laundering racket and uses Adam’s company to wash money.”

My ears started ringing, and so many questions flooded my brain at once that I froze up entirely. I couldn’t speak, and I was surprised I could even breathe.

“I’m so sorry, Nat, but Spencer *will* get to the bottom of this. We won’t stop until people are in handcuffs.”

How did my dad maneuver his way into my life like this, and why? This had to be why Adam was sweating when I confronted him about my money. Was he doing my dad’s bidding? How in the fuck was this my life?

“Tell me something,” I asked shakily, “in all this investigating that you and Spencer have done behind my back —”

“Nat, it wasn’t our intent to spy or do anything that—”

“I know, Jim,” I said, holding up my hand to stop him from explaining. “I know you had good intentions, but I need to know something. With the additional investigations, does it appear that my father murdered my mother?”

“Perhaps we wait for Spencer to arrive to answer that.”

“That fucking means yes,” I answered with a ragged breath. “And no, I’m not waiting until Spencer arrives because I may want to murder someone out of anger and impulse, and right now, that man seems to be the easiest target for me.”

“Okay, then,” Jim conceded. “We’ve launched an investigation on this case. Unfortunately, it seems the detective who was assigned your mother’s case was paid off. The overseas bank account that Spencer uncovered, which is linked to your real estate firm, was responsible for depositing a hundred thousand dollars into the detective’s account in the days after the accident, and a few other deposits were made to city officials. We hired another investigator to hack into the accounts, and with his expertise and clearance, he was able to track it all back to your father. I’m so terribly sorry, Natalia,” Jim said as he watched tears spill out of my eyes.

I didn’t know where to start. I was overwhelmed, pissed, sad, broken-hearted, betrayed...you name it, I felt it. All in one swift kick in my ass.

“Put Spencer on it,” I nearly growled. “I will talk to him when all this shit is over and my dad is behind bars. But, for now, if Spencer wants to give me closure, this is how he can. He owes me, and I don’t want him to be kind when he handles these assholes. I’ll figure out my future in real estate later. At this point, I’d rather be homeless than earn another cent at Adam’s firm. I want all of them behind bars, and I know Spencer can make that happen.”

“I wanted to talk to you about your future in real estate should that firm shut down.”

“I’m not in the mood to talk anymore, Jim,” I said. “I need to get the fuck out of this city for a while. I’ll let Bree know where I’m going. Most likely for a drive up the coast. I can’t manage any more horrible news right now. The next thing that’s about to land on me is that my brother is a homeless John Doe who was found overdosed in a gutter somewhere. I can’t.”

“Your brother is successfully entering his second month in a very nice rehabilitation center,” I heard Spencer say from behind me.

I turned, and my heart melted at the sight of the man. I still felt angry and betrayed by him, but I also felt warmth and comfort. I couldn't help but feel a sense of security he would be my advocate, treading through this fucked-up situation. I felt a wave of emotions, the ones I'd grown accustomed to before I thought this man was out to hurt me or protect himself from me, and instead of shoving the emotions away, I absorbed them. I fucking needed *this good feeling* that I was receiving for the first time in too long.

I wouldn't let Spencer see that I was melting at the sight of him, but what I would do is take the leash off this damn dog and let him hunt.

“Jim filled me on what you and he uncovered about my entire existence,” I said. “Find a way to end all of them. I want them behind bars; I'm sure you understand.”

Spencer nodded, and his chocolate irises were almost too much for me at the moment.

“More than you know. It's the least I can do, Nat.”

“I know. When you're done, reach out to me. We need to discuss some important and personal issues of our own,” I said, suddenly reminded I was standing here pregnant with his child. I wished desperately I could tell him, but everything inside me told me to hold off for now. I wanted him to have a clear head when he handled this bullshit, and then we could reconnect on a better day.

“Oh,” I said before leaving. “Where can I visit my brother? I want to hug and tell him I'm proud of him.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Two

If I weren't busy handling the final rejection of Jenkins Media, which Jim thankfully decided to pass on for now, I would've gotten to Jim's office to see Nat much sooner than I did.

I stood in Jim's office, watching Nat close the door behind her, and wondered how much I missed. Apparently, it was a lot because she managed to speak to me without justifiably screaming in my face for what an asshole I'd been.

"Well," I started, turning back to face Jim, "I don't know if I should be annoyed or grateful that you didn't wait for me."

"Grateful," he said, casually leaning against his desk, crossing his arms and legs confidently. "You're in a favorable position to win her back now."

"This isn't a game, Jim," I said, worried I may let Nat down again. "What does she know? What did she say?"

"She was surprised, but I don't think she was *too* shocked to learn that her dad has been the puppet master for her boss and managed to fuck with her through that dipshit."

"And?"

"And, you heard her. She wants them buried for what they've done—her father, specifically—and she wants *you* to do it. I mean," he held his hands up, "you and I both know

these are things Nat could easily handle on her own, but for some reason, she's allowing you to handle it. So, I wouldn't give it another thought."

I ran my hand through my hair, concerned by how this could go. "If I fuck it up?"

"Jesus," Jim said with a laugh. "In *all* the years I've known you, I've never seen you nervous or second-guess your ability to take down someone shady. No one is better at stripping down these fuckers than you. Are you losing your edge?"

"I just—"

"I can arrange for Alex to handle this situation. He is close with Nat, and he's almost as much of a stone-cold prick as you are," Jim said. "Listen, I do not doubt your ability to obliterate Nat's father, but if you feel hesitant, maybe it's not a good idea. You know people like him; they can smell weakness."

"No, I know that. And I can handle this in a manner that will get Natalia some closure, but I'm confused about why she wants me to do it. She has every right to jump down my throat for how I behaved, but she's gift-wrapping her father for me instead?"

"The way I see it, she's giving you a shot to earn back her affection. Jump all over it."

"Right," I sighed. "It just feels off, you know?"

Jim chuckled. "Of course it feels *off*. You're doing dirty work for her, and she's aware of it this time."

I grinned, "Well, even if this doesn't get her back in my life, I'm happy to bury those assholes for what they've done to her."

“Apparently, Adam hasn’t been giving her certain bonuses.”

“I suspected as much,” I answered. “All right, let’s get security and law enforcement on alert. We’ll need phone numbers from the dad and Adam from the PIs. Am I going to them or having them come to me?”

“You’re the killer, so it’s up to you,” Jim said as he stood from where he’d been leaning against his desk and walked around to his chair. “But I think having them come to you is a better move. You’re always more merciless when you’re in your element.”

After buttoning up a few loose ends, I began to organize how I wanted to go about this. I’d sent all my investigations to a close friend in the FBI, and after following up on it, they didn’t hesitate to take action. Indictments were being drawn up for wire fraud and tax evasion for the real estate agency, and those were just the beginning. Once the Feds got to the bottom of the money laundering scheme, there would undoubtedly be more to follow. It wouldn’t be long before they raided Adam’s office, and I anxiously awaited that.

I called in a favor with Captain Dufresne at the LAPD, and he agreed to have a pair of trusted homicide detectives look at Nat’s mother’s case. As suspected, it didn’t take them long to see the obvious trail of blood leading back to her father, and he and the people he’d paid off would need outstanding attorneys if they wanted to see daylight any time soon. My only request to Detectives Li and Mulvaney was that I be able to speak to her father before his arrest.

“Malcolm Hoover is here,” Monica announced.

“Send him in,” I answered.

It was strange to think the real estate company was being raided at this very moment, and good old Malcolm was none the wiser. I'm sure he had no idea why he was summoned to my office, but I was counting on the fact that a money launderer wouldn't pass up a meeting with a billionaire. I was not disappointed. I did wonder if he questioned why there were so many security guards in the building, but even if he did, he didn't know the half of it. Half a dozen police officers and a few Feds were waiting in Jim's office, ready to haul his ass out of there.

"Mr. Monroe?" Nat's dad said with a hint of nervousness in his voice.

He grinned at me as I flashed a fake smile. "Please, sit," I said, waving my hand toward the leather chairs across my desk.

He unbuttoned his suit jacket and took a seat. "I have to say you have me at a disadvantage. I'd love to know why I've received the honor of your invitation to meet with you today."

He was almost too much of a cliché. He was greasy and sweaty with the permanently flushed face and bulbous nose of a seasoned alcoholic. Nat had his eyes—although hers were much less beady—but that was about it. And even though he was wearing an expensive suit, he looked like a used car salesman. It was probably because the bullshit was oozing out of his pores.

I crossed the room to make myself and this dick a drink. "Would you care for a bourbon?"

A rhetorical question, obviously.

"I could go for a drink."

I eyed him from over my shoulder, disliking the tone of his voice. The vibe I got from this guy was worse than I expected. I'd met a lot of shameful con artists in my day, but he was different. Something told me that murdering his wife, abusing his children, and laundering money was only a part of the horrible things he'd done.

I handed him the bourbon and walked around to sit behind my desk. I watched as he gulped the liquid down as if it were a cheap shot of hooch instead of Kentucky's finest thirty-year-aged private reserve. "Thirsty?"

"This is some good stuff," he said, eyeing his glass.

I nodded. "Well, you are in Jim Mitchell's office, speaking with his VP, so it damn well better be good, right?"

