

A close-up photograph of a man wearing a dark, possibly black, leather motorcycle jacket. The jacket has multiple zippers and a high collar. The man's face is partially visible at the top, showing his mouth and chin. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The word "Mate" is written across the center of the jacket in a large, white, handwritten-style script font.

# Mate

NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TIJANI

**NATE**

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**TIJAN**

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*Nate Monson is a character from the Fallen Crest series, but  
his book can be read as a standalone!*

*I hope you enjoy!*

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Acknowledgments

Also by Tijan

Bennett Mafia

Rich Prick

## NATE

I wanted to beat the shit out of my stalker.

He'd been fine at first, putting some effort into being secretive and following me at a distance, but then he started getting lazy. And lazier. My last straw had been when I saw him pull out the camera, and I'd had enough. It was now insulting how stupid he thought I was. He was sitting three tables away.

The dude had been following me for the past three weeks. I caught glimpses of him every now and then. He showed up in Boston, then Chicago, and now he was following me in Seattle.

I was here looking at investment properties.

“Is that guy taking pictures of us?”

Now my realtor had noticed the guy.

Standing from the table, I gave a polite smile to both my realtor and colleague. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment?”

Both looked dazed at me as they nodded.

I headed for the bathroom. This wasn't my first rodeo dealing with people like this guy. Having a best friend who played pro football, his wife an Olympic runner, and a brother-in-law as a soccer superstar, I was well versed in sneaking in and out of places. Not to mention my folks, both movie producers and directors. They were *known*.

I was *known*.



It was a byproduct of who I was and who I was connected to, but for fuck's sake, this guy was a new problem for me.

Dining in a high-end restaurant, I found the majority of the patrons wearing business suits and dresses. And they were formal dresses like my mom would've worn to a fundraising gala, not the nightclub kind of dresses. The staff all wore tuxedo-like uniforms—black dress pants and buttoned-down white tops—and some even did the whole white gloves thing when they were serving.

So, all that to say, it was almost painful how much this guy stood out.

I headed toward the bathroom, but then swung through the kitchen, ignoring the startled staff, and came up behind him. He had just put down his camera and was reaching for his coffee when I swung into the chair, taking the camera on my way and flipping open the back to expose the film.

“Hey—” His voice stopped once he got a good look at my face.

“Hey, yourself.” I put the camera back on the table. “What are you? I'm aware some circles know me, but I'm not paparazzi worthy. Your pictures won't sell. If you're one of those lovesick fucks, then I'll call you a police escort to the nearest psych hospital. If you're anyone else, you better speak up now while we both aren't bloody. I've been patient, but you're so sloppy now that I'm embarrassed *for* you.”

I had to give him props.

After his initial surprise, he was a cool customer.

During my whole speech, he didn't move. He didn't react. He didn't show a thing. He closed down, and he watched me back with almost-dead eyes. His brown suit was pressed to the point it could cut through paper, so he at least had the self-respect to use an iron. He looked to be in his fifties, but he kept himself trimmed. His hair was kept short, and he was staring back at me, not a feather ruffled.

I waited for a beat.

He didn't talk, so I did.

“You were police once.” I motioned to his eyes. “Those give it away. What are you now?”

Without responding to me, he pulled out his wallet. He laid out two twenty-dollar bills, then took a business card and slid it across the table to me. “My client will be in touch.”

I was picking up the card as he stood, smoothed down his suit jacket, and left.

CARL MALLONE, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR.

NATE

“Someone’s investigating *you*? That seems like the beginning of a joke.”

I could hear Logan laughing from his end of the phone. He thought the whole thing was hilarious, but I didn’t know why. I had a few childhood friends who were my family. Logan was one of them, along with his brother, and now a whole slew of people we had included in our group. Logan was the lawyer, and like now, he rarely acted like one except when he was gearing up for a case.

I scowled, letting myself into my hotel room and dropping my suit jacket on the desk. “When are you going to grow up? You’re thirty.”

“Never, dude. Never. What was his name?”

I told him, and I could hear him typing on his computer.

“You’re looking him up?”

I needed a drink.

And a shower.

And a workout.

And a good fuck.

And all that wasn’t in any sort of order.

I was restless, and I needed to move.

I already knew how this phone call would play out.

Logan would do what he did. He'd investigate him, maybe send a text or make a call to his father, who had some questionable connections, and he'd relay to me what he was told by the people who knew the answers. This would either happen over this phone call or later this weekend. After that, Logan would want to make up a plan on how to "handle" this guy because in Logan's family, that was what they did.

They handled their adversaries.

That wasn't my first response, but I'd been inducted enough into their family to go with the flow. Usually.

Not this time, though. This time, it felt different.

I felt different.

I didn't know what was happening, but something was.

It was crawling under my skin, slowly coming up and covering my whole body. It was like a weird awareness that I had no control over and couldn't stop, and it was annoying the shit out of me.

Tucking the phone into the crook of my head and shoulder, I went to the minibar and poured myself a glass of brandy. I carried it out onto the wraparound balcony, where one side looked out over Seattle, and the other had a view of the water.

I loved Seattle.

I loved Boston and Fallen Crest, but Seattle was different. It felt different, or maybe it was just me. Maybe I was different here?

I loved it in a way I didn't love the other places.

"Bro."

Logan was speaking in my ear.

"Yeah?" I had the glass in my one hand and grabbed the phone in my other one, hitting the button so it was now on speaker. I needed to feel free for some reason, and keeping a phone pressed to my ear couldn't give me that sensation.

"You okay? I've been talking for the past three minutes, and you haven't said a word."

“*Bro.*” I used his word right back. “You talk a lot.”

He grunted. “True. Still. My Soul Brotha Connection sensations are tingling. Something’s up with you. What is it?”

I had to grin at that.

Logan Kade was a lot. He could be a dick, annoying, loyal, funny, but sometimes, like just now, he was endearing. And if you were one of the people he cared about, it was a privileged world to live in. I never took it for granted, not anymore. He and his brother.

“I’m good. I think I just need a hard run, that’s all.”

“Too many business meetings. You should stick to a max of two a week. You’re rich. You can afford it.”

“Like you can talk. You’re a workaholic.”

“Sticking it to someone is my life’s *passion*. That shit ain’t work.”

“You still work a lot.”

“It’s called playing. I play a lot, and I know what you’re doing. Stop distracting me, dude. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing. I mean it. Just need a hard workout. That’s all.”

Logan was quiet for a moment. “Okay, but I’m here. I always give you shit, but I love you.”

See? Endearing.

“I know. I appreciate it. Right back at you.”

“Go and get fucked.”

We said our goodbyes, and Logan was right.

I was best friends with him and his brother, Mason. I knew Mason first, but then Logan and I became tighter later in the years. I might talk to Logan more, but my bond with Mason went deeper at times. I couldn’t explain it. Both were family to me, so I wasn’t surprised Logan had picked up on my restlessness.

A good fuck was needed.

Tossing the rest of my drink back, I ignored the burn and scrolled through my phone.

Valerie was from here. She traveled almost as much as I did now, but she and I weren't a steady item. We were more steady bedmates. No exclusivity. No relationship. That'd never been her and me, even since the first time we hooked up back in college. It was after a big game for Mason, so the festivities had been extreme. I went to a bar and picked up a redhead who had me smiling the first second I saw her. She had me laughing within the next thirty seconds of talking, and I then took her home.

I meant to reach out later, maybe see what could be there, but I didn't. I didn't know why I didn't, I just didn't. Then *she* reached out six months later.

We met up and had a hot night.

The day after, she flew to Chicago, and I had my first investment meeting.

No phone calls were exchanged. No texts.

Until the next time she was in Boston, and we had a repeat. After that, it became our thing. If we were ever in the area of the other one, we shared a night, then went on with our normal lives the next day.

That all ended two years ago, and I had no idea why.

I called that night two years ago and was sent straight to voicemail.

I texted her. No response.

A few months into ghosting me, she changed her phone number.

Nothing new had been posted to her social media.

I tried looking her up at her job, but nothing. She wasn't on their website.

Then I got an event notice online for her engagement party. She and another guy were smiling all nice for the

photographer so that explained what happened. Still, though. I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about her.

Something still nagged in the back of my mind about her.

Tonight, looking at her phone number in my phone all these years later brought back memories that didn't necessarily improve my mood. She'd be married by now. Maybe even have a kid, too.

A hard run it was then.

That was what I needed to push the niggling out of my mind.

After that, well... I'd see who was in the hotel bar.

## QUINCEY

I was annoyed.

I was annoyed Carl got made.

I was annoyed I had to leave my studio.

I was annoyed I'd been putting this meeting off for a full month but couldn't any longer.

I didn't want to see this guy.

I didn't want to meet this guy.

I didn't want anything to do with this guy, but Valerie was having none of it.

I was following *her* wishes, doing what she wanted. Though I hadn't a clue why she was doing it this way.

She met the guy, hooked up with the guy, and here I was, giving him the 411? Me?

That wasn't my job.

It wasn't supposed to be my job. It was hers.

But, damn.

Maybe my anger wasn't anger at all as a tear worked its way up my throat. I was not doing that shit. I couldn't. Tightening my hands around the steering wheel, I forced that emotion to the bottom of my stomach, and I was hoping to wash it out of me forever. I ~~would not~~ *could not* break down now.

No way.



Not ever, to be honest.