"That's right." He took a sip and then sat back while I studied him. "Now, will you indulge me and explain what I can do for you?"

I thought I'd play with the man a little since my office was tapped and hidden cameras were everywhere, thanks to the Feds. My only concern was whether Natalia had chosen to come and listen to what her old man had to say. I was good at bleeding people for information, and while I wanted her to have closure, I didn't want her to be traumatized in any way.

I had to remind myself that Nat was a big girl who could leave the room if she'd heard enough, though, and I couldn't worry about her if I wanted to do this right.

"You seem like a very smart man, Mr. Hoover," I started, clasping my hands together. "Why do you imagine a man like Jim Mitchell would want you in his office?"

I couldn't tell if he looked excited or nervous, but there was a glint in his eye that was unmistakable, like he might've

hit the jackpot by garnering Jim's attention. "Well, I'm not sure."

"Don't play coy with me," I offered my wolf grin, baiting him into my lie. "I think you know exactly why you've been called to meet with the VP of a billion-dollar conglomerate."

"Mm-hm," he said, staring at me with those shifty little eyes as though he were measuring me carefully. "And how can I trust you *or* Jim Mitchell?"

"Because I wouldn't have invited you into my office or offered you my expensive booze if I didn't think you were the best man to provide the services Mr. Mitchell and I need."

He looked at me with concern and distrust, but I could also tell he was the kind of man who wanted you to know how good he was at being bad. People like him always told on themselves, and I could see he was itching to be impressive.

"Now, let's get this small talk out of the way," I said. "We've spoken to Adam. I believe you know him?"

"I know Adam," he answered smugly. "He and I are in business together. Adam Brinkler, correct?"

"That is correct."

"Okay," he said, leaning back in his chair as if I'd said the magic word to get him to open up. "So, tell me, Mr. Monroe. Why does your billion-dollar company want *me* to partner with them?"

"Partner?" I questioned. As I suspected, it didn't take more than a few words to get this fool to say something incriminating. "I'm not sure I'm following?"

"Well, Adam and I partnered up at his firm to skirt taxes and clean some extra money that a few important mutual

friends had lying around.”

I could see it all over his face. He was so fucking proud of himself for being able to assert what a badass he was in his own mind. Who in their right goddamn mind would confess to money laundering five minutes after meeting someone? He made my job too easy. All you had to do with a con man was play to his ego, and this guy was more eager than most to spill his misdeeds. It made me wonder how he'd managed to keep his role in his wife's murder a secret for so long.

“You're a very open man with someone you've just met?” I said with a smile. “Tax evasion and cleaning money, huh? Those things can put you away for a very long time.”

I changed the tone of my voice to appear a bit intrigued with the *services* he could offer Jim. This, of course, boosted the man's confidence, making him think he was in control and that I needed him.

“You seem like the kind of man who could benefit from something like that?” he said, starting his negotiations.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Well, I'm sure you can imagine the taxable income on this global empire that Jim's got going, not to mention certain offers from influential people he's gotten on the side. You know, the kind you can't mention to the IRS?”

“Oh, I know,” he said, interrupting me. “And yes, I can help. I work with a handful of businesses inside and outside the country because of the amount of work I do for *important* high-profile people, so I don't want you to think I can't handle the volume. I work with Adam for personal reasons, even though the firm is small. Now, if Jim Mitchell wants to play dirty to keep his rightfully earned money, a price must be paid to me.”

“And what is that price?”

How was this guy so fucking stupid? I expected him to make this challenging for me, but I guess not. He didn't vet me whatsoever, and my mind was blown at how quickly he was getting to the brass tacks.

“A partnership,” he stated like he did this every other day of the week.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Interesting. You expect Jim to give you shares of this company?”

“Why wouldn't he? He would still see double the profit, more or less, all without paying taxes because of the accounts I have set up on my end.”

“And why should Jim feel confident he won't end up doing jail time?”

“Let me put it this way,” he said smugly, using the phrase that annoyed me more than any other, “Jim Mitchell has nothing to worry about. It all flows through me.”

“So, you know exactly how to hide from the law, and because you're sitting in my office and speaking to me as a free man, you do it well enough that you're not found out?”

“Exactly,” he answered.

“I'm impressed,” I said. “Now, for the real reason I called you into my office today.”

His expression darkened. “And that is?”

“Nervous?” I said, picking up that the bastard was finally uncomfortable.

“I was under the impression we were talking about that already.” He ground his teeth together weirdly and stretched

his neck like his collar was too tight.

“Does the name Detective Victor Rosen ring a bell?”

His face went white. Finally.

“Sure. He investigated my wife’s car crash.”

“You’re right. You know, he’s a very wealthy man,” I said, knowing good old Vic was most likely being booked in LA County jail as we spoke. “Do you know why?”

He went to get up, and I rose to match his movement. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to imply?”

“Have a seat, Mr. Hoover,” I said with a greedy smile. “I need your services, and I think you know exactly what that means.”

“I’m not sure.”

“I was married, you see. Well, I still am, unfortunately. That’s the problem.”

“And you need?” This time he was smart enough to stop himself.

I nodded, “I need her out of my life. She’s threatening to mop the floor with me and take everything. I cheated on her, and when your new bride walks in while you’re balls-deep in your secretary, she’ll stop at nothing to make you suffer monetarily. And I can’t have that.”

He grinned and raised his glass, “Can I have another?”

“Of course,” I said, grabbing the bourbon and filling this bastard’s glass.

“Thank you.” He nodded when I handed him the glass, and he took a sip, “What exactly do you want to be done?”

“Whatever you did to your wife’s car, I presume?”

He eyed me, and I was ready to get this part out and done with.

“Hmm,” he said, taking a drink. Strangely, he looked like he was thinking ten different things at once, and his expression darkened like he was pondering something. “I think that could be arranged. You need to be careful, though. This could haunt you.”

“The way it haunts you?” I asked.

His expression hardened. “Depends on if you love her or not.”

“I do love her, but I also love fucking, and I prefer to fuck whomever I want, whenever I want, be it my wife or someone else,” I said. The bigger the dirtbag I sounded like, the more he’d relate and keep talking.

“You’re a strange man; however, I don’t think you one-percenters are operating at the normal human level.”

“We’re not. That is extremely accurate. Some of us are ruled by our fortunes. Money is a hell of a lot better than love, though.”

“I will agree with that.”

“Is that why you had your wife murdered?” I asked.

“I took care of that bitch because she found out what I did for a living, and she had a big mouth,” he said. I felt his energy shift, and it wasn’t pleasant. “She would’ve pissed off many people and cost me a lot of money, and I didn’t need any more problems.”

“That’s interesting,” I said.

“How so?”

“Because the woman I want you to *deal with* is your daughter, Mr. Hoover,” I watched him, but he didn’t flinch. “She’s trying to take my money, and I can’t let that happen.”

He wasn’t surprised in the slightest by what I’d said. “You think I don’t know you’re involved with my kid? I make it my business to know what she’s up to, and I wouldn’t hesitate for a second to have that self-righteous cunt whacked.” His blood pressure must’ve doubled because he looked like he would explode, and I wanted to strangle him for saying what he did about Nat. “She’s just like her mother, and I didn’t have a problem killing that whore, so if you think I’ll hesitate to do what you ask, you’ve got the wrong guy. I don’t give a fuck.”

I had no idea what was keeping me in my seat. Maybe it was divine intervention because I’d never wanted to hurt someone as severely as I did now. But all I could do was look at the camera and hope the cops and Feds were coming in before I did something stupid.

He was fucking toast after this confession, and now that he’d incriminated himself, I needed to end this for Nat’s sake. He’d hurt her enough throughout her life. Hearing that he wouldn’t hesitate to murder her as he did her mother was a bridge too far, and I almost couldn’t believe he said it. I couldn’t believe anyone capable of such a thing.

My office doors burst open, and the cops and Feds came rushing in, hollering at Malcolm, dragging him to his feet, and cuffing him. They read his Miranda rights, and he looked as stunned as I’d ever seen anyone, piecing together what was happening. He was smart enough to say nothing, though, which was the biggest surprise.

He stood there, hands behind his back, flanked by two officers as I approached.

“That you are capable of murdering your child is something I cannot fathom,” I said while he stood there dead-eyed. “What you have done to your children is unforgivable, but they have persevered and will continue to do so now that they can close the book on you. Despite what she has endured at your hands, your daughter is the single-most wonderful, strong woman, and Shane is well on his road to recovery.”

“You think I give a shit?” he spat.

“It doesn’t matter. *You* don’t matter,” I said, sliding my hands into my pockets. “And I’d wager you aren’t going to have a great time in prison, you know, because those *important* people you couldn’t shut up about will hear that you got picked up. What do you want to bet they aren’t going to want someone who knows all their dirty secrets running around trying to get immunity and plea deals in exchange for their names?” I could almost feel the terror strike him. “If I were you, I’d learn to sleep with my eyes open, mother fucker.”

I nodded at Detective Li, “He’s all yours.”

The officers ushered Malcolm down the hallway quickly, and once the elevator doors closed, I went to Jim’s office. I walked in and saw Nat sitting in a chair, sobbing as Jim rubbed her back.

“Spencer,” she said, looking at me sorrowfully.