*Ring, ring.*

I reached over to hit the accept button on my car and heard my dad's voice come over the car's speakers. "Are you there?"

I heard shrieking, followed by high-pitched giggling, and I automatically smiled. "Is that Nova?"

"It's the kid I kidnapped on the way home from the bakery today."

I flicked my eyes up, but I was relaxing. "Not funny, Duke."

He was my father, but in so many ways, he wasn't fatherly at all. I'd been calling him by his first name since I was ten years old. He never said a word about it, and neither did I. I was supposed to follow orders, and I had all my life, except now.

I wasn't following his orders. I was following Val's.

"Are you there yet?" he asked again.

"No. Not yet. But I'm not far."

My hands tightened on the wheel once again, and just then, I turned the corner, and the hotel where he was staying came into view. The Corebar Hotel was small and exclusive and well-known among the famous and wealthy.

"I'm here."

I was so tense.

I felt like two fists had been thrust into my stomach, holding my organs with a firm grip, and wouldn't let go. And I wasn't sure if I wanted them to let loose or just rip my organs out of me. It was an I-need-a-drink kinda feeling. A strong drink. I should have gotten trashed before I saw him.

I still could.

I wasn't a drinker, never had been with what I did for my profession, but today was an exception. A very big exception. My body would forgive me eventually.

“How’s everything at home with Nova?” I needed a slight distraction.

“She’s good. You know Nova.”

Yeah, I did. And I loved her, so that was why I was doing what I was doing.

Emotion swept through me, causing my throat to close up. Again.

God. The breakdown.

No, no, no.

And I gripped that steering wheel like it was about to fall off. “It’s not fair.”

I waited, but he didn’t reply.

I knew he wouldn’t.

I could almost hear what he’d inevitably say because he’d said it so many other times.

Life wasn’t fair. There were winners and losers. If I didn’t want to be a loser, I needed to “buck up,” get my head on straight, and wage war with cold ruthlessness. It was better to keep walking over the bloodied corpses than to join them. And my father thought anyone who shed a tear deserved to be a bloodied corpse.

I never knew if he actually meant bloodied corpse as in dead people, but that was another topic—like how I called him Duke instead of Dad—that never got discussed.

I didn’t think I wanted to know how he would clarify that phrase.

Fucking dammit.

I’d gone the block and another.

I stifled a second curse. “There are no parking spots. I’m going to have to valet the car.”

He was quiet for a moment. “You do what you need to do. The nannies are here, so you stay as long as you need to get this done.”

“I know.”

I was mentally saluting him. When he said take my time, he meant it. I brought a bag even though we lived just outside the city. Nate Monson was staying at this hotel, so as long as it took, I would be here as well.

Pulling up to the front of the Corebar Hotel, I grabbed my purse first. I'd get the bag later if it was necessary. I was still hoping it was a last-ditch effort.

“Carl did a full workup on this guy. Besides his investments, he has shown no indications he wants to settle down. I'm sure we're in the clear here.”

My dad was trying to reassure me, going over what our PI brought to us after his cover was blown. My personal opinion? I thought Carl wanted his cover to be blown. We sicced Carl on Nate Monson because we didn't know him. I knew he existed as Valerie's bed buddy, but I hadn't *known him* known him. Just that he, as a person, existed.

With the reason I was here, we needed to know everything we could about him, hence why we hired Carl.

And Carl wanted Monson to know he existed. That didn't sit right with me, but it was what it was.

I was here, and I had a job to do.

“Thanks, Duke. Here's to hoping.”

“Right.”

The valet guy was approaching the car.

“I gotta go.”

“Call me when you get settled.”

“Will do.”

That was the plan.

Get in. Get settled. Then scope out the lobby until Nate Monson showed up.

I was hoping to have a couple of drinks in me before that happened.

My door opened, and I handed my keys to the valet guy.  
“Miss.”

“Thanks.” I took the card he gave me and headed inside.

I went straight to the bar.

**NATE**

I was two bourbons in when *she* walked into the bar.

The world tipped over. That was what I was feeling, and I could only stare for a moment.

Total nerd reaction and I'd never been a nerd. Partier? Player? Asshole? For sure, but never a nerd.

I couldn't think either.

I could only stare.

She was gorgeous. Long dark hair. Long ass legs. Tiny waist. Shit, she was slender, and she was walking like a gazelle. She was holding her hands in front of her, curled toward each other. Dark eyes. A mouth that I already knew I needed to taste.

The cutest nose, and I'd never been a guy who noticed a girl's nose.

Breasts. Ass. Face.

Never a nose.

I was fixated on a nose.

"Are you listening to us?"

Right.

I blinked, coming back to the table. I'd been sitting, and a group of Thunder cheerleaders joined me.

"Uh... yes."

The black-haired one laughed, leaning back in the booth next to me. She picked up her drink, swirling it around, and gave me a slow smile. “We know who you are.”

I frowned. “And who do you think I am?”

“You’re Blaise DeVroe’s brother-in-law.”

Jesus.

I knew this happened, but to hear it so blatantly was a whole other reality check. I was getting recognized for that little prick, that little prick whom I’d grown fond of even though we started our relationship when he was the definition of a little prick. I scowled. “Excuse me?”

“We were at a Falcon game when the jumbotron went to your box. Millie recognized you first.” She pointed across the table to the redhead, who blushed and ducked her head.

She said to the table, “I only recognized you because you’re Mason Kade’s best friend.”

Yes. All the famous folks I knew, who *were not* me.

“There’re, like, entire fan pages dedicated to you.” The redhead looked up, still shy, but I caught the eagerness underneath it.

I’d recognized that look before.

A woman who wanted a notch on her bed or was looking for a sugar daddy.

The other girl spoke up. “Besides, we know you’re rich.” Her eyes moved to the door, and she leaned forward with an alluring smile on her face. “You can have all three of us tonight if you want. We have no problem sharing.”

This wasn’t the first time I got that proposition, and before today, I hadn’t cared. I hadn’t minded.

Now I did, and my scowl deepened because I didn’t know why I cared. I wanted to fuck. That’d been the whole point of coming down here. See who was here, who was interested, take her to the hotel room, then send her home in a car after. A threesome should be getting my dick hard, but it wasn’t. With

these women, I had a feeling a camera would be put somewhere in the room, and the video would get loaded to social media the next day. Look who we bagged? Or some shit like that as the headline.

I was getting a headache.

All three were watching me, expecting me to jump at it.

I wasn't jumping and had no plans to. I was prepared to excuse myself when *she* walked in.

And these three women were forgotten.

“Ahem.”

That was her.

My whole body knew it was her before I looked. Especially my dick, which was *now* hard.

She was standing at our table, a shot in one hand and a drink in the other. She looked at me, her eyes all stormy, and she tossed back the shot before clearing her throat. “I need to speak to you.”

I was already getting up to go with her before she said those words.

My dick was leading the way.

The first girl spoke up, her hand touching my arm, “Get in line, sweetie.”

I brushed the cheerleader's hand off at the same time the new girl tilted her head, total and complete sass coming from her. “I don't think so, *honey*. I got business to talk to him about, and it ain't none of *your* business.”

The “honey” woman turned to me, and she didn't look happy to be vying for my attention. “I need to have a word with you about my sister.”

“Your sister?”

She turned and motioned with her head. “Come on. This isn't going to be fun for either of us.”

My dick was saying otherwise, but I kept that to myself.

“Oh, come on.” One of my tablemates pouted.

The other touched my arm. “Come back. She doesn’t look all that friendly.”

That was why I liked her.

I shrugged them off, picking up my bourbon, and followed as she went to a far booth in the corner. Correction, she went to the far, far booth, and she slid in, all stiff and looking like she wanted to be anywhere but here.

I looked back.

A bartender was watching, so I motioned for two more drinks. He nodded, and I slid into the other side of the booth.

I waited for her to settle.

She never settled.

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## QUINCEY

OF COURSE, he was the first person I saw when I walked inside.

Of course, he had three beautiful women hanging all over him.

And *of course*, he was hot. So freaking hot.

Tall, over six feet. Broad shoulders. Trim waist. He had a swimmer’s body. Dark hair. His eyes—I could barely look at them because they were captivating. They made me want to stare and stay in them forever. And his face. A square jawline. A round face, but one that gave off rugged and manly vibes, not preppy-pretty boy vibes. Oh no. Nate Monson was all man.

The air around him was edgy and snappy, but also molten and electrified sex.

I’d never felt this with another man before. I never even knew a man could emanate sex like he was. It was always something I thought was silly and never existed. Hell. It existed. It was existing and in waves from Monson.



This wasn't fair.

Then again, Valerie had been no slouch. She only had one fuck-buddy relationship, and when she talked about him, I could tell she actually liked him. She respected him. Why she never pushed for more, I hadn't a clue. But she didn't, and that was on her.

I never understood my sister, except in one thing. Now two things.

My stomach was a mess. I felt like throwing up.

Miss Carina would've been all over me if she saw how flustered I was. My hair was a mess. I'd only used three pins to secure my flyaways. It would've been disgraceful on the floor.

*Get yourself together, Quince.*

I closed my eyes. Nate—gah, his name was Nate. The file said Nathaniel Monson, and I read all the details. His famous friends and family. That he did investments for a living, and judging by the portfolio that Carl included, he was doing quite well on top of already being rich. Valerie loved him. I knew she did, but she ended up with Nico instead.

I wanted to growl. Nico. I hated Nico more than I hated having to have this conversation.

Okay. My nerves were better now. My hate for Nico wiped everything out after that. Nate and Nico. My sister had a thing for N names. Who would've been next? A Neil? Noah? Nolan?

Why was I going through N names for males right now?

He'd stopped talking.

I looked up. He was watching me. My God. There was sexual desire there. He didn't blink it away. He only made it more pronounced, not shy, not hiding it. Confident. He wanted me. He had a little smirk that would've been a turn-off on anyone else, but it *worked* on him. It only made him hotter, and then he was seeing me seeing him, and he was seeing me right back.

He wasn't done.

He looked me over, lingering on the bit of leg I had resting out from just under the table before raising his gaze and pausing on my mouth.

He wanted to fuck me.

Heat bloomed in my chest, and an ache was forming south of that. I was being reminded by his stare how long it'd been since I'd gotten laid. That was all this was. When I opened my mouth, all that would be gone, and he'd hate me.

I was adult enough to admit that I'd like to fuck him, but the vast majority hated him first and foremost. Though I shouldn't hate him. My rational side reminded me of this, but the irrational side loathed him because he could take away my life. And I was the one here, about to start these preparations because I had to.

If he found out later in life...

No.

I couldn't go there either. That was another bank vault of emotions I couldn't deal with. Well, I wouldn't because I was here to hopefully snuff this fire out before it got any hotter.

Valerie wanted me to find him, to tell him, and I would do that.

*But seriously, Val, why didn't you ever tell him? It would've saved so much heartache for so many.*

The waiter came over, sliding two drinks on the table between us.

He'd ordered a drink for me.

"I need a shot."

The waiter had started to leave, but he looked back. "Of course, miss."

"Two!" I barked out. "Two shots." I tried to soften the demand. "Please."

The waiter's eyes flickered before he nodded. "Two shots, miss. Of course."

I was going to wait for the shots before I said anything.

I wasn't going to notice how Nate was so much *more* in person than he was in any photograph or social media feed.

So very much more.

I really wasn't noticing how he had a little scruff on his jaw because he hadn't shaved yet, or how I knew he'd feel like sandpaper in all the right places.

I was looking away, but I could feel him watching me not watching him.

I was hot and bothered, and in my profession, you didn't get ruffled. You were smooth. You glided. You were sensual and tender, but strong and fierce. You hid the strong and fierce. I wasn't hiding today. I was feeling all of my emotions, all at once and in full force, and that was making me feel even more.

I needed to calm down.

I needed to be like ice, so I went where I was always pristine and put together in my mind.

I was on the stage with the crowd sitting behind the spotlights.

It was me, the music, and my body.

Everything and everyone was pushed out.

I was bending. I was soaring, dipping, twisting, and I was rounding out on a perfect arabesque. And all the while, it was only the music and me.

It was working.

I went through an entire dance routine in my head before the waiter came back with our drinks.

Two shots were placed in front of me.

I immediately took both.

His eyes lit up, and he leaned back in his booth.

Waiting me out.

My eyes met his. It was the first time I was looking at him straight on since we slid into the booth. Well, it was the first time I was looking right at him since I walked into the bar, and simply put, he took my breath away.

Now he was seeing me better, and some of the amusement faltered.

He frowned, just a slight bit.

He was cluing in. This wasn't a social call where he was going to get laid. That was what he'd been thinking. I wasn't another of those girls who were still here. They hadn't moved on. They were at his vacated table, and they were whispering, watching us. They were holding on, still waiting for him.

They lived in that world, his world. Not my world.

All the more reason to get done with what I came here to do.

Time to rip off the Band-Aid.

“You had a relationship with Valerie Robertson?”

His lips thinned. “Yes.”

Time to tell him the first part.

I leaned forward, slamming a protective wall around me because this was going to hurt both of us.

And I told him.

“Valerie was my half-sister. She's dead.”

## NATE

Her words were a gut punch. I felt the blow.

I sucked in my breath instead, feeling the sting and pain slice through me.

Valerie.

Jesus.

I'd *just* been thinking about her.

I was reaching for my bourbon, needing the burn, when I heard the rest from her.

The rest that I wasn't at all prepared to hear.

"She also had a daughter, who's yours." A piece of paper was laid out on the table, and she slid it over to me. "This is her birth certificate." She pointed at a line. "As you can see, Valerie named you as your daughter's father. Valerie left me part guardianship. We had you investigated, and Carl reported that you didn't seem to be living a lifestyle where you would want to be tied down with a child. Because of that"—she slid *another* piece of paper to me—"I'd like you to sign over your parental rights, and we can all continue with our lives after this."

It happened in slow motion.

*She had a daughter...*

*Who's yours...*

I heard her. I saw her lips moving, but there was a pulse in the air. A beat. I heard it. I felt it.

The world was falling away, lessening, and it was me hearing a break in my life.

It was a crack.

I felt everything shift.

The left turned to right. The right, left.

I was spinning on an axis. Round and round.

Everything stopped. Paused.

Everything was frozen in motion. Because now the words she was saying were real.

Another thump.

From in my chest.

*Pound.*

*Pulse.*

*Thump.*

All were my heartbeats, but they all felt different. From different parts of my body. I felt them all.

I slapped a hand over that paper.

Valerie was dead.

That was sad. Regretful.

But there'd been a nagging. I didn't know. How could I have?

But the nagging.

It kept at me. Over and over again.

I let it go.

I didn't love Valerie.

There'd been a reason I hadn't fought for her.

But... She had a daughter. *She's yours.*

The world had been small to me before. On that beat, on those words, the world got real fucking big.

Colors changed. Deepened. Now I could see the colors in the colors when I hadn't been able to before.

Everything was different now, and when I took another breath, I leaned forward, and snarled, "What's her name?"

"Excuse me?" Her face was a blank mask.

Fuck that blank mask.

I leaned forward and gritted out, "What's her goddamn name?"

She blinked. "Nova."

"How old is she?"

A second blink. Her mask didn't slip. "She's eighteen months."

I did the math, and *fuck*. Fuuuck. Valerie was pregnant the last time I saw her.

She was pregnant and... was that why it was my last time to see her?

No. I—fuck. I didn't know what to think here.

"She got married."

A twitch now from her.

Her mask slipped. I saw the instant loathing there, and it was strong. A brief blip and her mask was back. "He's not her father. He's not in the picture at all."

"How do you know?"

She sat up straighter, though I didn't think she could get straighter. Her eyes flashed from indignation as though I'd insulted her. "Because he has no rights to Nova. There's an existing restraining order against him for Nova. And Valerie wouldn't lie about that."

I pointed at the birth certificate. "Yet she did for eighteen fucking months."

Also, *restraining order*? Who was this guy, and why would Valerie's kid need one against him?

She winced, saying softly, "Thirteen months."

"What?"

Her eyes were on the birth certificate. "Thirteen months. She's been dead for six months."

Jesus.

I felt punched all over again.

Dead.

I'd forgotten in the brief time she told me about 'my daughter.'

"Nova Nathaniel Robertson. She named her after you."

It was another blow.

Nova.

Nathaniel.

Robertson.

Not my last name.

But she had named her after me?

Right. I needed to get some answers before I did anything else. I locked everything down.

"Where is she?"

"She's with my father right now. Her grandfather." She looked down at her lap.

I was breathing through my nose, barely keeping it together.

"Where?" I ground my teeth together.

Her head jerked upright. "She's with my father. That's all I'm going to tell you—"

"Fuck you."



I didn't let her finish talking. She, whoever the fuck this was, didn't deserve that. I asked her, "She's *your* daughter?"

Her chin raised. "As I said before, Valerie died and left me half guardianship."

"Valerie doesn't get that option. If I'm Nova's *living* father, then *I* decide. Why six months?"

She jerked. "What?"

"She's been dead for six months. Why the wait to contact me?"

She looked away, her throat moving up and down. "Right. Next time my sister dies, I'll get right on that, notifying the guy who could take Nova away from us. Forget the funeral, forget the meetings with her lawyer, forget mourning, forget deciding to investigate you, forget all of that. Next time, I'll *just get right on that.*"

She knew sarcasm, that was for damn sure.

I didn't reply. I got it. Six months, though. Fuck.

I was going through everything I needed to do in my head.

Lawyers.

A paternity test.

Private investigators.

She squared her shoulders, and her face grew hard. "Nova is mine now. Sign those papers, and you can go on and have a child with someone else."

Locking my gaze with hers, I saw the steel determination radiating from her.

I didn't give a fuck.

Leaning forward, I spoke slowly but clearly. "This is how it's going to be. You will bring her to me. I will have my own physician do a paternity test, and depending on those results, we'll discuss what exact rights you think you may have. Got me?"

I shoved up to my feet, already knowing I would need everyone to fight this.

She stood, mimicking my moves, rattling the table. Her hands were in fists, pressing into the table. “You can’t do this.”

“The fuck I can’t.”

She was heavily breathing, her chest moving up and down rapidly. “You can’t. Valerie told me you wouldn’t care—”

“Valerie was *dead* wrong.”

She flinched at my words.

I would care later. Right now, after what blow she just dealt, I couldn’t care less about her feelings.

I held out my hand. “I want your information, and I want your phone.”

Her eyes grew wary, but she passed me her phone.

I took it, programming my number into it, and I took everything from her contact info that I could before she’d start balking.

“Hey.”