She reached her arms around me as soon as I knelt next to her, and I held her tightly, letting her crumble into my arms.

I had no idea where things would go from here, but at least that bastard would be behind bars, and she knew the truth. There was nowhere to go from here but up.

CHAPTER

Forty-Three

Everything felt like a sick joke when I was first brought into Jim's office and introduced to the FBI. I felt rage, nausea, and horror at everything my dad readily confessed to Spencer.

I don't know why I was surprised by his confession. Did I think he wasn't capable of killing my mother? After all, this was the man who'd broken my jaw when I was thirteen years old because I told him our bread was moldy. The man who'd choke my siblings and me until we were unconscious and who punched us anywhere that clothes could cover so our teachers wouldn't see our bruises and call the police.

Did I expect him to say something to redeem himself or insist he'd never do something so horrible? What did it say about me that a part of me hoped none of it would be true?

"We're almost to Malibu," Spencer said, his voice sounding a mile away.

I turned, and everything still felt like it was in slow motion. Nothing felt real, not even the skin on my hands as I rubbed them together to find comfort in the touch.

"Where?" I said, confused.

"Bree's place," Spencer said. "They're staying at the beach house this month again. I figured you'd be most comfortable

with your closest friend after all that.”

“Yeah,” I said softly.

“Nat?”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling disconnected.

“I’m sorry you had to witness that.” He sighed while I leaned my head against the seat’s headrest and looked at him. “I wish we never asked you to see what your dad had to say.”

“I know,” I said, knowing he felt sick about what happened today.

“The only thing I know to do to make this right is to bring you to your best friend.”

“Thank you.” I turned to stare out the front window where the ocean came into view. “I don’t want to talk but thank you for thinking of bringing me here.”

“Nat,” Bree’s voice rang through my head. It seemed like I’d just told her to let me rest, so I couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t leave me alone.

“Please, Bree,” I said, turning over and facing away from the blackout curtains of the room. “I just need a few more hours of sleep, and then I’ll tell you about what happened.”

“No,” her voice was stern, snapping me out of my foggy state. “You’ve been like this for almost a day. I won’t allow you to hide in here and let this eat you up.”

“What?” I said, forcing myself to sit up, feeling woozy and weak. “I just got here.”

She exhaled in relief. “No, babe,” she reached over and brushed the loose strands of hair from my face. “Spencer brought you here yesterday. Every time I come in to check on you or bring you food, you send me away. You’ve been out of it. I know this has been a very long month for you, so I was fine with you just sleeping it off, but it’s been long enough.”

I faintly smiled. “It’s easier to sleep these days because my nightmares are more pleasant than my reality.”

She chuckled, “Your reality is only as bad as *you* allow it to be.”

I sat up more, leaned back into the pillows, and took a bite of the toasted bagel she set on a breakfast tray. “Bree, honey,” I said in a sluggish tone that was a bit annoying, given I was trying my hardest to feel normal and quickly, “dreams and nightmares can be manipulated to what I *allow* them to be if I’m lucid dreaming. But reality? A whole different story.”

Bree reached for the other half of the bagel on my tray and began smearing cream cheese over it. “Nope,” she said confidently, taking a bite. “You are the only one who can give power to what hurts you.”

I placed my bagel back onto the table in frustration. “I don’t want to hear any of this whimsical bullshit. It makes no sense.” I picked up a linen napkin and wiped my hands. “Please tell me Spencer told you what happened with my dad. I don’t have the energy to repeat it.”

“He did, but only Alex and I are aware. Spencer didn’t want the information going past Jim, Alex, or me without your expressed permission.”

“I appreciate him taking that into consideration for me.”

“He’s a good guy, Nat. He is.”

“I *know* I wasn’t awoken from a twenty-four-hour coma only to hear Spencer’s praises being sung. I’ll deal with my opinions of that man when I’m ready, and now is not that time. I appreciate him getting my dad to cough up his transgressions, though.” I stared at the corner of the room, remembering every detail about Spencer’s interaction with my father. “Do you know my dad didn’t hesitate to agree to have me killed? My own father, Breanne. Although, calling that man a father is like calling a vulture a canary.” I let out a breath and looked at Bree’s sorrowful eyes. “He killed my *mother*. He brutalized my siblings and me, and I just think... why? For money? He was going to have me potentially murdered because some big shot would make it worth his while? I don’t even give a fuck about his other criminal activity; I mean, what could make him a worse human being than what he’s done to his family?”

“This is all so very unreal to me. I know it’s a sensitive subject, but I love you, so I’m going to talk about it anyway,” she said, reaching for my hand. “You’ve never told me any details about the abuse you suffered as a child, and you have every right to guard that.” I tried to maintain eye contact without crying, but I wasn’t doing a good job of it. “You know a little about Alex’s childhood, and from what I’ve gathered from everything you’ve shared with me in the past, it seems like you and he have similar backgrounds. You know, his father abused him terribly. He beat him, locked him in closets without food for days, and burned him with cigarettes,” she stopped and shuddered, and the lump in my throat felt the size of a softball. His story was all too familiar, and it made me very sad that we had so much pain and cruelty in common. “That’s not the half of it, but I’m sure you understand. I’m not trying to compare suffering here, but I just want you to know

it's possible to process it. He had to do intense therapy, even hypnotherapy, but all the work he's done has helped immensely."

"I'm sorry for what happened to Alex, and I'm glad he was able to work through his trauma," I said, tears filling my eyes, trying my hardest to be strong. "But I'm going to be okay. I have to be tough as nails since I'm carrying this little *slip-up* of mine and Spencer's for the next eight months and will endure the torture of giving birth."

"That's very true," Bree chuckled before she grew serious. "But you're *not* dealing with this on your own. I won't allow that."

"Neither will I," I heard Shane's voice and wondered if I was hallucinating.

"Shane?" I questioned, looking around Bree to see my brother's filled-out, healthy face.

I covered my impulsive cry when I saw how handsome and robust he looked.

"Hey, buddy," Bree said, using the nickname she had given him years ago. "Thanks for coming today."

I looked at Bree in confusion. "I'm not sure what is going on, but if I wake up from this after seeing my brother healthy again, I don't think I will be able to handle it."

"You're not dreaming, you nut," Shane said, walking over and sitting beside me on the bed. "I heard you fell off the face of the earth while I was in rehab. What the hell?"

I smiled and didn't say anything. All I could do was hug him. I clung to my brother, thanking God and everybody that he looked strong and better than I could remember ever seeing him

I released him, both of us crying, “You know about dad?”

He nodded and wiped the tears from his eyes, “Yeah. I called Liz and told her, but you know how she is. She just thanked me for calling and sent her love to us both.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m not surprised,” I said, thinking about how detached my sister had always been. It was her defense mechanism, and I couldn’t fault her for protecting herself. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“I’m so sorry this has happened to both of us. But I’m better now, Nat, and we have each other.”

I hugged him again, letting my head rest on his shoulder. “Yes. Thank God I have you, honey,” I said, wanting to hold him and, for the first time, allow my brother to help me feel stronger instead of the other way around.

I had no idea how long Shane and I cried together, sharing the grief of our mother’s murder at the hands of our father and our fucked-up childhood, which haunted our adult lives.

When I released him, I saw that Bree had left us to reunite alone. I would insist on thanking her for this later.

“How?” I said, feeling more like myself. “What made you get help? Rock bottom? Bree?” I laughed. “Something made you *finally* step up, own your shit, and get healthy for yourself again.”

“It was Spencer,” he shrugged and gave me the most adorable expression.

I laughed at his admission.

“How so? You wanted to be a wealthy asshole like him, so you had to get clean?”

“You have no idea, do you?”

I was confused. “No, apparently I don’t?”

“Well, he was blowing me up like crazy, telling me how worried you were about me—this was before he called the PI, I guess? Maybe after? I have no idea. Anyway, I went to his office to meet with him. I needed money for more drugs, and I figured I’d go and tell him I was checking in to ease your conscience, and maybe he’d give me some money.”

“You have met Spencer, right?”

He laughed. “Yes, but I thought I could manipulate his feelings for you, trying to be a savior and all that.”

“And he sent you to rehab?”

“Not at first. I think he sensed I wouldn’t go,” he answered. “It was the second time I met with him and Jim that things started to click on their own, and I took the help he offered to pay for. I was in a pretty bad place then, and I knew I would end up dead if I didn’t take what the angels were offering me through Spencer.”

“And?” I was feeling my heart open.

“And like a big brother would, he helped me.” Shane’s eyes filled with tears, “He went to every meeting he was allowed to attend and supported me in every sense of the word. He never mentioned you or that he was doing this for you. It helped me to know he had my best interest at heart and cared about what happened to me; he wasn’t just using me to get somewhere with you or anything.”

I sighed. “Well, isn’t he a real hero, then?” I smiled, feeling warmth ignite where my heart had grown cold for Spencer Monroe. “He jerked your handsome butt out of the flames and exposed our father, and—”

I felt my cheeks flush when I hung onto that last word, not knowing whether I should tell my brother about the pregnancy.

“And, what?” he said curiously.

“Well, he’s the reason I’m going to be a mother in eight months and you an uncle.”