I was still working on her phone.

“What are you doing?”

I ignored her, going faster.

I wanted everything I could get from it.

“Hey!” She rounded the table, reaching for her phone.

I held on. I wasn’t done.

She tried to jerk it out of my hands, and I was in her face. “I will not fight fair.”

She paled, her eyes growing big, and her hands went slack.

Not for long, though.

Right as the fight blazed in her and her hand tightened back over her phone, I added, “I will fight dirty. I will fight nasty *if* that is my daughter. I don’t care what Valerie wanted,

or what her fucking lawyers, or whoever else has an opinion on the matter, says. If she's mine, then she's mine. Not yours." When I let go, she fell back a step, holding her phone.

I leaned forward, ignoring the pulsating vein sticking out from her neck or how wide and fiery her eyes were. I promised, "You might've done your research. Your PI might have a file on me. I'm telling you right now that whatever you've read or been told says nothing about me or the lengths I'm willing to go. Your mistake was informing me about my daughter. Your second mistake was assuming I'd simply walk away, when and if that's verified. If she's not mine, I don't even want to know your game. But if she is and you fight me on Nova, I won't just destroy you. I will destroy your family. I will destroy everything and everyone you love *except* for Nova."

I'd said enough.

If I said any more, I could get in trouble with my own lawyers.

I was already gearing up for a fight, but damn her. She came expecting this fight.

I said one last thing. "To me, you are standing between myself and potentially my daughter. I'd highly recommend your lawyer reach out to mine at the earliest hour so we can start these proceedings. Got me?"

She didn't answer.

I didn't know if she was capable of responding.

I nodded to her phone, which she was grasping with white knuckles. "If your PI wasn't thorough enough to give you my contact information, my number's in there. I'll be in touch."

## NATE

The knock on my door wasn't surprising since I'd made some calls as soon as I left her in the hotel bar downstairs.

What *was* surprising was the time. Six in the morning.

I went over and opened it. I didn't need to look.

Mason Kade stood on the other side with a backpack slung over his shoulder, and that was it.

Mason had been my best friend for so long, then there was a group of us who were family. He'd been playing professional football with one of the best teams in the league, so not only was traveling alone a challenge for him, he didn't have the time for it either.

The fact he arrived less than twenty-four hours later meant *a lot*.

His head had been down, but he straightened, looking me over. His eyes flickered once before he nodded. "You look better than I would."

I grunted, stepping back.

He came inside, tossed his bag onto the couch, and took the bourbon that was still in my hand.

I should protest—no. No, I shouldn't.

He tossed it in the sink, then set the glass down and moved to the coffee machine. Fingering through what contents I had,

he frowned and went to the phone. He ordered a whole pot of coffee from room service before turning back to me.

“So.” He leaned back against the counter behind him, crossing his arms over his chest. “Tell me what you know.”

Right to business. That was Mason.

I tossed my phone on the couch, and Mason went over to scoop it up.

As he sat and began scrolling through everything, I said, “Her name is Quincey Royas. I got that much from her social media.”

He was reading and reading fast. “Her dad’s name is Duke Royas. Going through her account, I don’t see a lot of pictures of her and Valerie together. They’re sisters?”

“She said they were half-sisters.” I frowned. “Don’t you have practice today?”

Mason glanced up. “I talked to the coach.”

“Right. I’m sure he was fine letting you fly across the country for my emergency.”

He was putting the phone down, moving almost in slow motion. “Nate, you just found out you have a kid.”

“*Might* have a kid.”

He gave me a look. “You had a fuck-buddy relationship with Valerie, but it was still a relationship. Now the sister shows up asking you to give up your rights. You sign that paper, and she can’t turn around and demand money. It’s smart to be cautious, but considering what else she tried to get you to sign, let’s just assume the kid’s yours. If it were me, nothing is more important than my kids. I’d have a PI on her ass already.”

I nodded to my phone. “I made a call, and they’re on it already. Once I know when I can see Nova, I’ll get a doctor to do the test.”

“Good.” He frowned a bit. “I didn’t call Logan. Does he know?”

The question was valid. When Logan arrived, everyone would know it. He was a tsunami personified.

I paused, reaching behind me for the counter. I knew this question would come up, but Mason was here without his brother. That told me he already understood. If he hadn't, fuck whatever I decided, *he* would've decided himself.

"Not yet. I'm still digesting it, and I'm pissed." I gritted my teeth. My fingers gripped the counter tighter.

"I get it."

I shook my head. "No. You don't get it."

He stood, moving slow. Cautious. "I do, Nate. That's why I'm here."

I expelled a ragged breath. "If you found out your ex had your kid? She'd kept it from you? And she was dead? And her sister tried to ambush you to give your kid—the one you knew nothing about—away? Not to mention, we still have to verify the kid is mine."

His jaw clenched, but his words were low. "Well, in that situation, you're handling it better than I would've. I would've made moves to destroy the aunt right then and there, even if that's not what was right for the kid."

Now he got it.

And he eased up. I felt it in the air. He stood, nodding his head just as a knock came at the door.

He crossed over, signing for the coffee, and brought the cart inside himself.

"You charge that to the room?"

He shot me a grin, pouring me a cup. "You can afford it."

I snorted as some of the tension eased.

My kid.

Man.

Man!

"You think she's mine?"

He paused, giving me a long and steady look. “Yeah, I do. Normally, no, but I don’t know. I think her plan was to catch you before you could process it. And she’s doing it now instead of waiting, in case you happened to find out at some other point. You could’ve come back at them even harder than you might now. She’s being smart, playing her card, and hoping you’d be too shell-shocked to ask questions and would just sign anything she gave you. You read over the paper?”

I jerked my head in a nod. “It looks solid, that I’d be signing away my daughter.”

He swore under his breath.

I sank down on the chair nearest me and caught my head in my hands. “I have a kid, Mase. I might have a kid. I don’t know the first thing about raising a kid. What the hell, man?”

“You do, and you’ll have help. I think that’s the last thing you need to worry about right now. Get some of the other roadblocks out of the way first, then freak out.” He brought over my coffee and sat on the couch with his own. He nodded to my phone. “What other calls have you made? What do you know?”

“I got a preliminary file sent to me thirty minutes before you showed. Quincey Royas, like I said. She’s a principal dancer in the Seattle Ballet Company.”

Mason whistled.

“Or she was up until six months ago when her half-sister died in a car accident. Val was driving on the coast when she lost control and flipped her car during a storm. It went into the ocean, and she drowned.”

Mason winced. “Shit.”

Shit was right.

But I was emotionally locked down.

I wasn’t letting myself think about Valerie right now, thinking about the what-ifs or why-didn’t-I’s.

“She’d divorced her husband, Nico Mancini, and had filed for a restraining order two months before she died. He was

threatening to take her daughter away, but that ended when she told the attorneys Nova wasn't his. A birth certificate was produced, and she had put my name on it. The guy demanded a paternity test, and that was negative. Guardianship transferred to the godmother, Quincey, and Quincey is now living at her father's estate. Both of them are raising my daughter."

"That was all in the preliminary file?"

"My PI is good."

"He's damn good."

"*She.*"

"Right." Mason grinned. "I forgot. This Nico guy, is he going to be a problem?"

"I don't think so." I expelled a breath. "Restraining order was because he hit her, stalked her. He's in jail for another case. My PI is looking into it more, but she doesn't think he's a problem."

Mason grunted. "Wanna know for sure about that?"

"No shit."

"What about the grandad. Who's he?"

"He runs Royas Casino, but he also runs a national cleaning company that, dude, we've used at the house multiple times." I had a bad taste in my mouth. "She's rich."

That meant power. That meant resources. That meant we were fighting a battle where both parties had a PI.

"She's more than rich. She's wealthy." His voice sounded clearer. "But so are you. So am I. So's my family. This family isn't anyone we can't take on if we need to. But, having said that, maybe we're jumping the gun."

I looked at him and scoffed. "Mason Kade? Being the voice of reason in a fight? Since when?"

He smirked. "I've matured."

"Yeah, well, your brother hasn't."



As soon as the words were out, a different heaviness came over the room.

“When you want the bomb to explode, you call Logan.” His words were quiet.

It was almost sacrilegious that we hadn’t called Logan from the jump, but he was right.

When Logan came in, everything ramped up five levels. He was the dynamite we could send in to mess everything up if that was what we wanted, but right now, in my state, I needed studious and calculating.

I needed Mason.

I just hadn’t fully expected him to come right away. I thought within a day or two. He must’ve been out the door within thirty minutes, flying from Boston straight here.

“Thanks for coming.” My voice was a little raw, but that was how I was feeling.

“Thanks for asking.”

I glanced over, and he was watching me steadily.

There was a message there.

I never asked when we were younger. He was right.

“Thank you.” I said it again because it felt right to repeat it.

He nodded. “You gotta know that the Royas Casino...”

“Yeah?”

“Rumor is that there’s a mob connection to it.”

“How do you know that?”

“My dad. He looked into expanding up here with a couple of his companies and ran across the Royas Casino. Corporate world is sometimes a small world. I recognized the name when you said it.”

“He backed away because of the connection?”

Mason's face hardened, which it normally did when he talked about his father. "Let's just say there was a conflict of interest. Don't give James any credit."

I nodded, sipping my coffee as I mulled that over.

James Kade was not an upstanding businessman, so the way Mason talked about that topic told me there was a whole lot there I probably didn't want to know. Noted.

"You know how strong the connection is? If there's a fight, that's who we're really fighting?"

He let out a sigh, raking his hand down his face. "I don't know. I hope not because we don't take on those kinds of fights."

"Channing could maybe help."

His whole face tightened. "No. He couldn't. That's the conflict of interest."

I stared at him a moment, letting his words digest. Then I got it.

That wasn't good.

Channing was another friend from high school who had connections to a powerful motorcycle club. If that was the conflict of interest, then he was right. Channing couldn't help us, but besides Channing's connections and Mason's father's illegal connections, we had nothing going for us if it was a fight like that.

"Let's hope it doesn't go there."

Mason sighed. "Let's hope."

"So, then we're going legal." I stared at him.

He stared back.

Legal was Logan's world.

And that meant inviting the bomb early, earlier than I was ready for.

As if reading my mind, Mason stood. "Let's get the paternity test first, and then go from there."

I nodded, but I was remembering the conversation downstairs.

How smooth she'd been.

No.

She'd been nervous.

Awkward.

She needed to take two shots before saying anything, then it came out almost as if she couldn't stop herself. She blurted it out and slid the papers over immediately.

She'd been very un-smooth.

Not practiced.

Which gave me an opening.

She was nervous about either me or asking me to sign away my daughter.

Good. She should've been more terrified than she had been, but that also told me she knew it'd been wrong. She knew she was in the wrong.

Or I was hoping. *Again.*

"I'll call the aunt."

Mason was scanning the suite. "I had like three hours of sleep before you called. You got a guest bedroom in this fucking huge-ass suite?"

I covered a grin, nodding to the small hallway. "Take my bed. Sheets were changed, and I didn't use it."

"You sure?"

I grabbed my phone and gave him a long look. "Like I'm going to be sleeping anytime soon?" I gestured to the couch. "If I need a nap, I'll grab the couch."

His eyes fell to my phone. "You want me to wait?"

"Nah." Even thinking about the conversation I needed to have with Quincey made everything inside me lock down.

"I've got it."

He clapped a hand on the wall, picking up his bag. “Wake me when we gotta go.”

He headed to the room, the door shut, and I took a breath before moving back out to the patio.

Then I dialed the phone.

## QUINCEY

I felt like the female lead in *The Cutting Edge* when the hockey guy was coming to her personal home.

I had a sudden and fierce empathy for that character because that was what was happening here. Nate called this morning. I'd been up all night, unable to sleep, and when I saw his name on the phone, I knew this was just the start of the war. And that was a deeply unsettling feeling.

Here...he was coming here, to our home, my home, my territory.

I was standing in front of the living room's grand window. It looked out over our entire estate, and since we had a long driveway with a picturesque field of horses right next to it, we could see who was coming almost a mile away. Trees arched over the driveway on the other side as it led to a circle that looped in front of the main entrance.

If my other opponents were coming here, I'd have an edge of intimidation over them by seeing them first.

This place was impressive and intimidating to some.

The sprawling mansion had a pool behind it and three barns on the property. One was for the horses, and one was all mine as my personal dance studio. I was yearning to be there right now. I needed to dance off these nerves, pull walls of steel around me because I knew Nate Monson wasn't going to give a flying fuck about this place. It wouldn't scare him one bit. So my edge over my enemy was taken from me simply because of who he was.

Sensing a presence next to me, I said, “He was furious, Duke.”

He made no sound.

I glanced over.

He was looking out the windows with me, his hands in his pockets. “We’ll see.”

“He’s connected.”

“We’ll see.”

This didn’t feel right. None of this felt right.

“He’s bringing a doctor.” I sighed. “He was so mad.”

“You already said that.”

God. My dad was so cold. If only there’d been a break in his voice—any softness, any gentleness, *anything*—but there was none. This was his play. He said to throw the news at Nate, then sucker punch him with the custody papers. It was the words he used. I followed his suggestions almost to the letter. In the original plans, Duke wanted me to get him drunk first, but I hadn’t gone through with that part. I didn’t have it in me, but I considered it.

And I hated myself for it right away. If Monson had never put it together, a part of me would’ve looked at Nova years from now and known what we did was wrong.

“I’m saying it again because I *really* don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“We’ll see.”

I turned to him. “Are you kidding me? This was all your idea. Sucker punch. Those were your words.”

He glanced at me sideways. “I told you to liquor him up first.”

“If I liquored him up first, then he could come back at us with a lawsuit. You know that.”

I felt like my stomach was trying to chew itself out of me.

“We both know that the paternity test will come back positive. He is Nova’s father. Maybe we should work something out with him—” The words slipped out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying out loud.

“He’ll take her away!” His words were fierce, his face irate. “He lives clear across the country, and he’s her only living parent. We do this now while we have a fighting chance to keep her, or we’ll lose her... forever.”

“She’s family—”

“He’s her parent.”

I sucked in a breath and straightened my spine. “I’m her parent. I quit my career to raise Nova. She’s mine. She’s been mine for the past six months. She’s all—” I couldn’t breathe. Emotions were clogging me. I swallowed them and forced myself to continue. “She’s all we have left of Valerie, and she’s mine now. She’s my little girl. She’s your granddaughter.”

This was the world we lived in... or the world Duke Royas lived in. He either won or lost. There was no leeway and no middle ground. If we didn’t win, we lost Nova completely. He would forbid me to see her, and that was if Monson was even amenable.

The second we got Nova, he had declared her father “the enemy.”

And not to his credit, but Nova wasn’t of his blood. She was mine, through the mother that I shared with Valerie. And even though I was Nova’s godmother, my half-brother, Graham, and half-sister, Calihan, were, too, so I didn’t know why I’d been named as the one to take over actual guardianship of Nova instead of them. They all had the same mother and father while I’d been the outlier our entire lives.

As soon as I was born, I only remember a few trips to see my other “family.”

I was Duke’s daughter.

That was what I’d been all my life. Then I was Duke’s dancing daughter. It was all I’d ever known.

But Valerie picked *me*. Me.

I had to hold onto that.

“You need to get yourself together.”

I lifted my head, and an SUV was speeding down our driveway. Two cars. A smaller car was behind the first, moving at a slower pace.

The first was going fast enough to alarm the horses, making them run off into the pasture.

“I thought you said he was alone.”

“The doctor?”

My dad’s face was grim. “There are two people in the first vehicle.”

I looked, squinting to see better.

He was right.

Two males in the front seat.

Panic flooded me. “You think he already lawyered up?”

My dad didn’t respond, waiting until the SUV got closer. A low curse came from him. “That’s Mason Kade.”

Recognition hit me hard. For a bit, I was flummoxed.

We knew of Monson’s connections, but seeing the famous footballer now getting out of the SUV with just as hard of a look on his face as he turned to the house was a whole different experience.

I asked, my head starting to swim, “Isn’t his father James Kade?”

James Kade was powerful in the corporate world. He was *connected*.

Judging by my dad’s silence, I knew he was uneasy at this turn of events.

I looked at him, feeling like I was sinking underwater. “You didn’t take his connections seriously, did you? It was in Carl’s file.”



“The Monsons are in the Hollywood crowd. They’re nothing. And Carl exaggerates.”

Carl didn’t exaggerate. He never does.

My dad had made a mistake.

Anger pierced me, hot and fiery. “You decided to start this before we even knew the guy. If we lose Nova because of that decision, I will hate you for the rest of my life.”

He looked me square in the face. “If we lose Nova, I’m thinking neither of us will want to be spending Christmas—or any other day of the week—together for a long time.”

His words were so smooth, but the threat was a punch to my face. *His* sucker punch to me.

There was the Duke Royas ruthlessness. I’d seen it enough, experienced it enough, but I’d never had so much to lose because of it.

The doorbell rang.

**NATE**

**D**uke Royas was a dick.  
Noted that immediately.

He had the same dark hair and dark eyes as his daughter did, and he stood in front of us wearing a business suit. He kept himself in shape. The file said he was sixty-four, but he looked forty-eight. He kept his hand held in front of his stomach with the face of his Rolex pointing toward us.

And Quincey Royas was furious with her dad.

She had bags under her eyes, and she was no less dressed up. She was in one of those pantsuits for women, her trousers flowing softly. I looked her up and down. Today, she was wearing fancy-looking, open-toed sandals. I figured they'd be the kind other women would swoon over. Her jacket was open, made of white silk, and another cream-colored top underneath, one that dipped to show some cleavage.

Why was I noticing this shit? Their whole getup said money and superiority—except for Quincey's eyes. They said she was terrified and furious all at the same time, and both emotions were strong enough that she wasn't hiding either now.

None of this was surprising since I got a more detailed file from my PI an hour ago, along with the assault and battery that the husband dished out on Valerie when Nova had been in the house. But that aside, I went over what else the file summarized about the two standing in front of me.

The relationship between father and daughter was more that Quincey was a possession of her father's, barely allowed to see the mother she shared with Valerie. Or more likely, my PI guessed, Duke used emotional manipulation to cause Quincey to pull away from her mother's family under the guise it had been her decision.

I read the files on Quincey's mom and that side of the family. Stephanie and Guy Robertson. They came out smelling like roses compared to these two. There'd been a separation, and the relationship started up with Duke Royas, which was when Quincey was conceived. That relationship ended while she was still pregnant, and Stephanie Robertson went back to her husband. A nasty custody battle ensued after her birth, and Duke won Quincey. Stephanie had Valerie a year later, followed by another girl. Both Stephanie and Guy were physically healthy and attended church every Sunday. Guy was a banker, while Stephanie worked part-time at a local boutique.