Shane’s jaw dropped, and his bright eyes grew as wide as silver dollars. “No. Oh, my *God*,” he said sweetly, hugging me so tight that all I could do was squeal.

For the first time since everything exploded, I felt good. I really felt great, like everything was going to be okay. *I* was going to be okay. Thank God for this feeling because I believed I deserved it by now. And for the first time, I could celebrate this child growing in my belly. I was happy and thankful instead of disturbed, put out, and annoyed.

I felt that tiny flame for Spencer I’d tried so hard to extinguish grow bigger, knowing what he did for my brother and not expecting anything in return. Like everyone kept insisting, Spencer *was* a good man. It just took me some time, a few miracles, and my dad being flushed into the sewer to notice it.

And for the first time since everything fell apart, I knew in my bones that I loved him. There was no doubt in my mind. He was genuine and authentic and most definitely a bonehead for hiring a PI without my knowledge, but now, I knew he meant well.

“Is Spencer here with you?” I questioned, feeling ready to see him and at least thank him for everything he’d done.

And, of course, tell him I was carrying his child.

“No,” Shane answered. “I’m only out of the center on a day pass. I have a few more months before I’ll be out on my own again.”

“Oh,” I said in confusion. “So, does Spencer know you’re here?”

“I have no idea?” he shrugged. “He came to the center yesterday to inform me about dad, and that’s the last I talked to him. I did ask him if you knew, and he confirmed that you did. When he told me you were with Bree, I arranged to visit you for the day.”

“I have to talk to Spencer,” I said, feeling more urgency in that than ever.

I threw back the covers, turned around, and hugged Shane again. “I love you, and I’m so happy you’re here, but I have to see Spencer.”

He grinned, “I have to get back anyway. I’m glad I could bring you back together.”

“Oh,” I said, turning back before entering the bathroom to shower, “we’re not back together. I just have to see him.”

Shane laughed. “You’re such a drama queen. Does he know about the baby?”

“No,” I said with a laugh. “That’s why I can safely say we’re not back together. I’ll probably scare the shit out of him and send his ass running to hide in the Swiss Alps.”

“No kidding,” Shane said. “Well, good luck, and I love you.”

“I love you more, honey. We’ve got this,” I said with profound determination. “All of us. And we’re all going to be okay.”

CHAPTER

Forty-Four

After my shower, I felt right with the world again. Well, somewhat, anyway. I had no idea how I would deal with any of my problems, but I knew I would mentally divide and conquer. Or whatever. I was just going to focus on the things that made me feel good right now and not the things that made me feel upset, sorry for myself, or defeated.

I got out the blow dryer and pulled my oversized round brush through my hair, focusing on my gratitude. My brother was so healthy, stable, and happy that I couldn't believe this was not a dream. But it wasn't, and I wouldn't allow a negative light to shine on my brother's victory, lasting more than three days in a rehab facility.

I couldn't imagine how spun out he'd be if he'd found out everything without being sober: the news about our dad and me being knocked up by the first guy I ever allowed to stay in my life for longer than a night. I was primarily thankful he was sober because I needed my brother by my side this time to have someone to grieve the loss of our mother and move on from our childhood trauma.

I still wasn't sure about Spencer. My knee-jerk reaction was to see him, hug him, and make everything right again, but I understood it wouldn't be easy.

I flipped the blow dryer off, placed it on the counter, and turned to leave the bathroom.

“Bree?” I said, hearing her giddy laugh from just outside my room.

“Right here, babe,” she answered, peeking inside the door. “Trying to get these boys out to the pool for swimming lessons.”

“Okay, well,” I said, tapping the back of my makeup brush against my teeth, “I was going to see Spencer, I think?”

She looked down the hall, “Alex, I have Albert right here. Take him out to the pool, please?”

“On it,” I heard Alex answer her while Bree stepped into my room. “Are you sure that’s something you want to do right now?”

I grinned. “After hearing you snap your fingers and having Alex come running to take over children’s duties for you, yes, I’m quite confident that’s exactly what I want to do.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “I’m serious,” she answered. “Let’s go get some drinks, maybe? Celebrate your brother doing well.”

“Have you lost your damn mind?”

“No, going to see Spencer on emotions of excitement is you losing your damn mind.”

“Unless I want my unborn child to have serious issues, I think it’s best I stay away from the *drinks to celebrate* shit with you girls.”

“Oh,” she laughed. “God, this has been quite the afternoon. Alex got home early, and then the swim coaches showed up to the house early—”

“Well, there you have it. Everyone is punctual and early, and I’m late to leave. I’m not sure if I’m going to see Spencer, but—”

“He’s gone, Nat,” Bree said.

“Gone, as in?”

“As in left the country last night, from what Jim told Alex. Something to do with settling the last of his estate with his family. I have no idea?”

“When will he be back?”

“Not sure,” Bree answered.

“Well, fine. I’ll fly to Italy,” I answered, driven to see him again. “I need to talk to him, Breanne, and don’t look at me as if I’m your child, dammit.”

Bree’s expression softened, “I understand. I guess I wouldn’t be able to rest if I were you, either. I just wonder if you’ve forgiven him. I’m confused.”

“Of course, you’re confused,” I grinned, “because you want us to get back together. I mean, I don’t know whether I’ve forgiven him.” I opened the darkened drapes, allowing light into the room, “Well, that’s not entirely true. I think the issue is that I don’t know if I can trust him.”

“Then why are you so determined to see him in Italy?”

“Most people like to thank the person who helped their brother overcome years of addiction in person. That center has helped Shane, but I think the catalyst for Shane putting himself first was that Spencer cared and believed in him. I just want to thank him.”

“Then call him,” she nodded toward where my phone sat on the end table on a charge.

“Why?” I said with irritation. “Listen, I’m pretty much unemployed now, and I may as well start looking for employment opportunities anyway. Perhaps living overseas would be a good change for me and a healthy start for the little one?”

Bree’s eyes widened. “Okay, hold it. I think it’s best I leave you to decide everything independently. Trying to get you to slow down on seeing Spencer before you’ve thought things through has pushed you into hyperdrive, planning a move across the ocean. All that within the span of the ten minutes we’ve taken to discuss this.”

“I’m going to go home and pack for a little vacation,” I said with a smile. “I’ll be *back*, and I’ll certainly call before I place the condo on the market.”

“And what about the beach house you were going to make an offer on?”

“Bree, you dear heart,” I softly laughed. “Remember what I said about being unemployed? You don’t go making offers on dream homes in my situation, okay?”

“Just get the hell out of here,” she said, walking up to me and hugging me. “I swear, I’m the one who needs her mind checked right now, not you.”

“That was going to be the next thing I told you before I left.” I stood back and turned to grab my phone. “Get out and get some of that amazing Malibu sunshine. I love you.”

Within thirty minutes, I returned to my place to pack my bags. I had no idea what I was doing with this crazy idea, but I knew it felt right, and I would follow my instincts.

CHAPTER

Forty-Five

SPENCER

The last thing I expected to do was jump on a jet and come to Italy, but the circumstances demanded it. For years, I'd wondered about my mother's scheming, and after Gino Trazzi, a former employee of Nonna, contacted me out of the blue, everything came together.

The PI I'd had looking into Heidi hit the jackpot when he came across Gino's name, and after getting into contact with him, Gino insisted he be the one to tell me what my mother had done.

I wasn't in Italy for more than half a day before everything started tipping like dominoes. Gino offered to meet at a café, and once he started talking, I knew Heidi was going to prison just like Nat's father.

Gino was motivated to speak to me because he'd found out my mother hired a man to kill him once she knew a PI was sniffing around, knowing Gino was the only person who could tie her to her crimes. It would've only been a matter of time before Gino led the police to Heidi's doorstep. She would be arrested for fraud, forgery, attempted murder, and a litany of other offenses.

Heidi had known my father's health was failing before he passed away. She spent the weeks leading up to his death

unsuccessfully trying to change his will, having Gino help with the forgery and paying off estate attorneys to look the other way when anyone got suspicious.

She'd tried to divert the entirety of my father's estate to my siblings and me, with the caveat that she be in control of the estate and how and when we received our inheritances. She didn't realize until later that our trusts had been set up separately from what we were to inherit from the estate because my father had foreseen this happening. As such, he'd set up an addendum to his will, which left the remainder of the estate—aside from what he'd already set aside for his children—entirely to Nonna. When Heidi found out her whole plan was a failure, she offered Gino half of Nonna's estate if he would ensure she had an untimely accident resulting in her death. And when Gino refused to commit murder on my mother's behalf, she inevitably put out a hit on him.

The murderousness of my mother and Nat's father was so baffling that I couldn't wrap my mind around it. It would have been laughable if I could even believe it was true. Heidi failed at all her attempts to keep my father's money, so she was going to murder the only woman who'd ever suffered her treacherous personality. The horrible part was that if Heidi needed money, Nonna would've given it.

All those years of her meddling in my personal finances made more sense. She was pissed that my father had given us our own trust fund without her knowledge. She thought she was entitled to it and did whatever she could to pretend she had a say over it.

I sat here, thinking about the look on Heidi's face when she was arrested, thinking it would've felt better than it did to watch her get hauled away in handcuffs. But it didn't feel

good. It felt sad to know she'd wasted her life trying to control money that she didn't even need, and she lost her ability to have a meaningful relationship with anyone because of it.