I knew Quincey's older half-brother. I hadn't been close to Valerie's family during our casual relationship, but I liked Graham. He was a solid guy from the little bit we did know him. And I say we because Mason knew him as well.

Graham wasn't like what I was getting from here.

This was a huge estate, not a home. Dead people lived here, and I knew it'd be over my dead body that my daughter was raised in this environment.

*If she was my daughter.*

I was starting to hate thinking like that. I wanted to know. Now.

We stepped inside, and Mason shot me a look. The doctor was behind us, waiting for our go-ahead.

I could see Mason was getting the same vibe, and in that look, we both knew where the other stood.

I would raise hell and heaven to get my daughter out of here.

“Gentlemen.”

“Where is Nova?” Introductions could wait.

Quincey glanced to her father, who didn't look at her. He was first studying Mason before turning to me. “She's not here.”

“What?” Mason's eyes went flat.

I stepped forward, lowering my tone. “We have the doc here to verify she's mine. I think before we do any sort of talking, that piece of information needs to be settled first.”

“She's your daughter—”

“I need to see proof.”

He bristled now because I'd ruffled his feathers. His tone was ice cold. “Why would we lie about something like that?”

Mason's tone was dry. “You'd be surprised the games we've dealt with.” His tone was also flat.

Duke let out a small sigh but nodded. He said to Quincey, “Perhaps you could make the call—”

“I'll go outside and direct the doctor myself.” She'd slapped on a mask before pressing her lips firmly together, stepping around Mason and me, and heading out the door. She never grabbed her purse or phone, just went right outside.

Duke's mouth flattened, but he regarded us as if a mosquito had been in his eye. “While I wish you weren't Nova's father, you indeed are. From what my PI could unveil, Valerie didn't have an active sex life. She was with you before she was with Nico. There'd been no other partners for her, and since there was already a test done for the husband and that showed he was not Nova's father, the end results are what they are. Nova is your daughter, though I wish she wasn't.”

Fucking. Ass. Hole.

Mason and I shared a look.

I was struggling to keep from punching this motherfucker.

He saw that and stepped forward. “How about we start our sit-down.”

Duke raised his head.

Mason clipped out, “That’s not a request.”

Duke’s eyes flashed, showing the ego on this guy. He did not like being told what to do in his own home.

I moved forward. “I’m guessing you’d like us to sit somewhere back here? Considering you don’t have chairs in your entryway.”

I glanced back, seeing Mason waiting for Duke to follow. Duke was glaring at me. Mason was grinning at me. I loved it.

After a second’s hesitation, Duke Royas trailed and then led the way.

He showed us to a formal dining room, and we sat after a lady came out and took our drink requests. Nothing for Mason and I. Royas ordered a bourbon.

Then we waited.

It wasn’t long before Quincey returned, sitting and saying, “Nova is with one of our nannies right now. I called ahead and told them the doctor would be coming. They’re prepared, and I gave your doctor directions. They aren’t far, but we thought the adults should converse before you meet Nova for the first time.”

Right. Because this was going to be fucking uncomfortable.

I didn’t care.

The room was designed for that effect, but this didn’t affect me. Maybe another person, but not me and not Mason. The large chairs looked like they could be thrones. A table that stood at an uncomfortable height when you were sitting down. The room was closed off except for three doors—the hallway entrance and two servant’s doors.

Not *one*, but *two* servant’s doors.

No shame to those who use staff, but the vibe I was getting here was that the staff was definitely beneath the lord and lady of the manor.

“Where’s my daughter?” Fuck it. I was acting on the sentiment that she was mine.

My question cut through the room.

Mason sat up, readying.

And Dick and his daughter shared a look.

The Lord Dick was peeved at my bluntness.

He hadn’t even met Logan yet.

He cleared his throat, leaning forward. His hands were folded together, and he rested his arms on the table. “I think we should get to know each other a bit.”

Mason hid a grin, looking at his lap.

He knew the shit that was about to happen. I’d been barely restrained all day—hell, half the night, too. That was a lot of hours to sit and stew since we were now smack dab at four in the afternoon.

Leaning forward, I mirrored his posture and lowered my head. My eyes were locked right on him. “Your daughter came to me. Told me someone whom I’d had an on-again, off-again relationship with for years was dead. Informed me *I* had a daughter, laid down a birth certificate for proof, then slid a paper across for me to sign away my rights in the very next statement. Sign her away like it was as simple as signing your name on a credit card receipt. Thanks for your meal, sir. Please remember to tip.” I was just getting started. “You—and her—declared war in that move. You’ve been prepared for this meeting. I’m guessing that’s why it took you six goddamn months to notify me. I’m still playing catch-up, but according to what you’re saying, I have a daughter. I’ve not seen my daughter, and I want to see said daughter. I’m within my legal rights to call the police if you don’t make that happen.”

He was getting red in the face, and he opened his mouth—

“He’s right, Duke.”

Duke Dick cut his gaze to his daughter.

Duke. She called him Duke.

I shared a look with Mason because that said a lot, though a strained relationship between a parent and a child was nothing new for either of us.

She added, “He never signed.”

“Valerie asked for you to take Nova in her will—”

“A will. I’m not her biological mother. He *is* her biological father.”

Duke Dick’s eyes were threatening to bulge out.

I was guessing the Lady Daughter wasn’t supposed to speak back to him in front of the adversary. Or maybe I was being a judgmental asshole?

No.

I was right.

She turned to me, swallowing before taking a deep breath. She looked as if she were about to step into a tank filled with sharks, and not only that, but she was being asked to cut her carotid before she took that first step.

Her head folded to her lap before she lifted it back again. Her shoulders had a slight slump to them. “As you know, Nova is not currently here. We had thought a sit-down between all of us should happen first, but I understand your need to see your daughter.”

I made a low sound in my throat. “Call right now. Once the doctor is done, they can come here right after.”

Her eyes slid toward her father.

Christ. She didn’t want to fight him.

I gave him a look, too, and he was going to fight it. I knew it then. He was going to fight every step I made. And he had the financial means to do so.

“Fine.” I had to relent, at least for now. This was going to be harder than I initially thought. I wanted a moment to regroup. “Bring her to the hotel.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, Mason shoved back his chair and stood. Both of them were taken aback by the abruptness of it but not me. I was following him in less than half a second. We were both itching to get out of that house.

Duke Dick didn't follow us out. He was still sitting when we left the room.

*She* followed us to the door.

Mason opened it, heading outside.

I reached for the door but stopped and turned to her. "If you don't follow through, I will call the police." My eyes went over her shoulder before turning back to her. "Do not fight me on this."

She swallowed, but she raised her chin.

Her eyes went from being dazed to a fire being lit.

She reached for the door, too. Her hand closed just above where mine was, and she forced a gritted smile at me. "Safe travels back to your hotel, Mr. Monson. I'll be in touch when we're coming to the hotel."

Mason shared a look with me as soon as I was outside.

The door shut behind me.

He said, "There are cameras." His eyes flicked upward.

I got his message.

Anything we said, they could potentially hear.

Sighing, I ran a hand over my face, feeling like I aged five years just being inside that house.

As soon as I closed the door behind me, Mason said one statement under his breath.

"We need to call Logan."

I agreed.



**NATE**

**T**here was a knock, then the door burst open. Logan walked in and dropped his bags. “I have arrived!” He came in with a gust of crisp cold air as well.

Mason and I were on the balcony, and Mason stood. “Here we go.”

He led the way into the room.

It was hitting me now that Mason and I hadn’t hugged when he showed up. It’d been a situation when I needed him, and he came. Immediately. He was there to help. The hugs had been later, but Logan took two steps, bypassed his brother, and wrapped his arms around me.

“How are you?” He squeezed me hard and tight, then stepped back, leaving his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to give you crap or make you feel guilty for calling Mason a whole day before me. I get it. I’m a lot, but I’m here now. And we’re going to get this shit sorted. Got me? I’m your personal pit bull.”

My throat was choking up.

“SBC-er.” I held up a fist.

He cuffed it with his and dipped his head down. “SBC for life, motherfucker.”

Mason had been waiting. Logan turned, and the brothers hugged. There were a couple of fists pounded on the back.

“How’s Taylor?” Mason asked after the hugging was done.

Logan was already eyeing the minibar. “She’s good. After work, she was going to head over to your place and stay with Sam until we get back. She’s taking the dogs, too.”

“You propose yet?” Mason asked with a knowing smirk. The knowing part was because he knew it was a sensitive topic. Logan was starting to realize he had a somewhat unhealthy fear of marriage. The divorce and his parents’ relationship contributed to that. He glanced at me before clearing his throat.

The look was because he’d been talking to me a lot more lately about the whole situation.

I didn’t know if Mason knew or not.

“Before we have that conversation, I need to get properly wasted. And before *that* can happen, we have shit to handle for Nate.”

Mason frowned, then gentled his words. “Sorry—”

My phone started ringing.

It was Quincey.

I showed them the screen before hitting accept and taking it to the bedroom. “When?”

There was a sigh on her end. “We’ll be in the lobby in one hour.”

“No. You bring her up here.”