I always knew my mother was wretched, but the confirmation of it stung more than I anticipated. Maybe I was a bit raw after hearing Nat's father say he wouldn't mind killing his daughter if it meant he got paid and knowing we both had a parent who could be so cruel was almost unbelievable.

I glanced down at my watch. Sunset would be in about twenty minutes, and I looked forward to watching the sun slide behind the mountains surrounding the lake, painting the sky in orange and pink pastels as the aqua-blue water shimmered in the distance.

I could sit on this stone bench, next to this ancient olive tree, for the rest of my fucking life. I would bet my life there wasn't a more perfect view on Earth.

"Beautiful sunset," I heard a ghostly, harmonic voice say.

I glanced over to ensure I wasn't losing my mind and instinctively rose when I saw Nat's face, glowing and radiant.

"Natalia?" I said.

"In the flesh," she said with a touch of her well-known sass. "Is it me, or is it more peaceful out here with your mother and my dad behind bars, rotting like the villains they are?"

"It's not you," I said, properly nervous. "Why are you here?"

The first dead giveaway that I was tense as fuck was that I had just said something idiotic to a woman who flew across the world to see me. She was here for a reason, and I couldn't imagine it being bad. How could things get any worse?

“To celebrate your victory over your mother, I guess. I honestly have no idea why I’m here. Maybe it was just a random, crazy idea I had. I feel sort of stupid.”

I eyed her, thinking of how many times I’d imagined our reunion. It didn’t start with me asking why she was here, nor didn’t include her saying she felt stupid.

“I don’t think it was stupid.”

I think I’m fucking stupid, though, because I can’t think of a normal, well-thought response.

I exhaled the nerves away, but it seemed to increase them. It was Nat’s confused expression and my inability to articulate that made me start to pace.

“Spencer?”

“Listen, this probably isn’t the best way to say any of this, and I’m very aware of that, but I feel like I’m going to explode, or implode, or lose my fucking mind if I keep this in.”

“What’s going on? You’re pacing as if you’re about to ask me to marry you,” she laughed, and I could only nod in response because she was chilling on easy street, and I was stressed the fuck out.

“Yeah, far from that,” I said, rolling my eyes at how foolish I’d been ever to entertain the idea of *using* this woman as a fake wife. “Look at where all that stupid shit got us.”

Her eyes widened. “Jesus, I didn’t fly over here to be insulted by you, Spencer Monroe. If I wanted that, I would just revisit the days when you thought it was okay to hire a private investigator to go behind my back—”

“I know,” I snapped without meaning to. “I mean, I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for hiring a private investigator to sniff out some dirty details on my family or for being a complete dick right now?”

“Both?” I answered with some weird, wimpy tone I was surprised I possessed.

She folded her arms and arched her eyebrow in the sexiest and sassiest way.

“I think we should both take a walk. You’re sweating, and you look like you’ll pass out.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” I said, holding out my arm to lead the way.

I wanted to kick myself. I couldn’t think of the right words, and I was scared shitless to say anything because if I did, that shitty little weak voice might pop up and say something I’d regret.

“Feeling better?” Nat said. I could see her glance over at me while I stared at the cobblestone path we took through the neatly groomed gardens.

“A bit,” I said, feeling like my nerves were quieting and my brain was re-engaging. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I didn’t come all this way just to take a walk around your family estate that your mother tried to steal,” she paused, bringing me to look at where she stopped and stared at me. “Okay, you’re still two shades of pale, so I can’t tell you the other reason either.”

“What’s the other reason?” I asked, seeing a flash of fear cross her face.

“You won’t survive it,” she said, crossing her arms across her chest. “Trust me. If you can’t even handle apologizing to me, I know you won’t be able to handle that.”

“Nat,” I said, feeling more solid in my shoes now, “I am truly sorry. I swear to God that I *never* intended to hurt you in the way that I did. I understand that trying to fix your family problems, even when it was to help you and your brother, was wrong of me. I was so foolish to believe I could hire a fucking PI and go to work, trying to figure out ways to fix everything.” She went to speak, and I reached for her hand, “Please, let me get this out. I’ve had plenty of time to hate myself for doing this to you, and my *mother* being the reason you found out in the way you did was the icing on the worst cake ever.”

“These shoes are killing me, and I’d love to sit down,” she said with a smile that gave me hope I was going in the right direction with the apology of the century—or lifetime.

I guided Nat to one of the many stone benches lining this path. “For everything I did,” I said, as she sat, “sorry is not enough, and I understand that. It was selfish of me to behave like that. I wanted to fix things, get our relationship on a good track, and get your brother healthy so you would be happy and not stressed about him. Everything was done because *my needs* were not being met in the relationship.”

Her expression told me she might never forgive me for what I’d done, which was understandable. I was still struggling to forgive myself after acknowledging my true motives.

“What I learned after I hurt the person I cared about most was that I was a damn selfish fool. A fucking spoiled bastard who was used to having everything his way or no way. If I didn’t get my way, I usually cut people out of my life,

believing I was punishing them by not giving them my attention anymore.”

“Um,” she said, holding up a finger, and I could hear the fight in her voice. “You didn’t cut me out of your life, Spencer. I believe I was the one who shut the door in your face on that one.”

I grinned. “That is very true. And no, I didn’t cut *you* out of my life; that’s what I used to do to others. I prided myself on being above everyone and fixing their problems in a way that served me best.”

“I believe most call that narcissism, and if that’s the case, there is no hope for a relationship because I will not serve a man—”

“Nat, please let me finish?”

“Go ahead,” she rolled her eyes.

“I know I have a bit of a self-serving ego. Hell, I wouldn’t be able to help run a fucking company if I didn’t. But maybe because I’m remorseful and have felt like I would die without you might mean there’s still hope for me?”

“No,” she stated firmly but with her usual feistiness. “Most women don’t buy excuses for acting like an arrogant ass, especially in the name of learning a lesson. However, in your case, Spencer Monroe, I believe you’re not entirely doomed.”

“I’m not?” I answered, confused.

“No,” she said. “And it’s only because we have mutual friends who all agree that you’re not a narcissistic asshole. I understand now why you did it, and I know it wasn’t only to meet your needs. You wanted to help us. You went out of your way for my brother, and I knew nothing about it. Your care and concern for him, knowing you weren’t going to gain

anything from it, was the thing I needed to see. You're a selfless man. Your ego just has a smaller brain than your dick."

I coughed out a laugh, "What?"

"You heard what I said."

"Listen, I know I deserve every insult in the world from you, but I do hope you won't bury the blade up to the handle while stabbing—"

"Let's kill the dramatic analogies. I am jetlagged and irritable. I've had a lot of time to think about this, and if I thought you did those things out of selfishness, I would never forgive you, but I know your heart was in the right place. However, I will warn you, if you do some shady shit like that ever again, I *will* cut your balls and dick off as promised."

I sighed, "Are you letting me off this easy?"

The smile on her face scared the shit out of me. I had no idea what was hiding in her gorgeous mind and behind the beautiful blue eyes that I hadn't seen in too long. It was almost as if she were about to get the best revenge in the world at the best time possible.

"What the hell is that look?" I questioned.

"Oh, Spencer. I have no plans to let you off easy."

"I see that," I said very cautiously. "Can I ask what my punishment will be?"

Her eyes narrowed, and I felt like I was about to get leveled.

"Depends on whether you see it as punishment or not?"

"Nat, you're either fucking with me or—"

“I’m pregnant with your child.”

I had no idea what my expression was. I felt frozen, trying to process this news while fireworks went off inside me.

Holy shit! We’re going to have a baby?

“If you don’t say something, I’m going to kick you in the balls,” Nat said, cutting through the silence.

“Okay,” I answered, fumbling for the right words. “Right. Okay.”

“Spencer,” Nat said, standing up and taking my hands into hers, “you won’t be responsible for the baby in the way you might think I would hold you accountable. Jim has offered me the most amazing opportunity to open a luxury real estate firm, and I can bring over all my existing clients. I’m not after your money. I just want you to know.”

I let her say all that while I stood there staring at her, not listening to everything she said or giving two fucks about money. I was just trying to process how beautiful she was to me after saying she was having *my child*.

“I didn’t believe I could love you more than I already did,” I said, running my knuckles over the softness of her cheeks. “But here I am at a loss for words to describe how beautiful and amazing you are to me. I have no words because I honestly can’t think of anything to say?”

She smiled, and my heart skipped a beat when her eyes closed, and she exhaled in reaction to my thumb grazing over her bottom lip with a will of its own.

“I think this reaction is perfect,” she answered. “I’ve missed you.”

I couldn’t believe this was suddenly where we were.

“I can’t believe I just said that. I mean,” Nat rose and jerked away as if I’d electrocuted her and covered her mouth. “I mean, I’ve missed you, but there’s still a lot to prove, you know?”

I grinned at her usual feistiness. “Oh, I know,” I answered, thankful my confidence returned. “And I’ll prove it.” I stepped toward her, reaching for her hand and bringing her wrist to my lips. “Slowly,” I said, pressing my lips into the fragrance I’d desperately missed so much about her, “and with a smooth intensity that smolders, melting you from the inside out.” Her breathing picked up, “It’ll leave you lightheaded, holding tightly to me and begging to trust me with more.”