“Monson—”

“This is the first fucking goddamn time I’m meeting my daughter. You bring her where it’s private. I walked away from your place today when she should’ve been at your house. That’s the second time I gave you. The first was after you told me about her.”

She sucked in her breath. “Listen here, you asshole—”

“You knew for six months. ”

She made a growling sound on her end. I could hear her trying to control herself. “Fine,” she bit out. “What room?”

“We’re in the presidential suite. I’ll call down so you can get up here.”

“You want me to meet them? Ride up with them?” Mason asked when I returned.

They’d overheard.

“I want to be there, but I also want privacy when I see my daughter for the first time.”

Logan said, “Mason can’t. Someone might recognize the dumbass, but I can do it.”

“You know who you’re looking for?”

All joking aside, he gave a tight nod. “You sent me the files. I saw her picture, but I’ve got a feeling I’ll recognize your daughter anywhere. Their PI is normally good, so I’m sure they know who I am.”

“Yeah, about that.”

We both glanced at Mason.

He looked at me. “My dad knows Mallone. You say that you’d been noticing him for a while?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Mallone’s not known to be lazy. If I’m guessing, Mallone didn’t like something Royas was doing. He was *letting* you see him.”

Logan’s chin jerked up. “You mean, like we could flip him? He’s that kind of PI?”

Mason slid his eyes to his brother. “I don’t think it’d hurt to try.” He glanced at me. “If you’re game?”

“Oh. I’m game. I’m all sorts of game.”

“I’ll make the appro—”

“Ooh, ooh! No. Let me.” Logan’s eyes were lit up.

“You sure?” Mason frowned, casting me a look.

“Yes. I’m so sure. I’ll be smooth about it. Don’t worry.”

Mason fully turned and looked at me.

When Logan used that phrase, we knew to worry.

He saw the look. “Come on. I’m not a kid anymore.”

“You were arrested for stealing flamingos from a neighbor’s lawn.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“That was last week.”

Logan’s eyes flicked upward. “I was rescuing those flamingos. And no charges were pressed.”

“Because you offered pro bono work to the guy whose lawn you were stealing them from.”

“I was doing him a favor.”

I frowned. “What’d you do with the flamingos...? No. I don’t want to know.” I glanced at the clock. She called ten minutes ago, saying an hour.

This was going to be the longest hour of my life.

Both guys must’ve sensed the shift in me because they eased back. Logan patted me on the shoulder. “You know about her. That was the biggest obstacle. It’ll work out.”

I was staring at the door.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

It would.

It had to.

## QUINCEY

I loved Nova from the first photograph I saw of her.  
It'd been that quick.

I never thought about children growing up. Never considered if I wanted them or if I didn't. Since I was little, my life had been all about dancing. I needed to move.

I loved the spontaneous, free movement.

Of course, that was not what ballet was.

Structure. Foundation. The body was regimented, pounded, trained, forced into a certain look, a certain motion. All to convey the opposite of what we were. We were fierce, but we needed to look slender. We were motivated, yet we were supposed to blend. Always blend until the moment we got to stand out. To bring gasps from those watching us. To make our bodies move in a way that books could make people feel, how a song could make someone cry. We did that by moving, by breaking free of what normal people could do and go beyond. Always beyond.

I was a principal dancer in a ballet production.

I was there where I wanted to be.

Dancing was my life.

Then a text was sent, and an image was attached.

Valerie was pregnant, had already given birth, and Nova's picture was next.

Everything stopped at that instant.

As I said, I loved Nova the second I saw her. She was my niece.

All those years, all the history where there'd been strained visits, and I regretted everything. Everything.

I *needed* to be in Nova's life.

I began lessening my load.

Visits started slow.

I went to see what Valerie needed, if anything.

I found out about Nico by accident. Not about him. I knew Valerie got married because I was a bridesmaid, but family can be around each other for events and not know a damn thing going on in their world. Nico was one of those "things." And I knew she was getting a divorce, but I didn't know the reason until that day.

I'd been changing Nova's diaper when the phone rang.

I didn't think about it. Who would? It was a phone call.

But I was carrying Nova back when I heard the first shrieks.

Chills went down my spine.

"You stay away from me! Stay away from Nova—" A break. She was sobbing. "She's not yours, Nico! She's Nate's."

Nova started crying at that moment, so I cradled her head and walked out, starting to rock her at the same time.

Valerie looked like she had lost thirty pounds in that instant. She was haggard, and I saw *all* the pain, *all* the exhaustion. The fear, too.

The fear—it was choking her.

She ended the call with no goodbye, nothing.

Then she just stood there.

I crossed the room. "Give me the phone."

Her fingers were limp when I took it, and I blocked his phone number.

I pulled up her lawyer and handed her the phone back. “You need to file an order of protection against him. Is his name on the birth certificate?”

She shook her head, everything in her sagging. “I already have one.”

I froze. “What?”

She took a deep breath, looking me fully in the eyes. “I already have an order of protection against him. It’s for Nova and me.”

That had been the start.

She whispered to me later, “I’m so tired, Quince. I don’t have any more fight in me.”

A need rose in me, swiftly and promptly. I hugged her tight and whispered back, “Well, I do. I’m here. I’m here, Val.”

Remembering all of that, a tear fell down my cheek as I drove the car to the Corebar Hotel. I flicked it away as the valet came over, waiting as I grabbed everything for Nova and then bent down to pick her up from the seat.

A guy came forward when we stepped inside. I recognized him from Carl’s folder and also from the social pages.

Logan Kade.

Man.

Good looks ran in Nate’s *entire* friend group. Brown eyes, brown hair, a lean frame, and a pretty face, but it was the charisma that rolled off him that got me the most. I could feel a literal zap in the air.

“I’m Logan.”

“Hi.” I nodded to his hand because my own were full. Including Nova, I had four bags hanging from my arm and another on my back. “She’s starting to wake up, but I’m hoping she holds off on the tears until we get to the room.”

“Sounds good.” He was staring at Nova before he nodded to some of my bags. “May I?”

I nodded as his eyes went back to Nova.

As he took them all from me, except the one on my back, I asked, “You’re the greeting team?”

A soft laugh as he began to lead the way to the elevators. “I am. You can’t get to Nate’s suite without a special card.” He hit the call button and smiled again, so polite. “We’re all trying to be civil here. There’s a child involved.”

Right.

Because I guess I hadn’t been.

I got the message. “Yes. I can see that.”

We got the elevator to ourselves, and Logan swiped the card before hitting the button for the top floor. He eased back as the doors closed. “You’re not close to Graham?”

“Uh.” He was going deep already, asking about my half-brother. I was noting that, too. I frowned. “You’re the lawyer, aren’t you?”

His eyes were steady on mine. “I am.”

Right. Again.

“I’m also like a brother to Nate, so take it as a good sign that they didn’t call me until *after* your meeting.”

“Yes.” I was realizing that, *too*.

“Nate’s loved by a lot of people.” He waited a beat. “A lot of people who have different connections and resources.”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“You don’t.”

My head whipped to his.

I was getting a blank wall from him.

He added, “Your father’s casino has mob connections, but other than that, you have your father and your father’s money. You don’t have a large circle of people. Our search found one



or two casual friends. No lovers. You're not close to your brother or that side of your family."

I felt slapped by that one, but he was right. I gritted my teeth.

I didn't have anyone close to me except one friend.

I hadn't grown up that way.

My jaw firmed. "You're mistaken about the mafia connection. My father's never done business with the mob."

We arrived, and the elevator dinged.

He asked, "You sure about that?"

I stiffened, but Nova began stirring. Her head started moving around, and she was going to wail in the next breath. I didn't respond, but I truly had no idea what he was talking about. If my father was connected to the mob, that was firstly, chilling, and secondly, needing to end as soon as possible.

Logan held an arm out, indicating I should go first.

There was one room on this floor, and the door opened.

I faltered in my footing, a sudden burst of nerves hitting me hard, but it was the other brother. Mason Kade stepped out and jerked his chin up toward his brother. "You got a call."

Logan frowned, but Mason handed off a phone. Logan let him take the bags and then turned back, pressing the phone to his ear. "Yeah?"

Mason was now watching me before his gaze fell to Nova. Some of the frostiness from his brother wasn't with him, and I relaxed, just a little bit. I almost felt grateful, but I noted that it was the opposite of what Carl's files said about them. Logan was supposed to be the more beta-type with a big personality. Mason was noted to be the alpha leader of the group and not known to be people-friendly. They both were supposed to have anti-authority tendencies.

I was getting the opposite reactions from them.

And I didn't know whether to be grateful or scared out of my mind at that revelation.

He nodded to the bedroom. “He’s coming out. Logan and I will give you some privacy.”

My throat just doubled in size, with a full boulder choking me. I could only jerk a nod in response.

His eyes returned to Nova, and he softened. “Test or not, she looks like him.”

I looked down. “Interesting. I only see Valerie.”

Nova had a good mop of curly red hair already, bordering on strawberry blond. Then she opened her eyes, a yawn leaving her, and she started stretching her arms up. Her eyes were definitely Nate’s, though, bright and green. Valerie had dark eyes.

Mason called out, “We’re heading out, Nate.”

“Okay,” came from inside.

He slipped out the door, shutting it gently behind me.

I took a moment, my nerves on full blast, and I waited.

Nate didn’t show.

Still carrying Nova, I moved forward, going to the opened doorway.

My heart was beating so fast, so loud, that it was almost all I could hear.