“I should tell you,” she said, her breath ragged, “I already asked the doctor if carrying the baby will hinder my sex life.”

“Hopefully, your sex life with a vibrator since I know I wasn’t in the picture when you asked that of the doctor.”

“Of course, and no, I’ve been with no other men since you crushed me. I believe I am bound to you by some witch’s curse or something because I tried to get over you for doing this shit to me, and all that did was make it worse.”

I stepped back, looking into her eyes because I knew *exactly* what she was talking about. “I know that feeling,” I said. “The more I thought to distract myself, the more my mind went directly back to you. It was pure torture.”

“Unless you had frightening panic attacks from out of nowhere, leaving you stranded near a homeless encampment, don’t talk to me about torture.”

“What?” I said, horrified by what I heard.

“It was nothing,” she said with a laugh.

I grinned and pulled her into my arms, “I vow to care for you and our child for the rest of our lives. I know this is coming from left field, but I don’t care. I want you to be my wife, Natalia Hoover. I want to spend every second of every day knowing I’m your husband and the father of *your* children. I understand if you say no; I truly do. I just want you to know that I want you as my wife, and I hope one day you’ll want me as your husband?”

“I wouldn’t be here, going to these lengths, if I didn’t think we were worth a chance. I’ll be honest, though; I didn’t come out here to get engaged.”

“We don’t have to get engaged,” I said with a small laugh.

“But maybe I might *want* to be engaged,” she said with the most adorable questioning look, which I found so irresistible now.

“Then, let’s get engaged.”

“God, what are we doing?” she said.

“We’re doing the right thing this time. Nat, I don’t know what happened between this place, London, and California, but something *did* happen, and I learned that I can’t live in this world without you in my life. I’ve never needed anything as much as I need you.”

“We’re going slow on this,” she said. “I’m talking *our kid might be a five-year-old, walking wedding rings down the aisle* kind of slow. I think we need to move in the direction of allowing the relationship to simmer and grow still.”

“I agree with whatever you want,” I said. “Whatever makes *you* happy. If you want to wait five years to make it official, I’ll wait. It just gives me something to look forward to.”

“I think this might work out for us,” she said, her daring expression returning, and I knew we were skipping dinner and heading straight for my room.

“I know it will. The hardest lesson I’ve ever learned was losing you because I put my selfish and impatient ass first. Trust me, I’d rather learn a lesson in patience than a lesson in losing the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“I’m not down for admitting I would like to learn a lesson in patience, but I don’t want to lose you either. I love you, Spencer. And yes, I’ll marry you, but give me at least three to five years.”

“Anything you ask, I’ll gladly do. Now, let’s celebrate alone. Preferably in Verona, where we can relive some of the good times we had without distractions.”

“Won’t the family be irritated we left?”

“I just saved them from losing my grandmother and this estate to Satan’s sister. I think they’ll all survive. Besides, Steve and I are back on the mend, so that’s settled. And in his deepest apologies to you, he’ll be kissing your ass for quite some time.”

“Seems like things got a little intense out here?”

“Just bizarre. You’d think I was making it up if I told you everything.”

“It’s sad that our child will never have any grandparents.”

“Do you really want them to know your father and my mother?”

“God, no,” she answered. “It just sucks. I don’t want my kid to be sad when all the other little asshole kids have their

grannies and grandpops show up on Grandparents' Day or whatever, and all our kid can do is look at mugshots."

"Our child will not be the only one who has no representation on Grandparents' Day, if that's even a thing," I answered. "Hey, Bree and Alex's twins are in the same position with their misfortunes. Instead of thinking about the sadder things, why don't we focus on the fact that I still have no idea how I managed to get you back into my arms so easily?"

"You think this is going to be easy?" she laughed. "Spencer, you're signing on to wait at least five years to marry me, dealing with the wild life of being with a pregnant woman. Trust me, friend. I'll be miserable and probably unbearable. It's half the reason I'm waiting five years for marriage."

"How's that?"

"I don't want to be pregnant in a wedding dress, and I *may* want another child to get it out of the way. So, you never know how long these things can take. You can't just throw together a couture gown, either. These things take time, you know?"

I couldn't help but laugh at how she was planning this out in her head. "Don't you think that's a little backward, though? I mean, most people like to get married and start a family when they determine they want to spend the rest of their lives together."

"I'm not most people. I must have this all planned out, or it just won't work."

"I'm following your lead, sweetheart."

At that moment, I picked her up, prompting an excited laugh from her, and marched up to the house. We'd have a lot to discuss after everything we'd been through with our

parents, but I was ready for it all. Nat was likely still dealing with the truth about her family, just as I was internally battling what Heidi had done. It was a lot, but I knew we could go through it together.

Nat wasn't lying when she said the wealthy were weird. They were. Some are dark and disastrous, and some are just a little bit off. I'd like to think we fell into the latter category with some fun sprinkled in.

I'm sure we would have one hell of a wild engagement, probably five years long and three kids later, but I was already committed to this woman in my heart, so I would wait for however long she wanted me to. I loved her enough to sacrifice everything to build a harmonious life together.

I was a fool in love and a damn proud fool too.

Funny how life works out and how the lessons and paths we unknowingly take are leading us in one way or the other to our destiny.

Epilogue

YOU HAVE CORDIALLY BEEN INVITED TO THE WEDDING

OF

SPENCER MONROE

AND

NATALIA HOOVER

Six months later.

(So much for that five-year plan.)

NATALIA

The chaos of the catering company filled the hallways and the room I was in. The sounds of crashing dishes, some head chef yelling at her line cooks, and the smell of lobster bisque, coupled with the other exotic dishes on the menu for our wedding, added to my nervous excitement.

“Nat,” I heard Bree call as I leaned over to taste the delicious bisque. “Do *not* get that on your dress!”

I sighed, delicately placed my spoon handle against the bowl’s rim, and glared over at my maid of honor. She was lucky she looked dazzling in her strapless sage gown, which accentuated every curve.

“You look very bangable in that dress, you know? Alex can thank me later,” I said. “Now, let me eat this before I turn into Bridezilla on all of you.”

“Alex already nailed me in the bathroom, but I’ll remind him to send you a thank you card,” she said sarcastically.

“I’d believe that if you didn’t sound annoyed,” I said.

She grinned, “I swear, I don’t know how you haven’t put on five hundred pounds with your recent cravings for baguettes and lobster bisque.”

“Honey, I was a shade worried about it too, but it appears pregnancy suits me. I was born to shine in a wedding dress just two months before I drop this baby.”

“Your confidence baffles me sometimes,” our dear friend Cass said, walking up and kissing me on my cheek. “You look

radiant, darling.”

“I know,” I winked and leaned over, continuing to devour this soup before Shane came into the room to load me up and bring me down the aisle to Spencer. “Damn, this is fucking delicious!”

“Excuse me?” I heard an elderly voice say.

I glanced up, seeing Nonna in the doorway.

I smiled widely as I approached her. “I’m so thrilled to surprise Spencer with you. You look gorgeous, Nonna,” I said, hugging her and grinning at her purple dress. I released her and looked around, “Are Sloane and Becca with you?”

“*Si, Dolcezza*. They are coming,” she said as a teasing grin spread across her face. “Now, may I ask if you’re Italian?”

“Unfortunately, the only Italian in me was put there by your beloved grandson and is growing bigger by the second,” I said as she snickered. “Why do you ask, Nonna?”

“I don’t know of any other culture that would have their brides get ready in a room attached to a kitchen,” she teased. “Are the chefs taking care of you?”

“You know they are,” I chuckled and brought my hand through the bend of her arm, escorting her to the sofa I had placed in the corner of the room to make this part of the second kitchen feel more like a bridal dressing room.

Yes, my food cravings were a problem, and no, Bree wasn’t lying when she couldn’t understand why I didn’t look like the Goodyear Blimp, either. I ate so much rich and fattening food the last few months that I shouldn’t have been able to fit into my dress, but by some miracle, I could.

I was grateful my pregnancy had been relatively pleasant, as much as a pregnancy can be. It wasn't what I'd expected, but nothing was when it came to Spencer, was it? Every plan I'd ever made with the guy went the other way somehow. Our fake, no-strings-attached marriage ended up in soulmate-level love. Oh, and the five years I insisted on waiting to get married turned into six months because why wouldn't it? I'd given up on trying to plan anything when it came to our relationship because I realized it wasn't something I wanted to control. It was something I wanted to enjoy.

I still think Spencer was half expecting this to be an elaborate prank. I'd been pretty spontaneous these days, which was all part of exercising my ability to let go of my need to control everything. It was going pretty well, if I did say so myself. I managed to whip this wedding together in six weeks, from this elegant hotel venue down to the helicopter waiting to take us to Jim's yacht, ready to set sail to Alaska for our honeymoon. It was all done on short notice, and so far, it was working as planned. All I could do now was cross my fingers that Murphy's Law didn't crash the party.

"You only gave me a month's notice to be here, *Bella*," Nonna said while the chef came out and gave her a plate of snack food. "I'm just thankful to be here."

"Trust me, Nonna," I said, "if I'd planned this any farther out, it would've only given time for more things to go wrong. I would've really ended up turning this into a five-year engagement."

She chuckled as I heard the door open, admitting Sloane and Becca.

"There she is," Sloane said, and before I could say a word, Bex was bear-hugging me tightly.

“I’m so happy to see you, kiddo,” I said, brushing my hand over her head. “Are you excited, and did you get plenty of rest?”

“Yes, and yes,” she chirped. “I can’t wait to surprise Uncle Spencer. We’ve been here for two days.”

“I know, little one,” I said before reaching out to hug my future sister-in-law. “You look beautiful, Sloane. Now, Spence is going to be excited to see you all. You might get a tight hug from him when you walk up the aisle with those rings, too, Bex. You’ll be walking with a sweet boy named John.”

“I met him, and I think I have to practice again with him because I tripped last night,” she said with a frown.

“Nonsense,” I smiled at her and brushed the tip of my finger over her nose. “And I’m sorry I wasn’t there last night, but it would’ve blown the surprise for Uncle Spencer if we rehearsed together.”

“How many people will be here?” she asked with trepidation.

The ballroom where the ceremony would be held was massive, and I didn’t want to tell her nearly all our friends from across the globe would be in attendance. She’d probably be petrified at the thought.

Spencer couldn’t have given a fuck if we were here, in Vegas, in front of a judge, or in a closet. The guests and venue didn’t interest him, but it interested me. If Natalia Hoover were getting married, it would be a sight to see, and everyone would know about it.

“Nat, it’s time for everyone to find their seats,” Bree said, part maid of honor and part wedding coordinator. “We’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, Breanne,” I said, then looked back at Becca. “Listen, you and I are going to be the stars of this show. I didn’t have our dresses made by a very talented Parisian tailor because I wanted this to be a simple wedding, yeah? I’m so happy to marry Uncle Spencer and become a *real* part of your family that I want to celebrate it in front of everyone I know. And, to thank you kids for doing such an incredible job, our friend Cameron is going to take you all on a helicopter ride after the wedding.”

“Oh no,” she said. “Maybe that’s why John got so angry with me for tripping.”

“*Angry?*” I frowned until I realized who we were talking about. “Oh, sweetie, no. Don’t you worry about little John. He can be far too serious for his own good. The funny part is that his dad, Jake, is the biggest goofball around. I think he probably gave John a pep-talk and reminded him not to worry about things being perfect.” I smiled, then hugged her.

“We need to wrap it up,” Bree said.

I rose and sighed, “I wonder when I become a mother, if you’ll actually start treating me like your friend instead of your child?”

She chuckled, “I might consider it once you’re a married woman.”

I rolled my eyes, “I *can’t even* with you sometimes, honey,” I said, then walked over to the wall of mirrors that was ideally situated with lights to shine down on the pale gown I wore.

“You look so beautiful,” Cass said, adjusting the Harry Winston diamond tiara on the crown of my head.

“I know,” I said with a sexy smile. “I don’t know why I’m not on the cover of Mom’s Vogue or something. This is too much beauty to behold sometimes.”

“Five minutes, ladies. Ushers are here to escort the bridesmaids and grandmother,” the wedding coordinator said, taking the words out of Breanne’s mouth, I was sure.

I took one last bite of bisque, popped a breath mint, and then I was ready to become Mrs. Spencer Monroe and never look back.

Two months later...

SPENCER

Everyone told me I would never get over the beauty of watching my bride walk down the aisle because with each step she took toward me, she was closer to spending the rest of her life with me.

I believed them. However, everyone, including myself, was wrong. Nat seemed to become more beautiful with each day that passed after she accepted my marriage proposal.

The day was beautiful, and the honeymoon was simply perfect, ideal for us to enjoy the first days of being husband and wife. I constantly drifted back to how sublime everything was and how angelic Nat looked with her beaming and proud smile as she walked toward me.

I didn't think any day would surpass that one, but here we were. She was a week past her due date, and my heart was just as full, happy, and grateful as it was on our wedding day.

Today might be the day that tops them all. I was excited to find out.

“Alex?” I said when my friend answered the phone. “Give me good news, man.”

“You guys will take ownership today. Now, I'm not sure how you want to work this since Brooks and Stone own the home, and—”

“Nat will sign all the documents and take ownership of it. It's her home, and I want her to experience this. Trying to convince her that someone else bought it from underneath her

has been hard enough. She's been drooling over that house forever, especially because her best friend designed it."

"I get that," Alex laughed. "Maybe now she'll forgive me for telling her I couldn't refuse the other offer. I think she's secretly hated me ever since."

I chuckled, "Yeah, sorry about that. I promise she will love you again when she finds out. You and Bree were very convincing."

"I think you had a little *too much fun* with this shit, but I'm excited for you both. I suppose you'll be relocating to the lap of luxury in La Jolla, then?"

"Turns out, Jim is all about the luxury real estate headquarters being further south. So, now I get the privilege of being flown up the coast from San Diego every other week in the corporate helicopter. I'm one spoiled mother fucker."

"You said that, not me. Hey, congratulations."

"Thanks, man," I answered. "Dinner tonight, right? We're celebrating at Nobushi's at seven."

"We'll meet you guys there."

I hung up with Alex and walked to Jim's office. "Hey," I said, letting myself in, "I'm taking off."

"Great work on that Kulganthu project. It's going to be a great acquisition."

"At least something will pay for the chopper gas for me to show Nat her new home," I laughed.

"Our asses are far too spoiled sometimes," he said, standing up and grabbing his briefcase. "See you tonight at seven, right?"

“Right. See you all then.”

It was two in the afternoon when the chopper landed on the helipad of the home Nat had been devastated to lose to a fictitious investor. I'd been waiting for her to notice where we were going for the last twenty minutes, but her head was so buried in her phone that she wouldn't have noticed if we were flying over a volcano.

The place sat imposingly on the bluffs overlooking the beaches of La Jolla. It was magnificent, and the views were beyond astounding. The climate here was perfect throughout all four seasons, which was one of the many reasons why anyone who could afford to live here did.

“Where the fuck?” Nat said when the helicopter pilot walked to the side door and opened it for us. “This is my home.” She looked at me in confusion. “Why are we here? Are you *trying* to make me hate you as much as I hate having to wait another week in discomfort to meet this baby girl?”

I smirked. “No, gorgeous,” I said. “I'm trying to ease the discomfort by bringing you to your home.”

“Did that bastard investor back out?”

I sighed. “No,” I answered with a grin. “How could I back out when this is my wife's dream home?”

“Baby! Oh, my God. You are *so* getting laid for this. I will fuck you every way I know how, Spencer Monroe,” she said, taking the pilot's hand and forcing him to look at the ground and bite away his smile before looking at me.

I shrugged, “What can I say? Buy your lady her dream home if you want to get laid.”

He chuckled, “That’s all?”

“Apparently so.”

I took Nat’s hand and led her toward the stairs that spiraled into the home. The ocean-facing side of the house was constructed of nearly all glass to take in panoramic views of the Pacific. Breanne had brilliantly designed this place, and I would’ve been surprised if she didn’t win an award for this architectural masterpiece.

“I don’t even know what to say,” Nat said with a crack in her voice.

“You don’t have to say anything, sweetheart. We know this home spoke to your heart. It’s why you had to have it.” I turned her to face me, “It’s also why I wanted to surprise you. Safety measures will be put in place for our daughter, but Bree said she’ll start with those designs once—”

I was silenced by Nat’s lips on mine, while I braced her tightly and tugged at her bottom lip as her hands went to the button of my slacks.

“We’re fucking right here and right now,” she demanded.

One thing I loved about this woman was how she showed me her gratitude, and I was sure our marriage would continue to blossom as I showered her with gifts, especially when *this* was my reward.

After two hours of enjoying every last part of each other’s bodies, we were forced to get up and get ready to head back to Los Angeles and finish the paperwork for the home before joining our friends at dinner.

While Nat and I stole one last kiss, I couldn't resist but to be inside her one more time before leaving our first official home as husband and wife. Nat didn't argue. In fact, she turned to the wall, allowing me to take her from behind.

Nothing like fucking up against a glass wall where you could see the endless magnificence of the ocean. I found a steady and delicious rhythm, Nat's groans becoming louder and louder, practically throwing me over the edge like I hadn't had sex for a month.

"Fuck," I said, feeling her orgasm gush all over me, sending my mind into a fucking trance. "Yes."

"Get the fuck out of me!" she bellowed. "Holy shit, my water just broke."

"Oh my God," I said in horror, worried I did something to hurt her until I realized what was happening. "Baby?"

"Yes," she said. Her eyes filled with fear as she gripped her stomach. "I can't believe it happened like this. It's mortifying."

"It's natural, honey," I said, trying to keep my shit together. "I mean, not all couples prefer this method, but we opted in for it, given we can never *not* have sex."

"Shut up," she growled, bending over in a contraction. "Get me to the comfort of a damn hospital!"

"Right," I said. "We need to get dressed!"

There was a lot of shouting, panting, and heavy breathing from both of us until we landed on the helipad at St. John's hospital. It took minutes to have Nat admitted and dressed in her hospital gown. After they examined her and saw she was already dilated to nine centimeters, shit escalated too real and fast.

“I thought first-time babies took about a hundred hours to deliver. This is my first baby, Dr. Aster. I know it’s probably your first delivery out of college, but Jesus, there’s no way I’m at nine centimeters already.”

The young, handsome on-call doctor looked familiar, but I couldn’t place him. I had probably met him before through Jake and Cameron at a bar or something. Nat was correct in her assessment, though. He looked like he was still *in* college.

“I think you should call for a second opinion,” I advised him, wanting only the best doctor to attend to my wife and child.

Nat was hooked up to all sorts of monitors, and when they started going off all at once, I freaked out.

“We need to prepare the OR room now. The baby’s heart rate is dropping,” the doctor said to the nurse reading the machine. “*Now*,” he ordered. As soon as I heard the thundering sound of his voice, I understood that his looks were deceiving. The man was in command, acting like the chief of obstetrics.

“Sir, come with me, and I’ll get you scrubbed in,” a nurse said, guiding my shocked-into-silence ass out of the room.

I stopped and snapped out of the horror, returning to where Nat lay crying and scared. They were practically racing her from the room on a rolling bed, and at that moment, I knew shit was serious.

“Baby, I love you,” I said, staring intently into her eyes. “You’re both fine. We’re going to meet her soon. Just imagine her having your blue eyes and my smile like you hoped to see.”

“Spencer, you can’t leave me,” she said, her weak and scared voice breaking my heart.

“Never. I’m not leaving you, sweetheart,” I told her. “I need to change into the gear that allows me to go into the room with you, okay? I’m right here.”

“Okay,” she said, and then the nurses were racing the bed down the hallway, saying uplifting words of encouragement, and telling Nat everything would be fine. I went into some strange survival mode and focused on getting to the operating room where the young doctor would perform a C-section on Nat to deliver our baby.

When I walked in, I was guided to sit where Nat’s face was turned toward me. A curtain was draped over her chest while the doctor went to work. No one was fucking around, and I appreciated that the life of my Natalia and baby daughter was being taken so seriously.

“You look so beautiful,” I said, seeing her eyes glistening under the bright lights of the room. I wiped away the tears streaming from the corners of her eyes. “So beautiful.”

“I don’t know, you two, but I think you’re both going to have competition with this little one,” I heard the doctor say before he raised our daughter over the curtain for us to meet her.

Her hair was full and curly, her eyes a deep blue, and her lips pouted sweetly before she let out her first scream. I choked, feeling tears in my eyes, and covered my mouth while I unexpectedly realized that I wasn’t choking, I was crying.

My God, she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever laid eyes on.

“She’s so beautiful,” Nat choked out, laughing and crying simultaneously. “She looks so much like me.”

“We’re going to go get her vitals,” the nurse said as the doctor handed her our daughter. “Dad, you may come with us or stay with mom.”

“I love you,” I told Nat. “There is no better gift.”

“Go be with her, Spence,” she said, smiling. “Don’t leave her side.”

“Okay,” I answered, then kissed her forehead and walked over to where the nurses were cleaning our daughter.

“Hey, sweetie,” I said when she started screaming at the top of her healthy lungs. “It’s your daddy.”

Just like the books and the shows we watched had said, our baby would find our voices comforting if they heard them while in the womb. I could see that now as my face grew lighter, watching her eyes search the room for where my voice came from.

“A miracle,” I said, awestricken.

“You can hold her hand, Dad,” the nurse advised me.

I reached into the warming area where they were cleaning her and reached my pinky in, watching in amazement as my daughter clasped her tiny fingers around it. The miracle of this was overwhelming me. I felt like I was floating, feeling so peaceful and in love with her.

I’d heard many stories of parents bonding with their children, but I never knew what that was all about until now. I was experiencing emotions I didn’t know existed.

Everything was rushing past in a whirlwind, and Natalia still had not had the luxury of holding our daughter. Then,

after the nurses wrapped her up, she smiled at me, “Would you like to bring her to Momma?”

“I’d love to,” I said, taking my daughter in my arms and letting the love wash over me.

There were no words to describe the feeling I was experiencing. I wanted these first moments to be spent with just me and Natalia. I knew we’d have the chaos of the operating room and then returning to the postpartum room, but all I wanted was to watch my wife hold her baby for the first time.

Nat’s eyes widened when she took her, and with the assistance of me holding our daughter, Nat and the baby were able to stare at each other and meet for the first time.

“Hey, apple cheeks,” Nat said, obviously feeling great with the drugs in her system and acknowledging how chubby our daughter’s perfect cheeks were. “You’re so beautiful.”

Everything went smoothly from the moment the doctor made the call to perform a Caesarean section to safely deliver our daughter until now. Dr. Aster explained that she’d gone into distress during the contractions because the umbilical cord was wrapped around her neck, so the emergency C-section saved her life. For that, I’d be eternally grateful.

“I want to name her Angel,” Nat said, my eyes shifting from where I stood, staring at our little miracle while Nat rested on the bed.

“Angel?” I questioned. “Are we hippies now?”

She arched an eyebrow at me and grinned, “I said Angel, not Stardust-Moonbeam. Although, I like the sound of that

too. Don't tempt me."

"Nat," I tried to reason with her a little, "I understand that it was likely Angels that saved her and all that. But don't you think that is like something you name your pet? What about something normal like Jennifer or Allison or whatever?"

"Jennif—Hey, this isn't the eighties, pal," she said, looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "We're not naming our baby Jennifer, Tammy, Linda, or any other name that makes our infant an instant forty-year-old."

"No, I just mean that they're regular, human names," I said, trying my hardest not to laugh so as not to startle the baby.

"I love the name Angel," she ordered.

"I see that we're a happy family," the young doctor said, walking in, pumping hand sanitizer onto his palm, and rubbing his hands together.

"Our first family fight," I laughed. "Thank you for doing an amazing job, saving our daughter and keeping my wife safe."

He nodded, walking over to Nat to check her vitals. "I think I did pretty well, you know, for being in college and all?"

"You seriously look like you're in high school," Nat said. "I'm sure you *must* get that a lot. I mean, come on."

"Not really. Just from you two." He laughed and looked at me, "Spencer Monroe, correct?"

"Yes," I answered. "You look familiar, Doc. Have we met?"

“I think so. I attended a medical conference in Palm Springs with Collin Brooks a while back. I believe Mitchell and Associates hosted it. You work for them, I think; is that right?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “I’m the VP.”

“Ah, well, I guess that makes you my boss, so it’s good I didn’t screw anything up today.”

I chuckled, “Jim Mitchell is the one who enjoys sitting on the hospital board. I avoid that like the plague.”

He nodded, then looked back at Nat, “Everything looks great, Natalia. I’ll check on you in the morning, but there should be no issues with a speedy recovery. You have a gorgeous, healthy little daughter who likes to steal the show; she’s a bit of an attention grabber, that one.”

“Like her mother,” Nat teased back.

“Very nice to meet you both.”

The doctor left, and I stood up and walked over to Nat. “I love you beyond words, and I’m so thankful for you, baby,” I said, bending over to kiss her. “Here’s to the rest of our lives.”

“And sleepless nights,” she added while I placed Angel in her arms.

“You sure you want to name her Angel? You might not be too keen on the name when she’s waking us up every three hours.”

“She’s our Angel, and she must be called what she is.”

“You’re right, my love,” I said as I gazed at the miracle we’d created. “No other name would do.”

After a few hours of soaking up our Angel, I texted our friend group, letting them know we had desserts at the hospital and a sweet baby girl for them to meet.

Never in a million years would I have guessed I would ever be this happy. I didn't think it was physically possible until I met Natalia. We'd been through more highs and lows than I expected to face in such a short time—the highs being blissful and the lows being as dark as it gets—but I could've never imagined we'd end up here.

Nat and I had endured painful childhoods and managed to come together on the other side, whole and full of love despite the path our parents had laid out for us. The most important thing to me was *my family* now—my wife and daughter, who was hopefully the first of more children to come.

I would stop at nothing to give our children all the love and positive guidance in the world and show them how wonderful life can be when you find the perfect partner to share it with.

This was the way life was supposed to be lived.

The end.

About the Author

Raylin Marks is in love with each and every character she writes in her stories. Her greatest excitement is bringing readers on fun adventures with her characters and hopes they love them as much as she does.

When not writing, she's drinking coffee and plotting her next book.



All books in the Billionaires' Club Series

SERIES ORDER

All books in the Billionaires' Club Series can be read in any order and are standalone reads, each with a happily ever after.

Here is the series order:

Book 1: Dr. Mitchell (Jake and Ash's Story)

Book 2: Mr. Mitchell (Jim and Avery's Story)

Book 3: Dr. Brooks (Collin and Elena's Story)

Book 4: Mr. Grayson (Alex and Bree's Story)

Book 5: Dr. Brandt (Cam and Jessa's Story)

Book 6: Mr. Monroe (Spencer and Nat's Story)

And...yippeeaaaa there will be more sexy and steamy Billionaires and doctors joining the club, with a book 7 hot on the keys of Raylin Mark's keyboard right now....

Stay tuned for Dr. Aster (Book 7) and Mr. Aster (Book 8) joining the club, and one never knows where it all goes from there...as long as these Billionaires are telling their stories, Raylin will be writing them for you.

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