He was on the edge of the bed with his head hanging down. His hands were clasped together, his elbows resting on his knees.

A wave of understanding hit me. Right behind it was an intense sensation of pity? Did I feel sad for him?

I frowned, but he lifted his head.

His eyes were blinking back unshed tears, and he blinked them rapidly as he rose. His gaze latched onto Nova.

When I looked down, her eyes were locked right back on him. She could see him approach.

She was taking him in, drinking in the sight.

He was doing the same.

It was just the two of them in the room now. I didn't exist.

Love was a somewhat unfamiliar emotion in my family with how I grew up, but right now, I was watching a father fall in love with his daughter right before my eyes.

And it was rather glorious.

He was melting in front of me. His entire face softened, and his shoulders fell in a swoop.

The air in the room lessened, a charged feel to it, like something amazing and life-changing was in the process of happening.

It was a beautiful sight to witness.

“She’s just waking up.”

“Does she—I mean, Mason’s little girl doesn’t like waking up.” He glanced at me, a question in his eyes.

I shook my head. “Not Nova. She’ll wail at first, but she’s already past that. She’s fixated on you.”

“Can I?”

I nodded. Of course.

That was all I was thinking.

*Of course, you can hold your daughter.*

*Of course, you’ll love her.*

*Of course, this would only cement how much you need her.*

He slid his arms around her, taking her from me, and he slowly sat on the floor with her. She was eighteen months, so she’d want to stand on her own. She’d want to be moving around, but she didn’t.

She stood on his lap, her hand clutching her stuffed penguin, and she didn’t do anything except stare at him.

*This was the right thing to do.*

I knew it, felt it in my bones.

If Valerie had been there, she'd be crying, too.

"I'll give you some privacy." My voice came out in a whisper.

He barely acknowledged me as I backed out, going to the next room. I sat on the couch at first, listening to them starting to talk.

"Hi." From Nate.

"Hayeeeyayayeeeyaa!"

I smiled.

"I'm your dad."

"Ayyyaaaa yayaya ogd. Penna. See."

"That's your penguin?"

"Ayyayaallmmaa ooooo penna. See. See. See."

A soft laugh from Nate. "I see. I like penguins. Do you know what sound they make?"

Nova just giggled.

When I heard her excitement and her joy, I made a decision that I hadn't known I'd been debating until this second.

I pulled my phone out.

**Me: We're not fighting Nate.**

He responded right away, but I knew he would. He would've been waiting for a report, and this wasn't the type of report he wanted.

**Duke: You're emotional. Rein it in and don't promise anything.**

**NATE**

“**S**he’s perfect, Aspen. Just perfect.” I was near tears, my voice barely coming out, but I’d never been happier. I had sunk into my hotel room’s bedroom chair as soon as I got back to the room.

I hadn’t fought the tears earlier in the room. Nova kept wiping them from my face.

Her little face puckered up as she grabbed both of my cheeks, then a babble came out.

Quincey started laughing, but she was sniffing, too. She wiped her nose and flicked her own tear away, translating, “She asked if you’re unhappy.”

My heart pierced again, but in a good way. I smiled, letting it blind my little angel, and she started smiling and giggling with me. “No, baby girl. I’m very, very happy.” My voice was a whisper by then, but more tears came, and Nova got all serious. She held my face and shifted up, her little forehead coming toward me.

I knew what she wanted, and I thought she had blasted through all my walls, but this little movement made everything shift all over again.

I stopped and moved my forehead some more, letting her close the distance. There was a slight bang, and I winced, holding her tighter, but she only started laughing. Then she got serious, and I was watching as she closed her eyes, her little lips moving and soft words slipping out. I couldn’t make sense of them. I waited, but Quincey wasn’t translating, and then

Nova lifted her head, leaning back, and she clapped both sides of my face, her head moving in a firm and final nod.

“I think...” Quincey’s voice came out hesitant. I didn’t dare look. I didn’t want to miss anything Nova was going to do. “I think she just gave you a love spell or something.”

I was a mess.

This. Today. This was the day I woke up to the world.

I pulled my daughter close, hugging her, and I whispered, “Your daddy loves you very much.”

She was mine. I knew she was. Knew the second I saw her, saw my eyes looking back at me.

More happy cooing came from her.

I closed my eyes, pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, and she was still again.

The room shifted, growing more serious and almost sacred.

Nova might’ve been eighteen months, but she felt it. I thought anyway...

She leaned back against my shoulder. One arm came over, resting down my back, and her head leaned forward, resting on the side of my neck.

After that, I carried her down.

Quincey took her to the car. That was the first time I spared her a look.

She was pale, fresh tears streaking down her face, and she was biting her lip.

An urge to reach out and take her arm to ask if she was all right came over me.

I held back.

Then Nova was being put in her car seat, her bright eyes staring at me. Quincey lingered by the closed door, but I didn’t spare her another look.

“I’ll, um, I’ll be in touch?”

She started to go around the car.

“Quincey?”

She paused, looking up.

I stepped forward, not letting Nova see my face.

When she did, she gulped, her hands tightening around her purse.

“I was told to wait two days for the results, but she’s mine. She was Valerie’s. If you want to be in her life, you won’t fight me on this. You give that message to your father.”

Blood drained from her face.

She didn’t answer, blinking a few times, then continued around to the driver’s side.

I cleared my face, stepped back, and smiled down at Nova.

She pumped her arms, her little penguin clutched in her hands. She was waving it at me.

Now I was back in my hotel room, sitting in that chair, and I hadn’t moved for a full hour.

My phone rang then, and I had just gotten done catching my little sister up to date.

She was quiet for a moment afterward.

“She’s perfect, Aspen. Just fucking perfect.”

“I’m an aunt?”

“You’re an aunt.”

“Holy... whoa. You’re in Seattle now?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m in Hungary. I was in Seattle for two years! I was there. What?!” There was a sound from her end, a rustling movement. I heard Blaise’s voice, then she answered back, her voice muffled.

“Aspen.” I frowned. “What are you doing?”

“I’m coming back to the States. My brother needs me.”

“What?!” That was from Blaise.

Aspen’s voice came back. “Hold on. I’ll call you back.”

“Nate?” I heard in the hotel room, outside my bedroom.

I put the phone aside. “In here.”

Mason and Logan came in, both eyes hooded until they got a good view of me.

“Shit,” Mason said.

“Damn.”

The two shared a look.

Mason nodded at Logan.

Logan went over, grabbed my wallet, and tossed it on the bed. “Wash your face, brother. We’re going out.”

I groaned and sat forward. “I don’t know if my legs will walk.”

“Then we’ll carry you.” Mason stepped forward.

Yes. They would.



## QUINCEY

I needed alone time, and I needed to move.

It started snowing this morning, so I left the lights off when I headed into my studio. I opened the wall chambers to expose the floor-to-ceiling windows, then put the music on. The heat filtered through, but I kept it turned down.

There was so much noise in my head. Too much.

I needed to clear it out. I needed things to make sense.

Nothing was making sense right now.

You win. Always. Those were my father's words, his motto. It was how he lived his life.

Valerie didn't live life that way. Neither did our mom. Neither did Graham and Calihan.

Why me?

Why did she choose me to take Nova?

Why did Valerie want her in this life with me?

*"Oh my God, Quince! You can't be serious with that costume."*

I was stretching and paused as Valerie's voice ripped through my concentration. It was a memory, and Valerie had been laughing. It was one of my rare visits to our mom's house on Halloween. I was dressed as the Statue of Liberty, and Valerie had dressed as a fairy. She looked cute in a green tutu with pink glitter all over her body and in her hair. I came out

with a microphone wrapped in cellophane and a white sheet around my body. I was wearing a wig and had gold glitter all over me.

I thought I'd been ingenious.

Valerie and Calihan had not. They both jumped up from eating brownies, and I was quickly changed into the third fairy for their trio of fairies. It'd been one of the few times I felt as "one" with my sisters.

My phone buzzed, lighting up the studio.

I paused, the memory now fading, and I reached over, seeing Ricci's name on the screen. She was the only friend I kept in contact with from high school. I swiped the screen, her text lighting up with a picture.

**Ricci: OH MY GOD! That's him, isn't it?! And he's in Seattle now???? U ok? Have u seen him yet?**

I clicked on the picture, seeing Nate at a nightclub with his two friends on either side of him. It was from one of the gossip blogs, the headline reading, *Mason Kade and Nate Monson at Club Poof!*

*Buzz!*

A second picture came in. This one was Logan shielding Nate, his arm up, and he was scowling over his shoulder at a photographer.

**Ricci: Holy shit. They're all hot! No wonder Nova is already stunning.**

I instantly softened, a warmth spreading through me because she was. She had the beginning of a serene face. Nova was going to be absolutely gorgeous, but it made sense. Valerie had done a small stint as a model, and now I had seen Nate's looks up close and personal.

But there was more.

There was the air that moved around him. It was like he was a vacuum, and he pulled you to him. As if you needed oxygen and he was the only one to give it to you.

*Buzz!*

A third picture from Ricci.

This must've been from later in the night. All three were exiting Club Poof, a trendy nightclub usually known for being secretive about its clientele. And Seattle didn't usually have paparazzi at the ready, so either a call was made or someone sold their pictures. I wasn't altogether surprised. I'd forgotten Nate's relation to Blaise DeVroe, who had been Seattle's star soccer player for a couple of years.

*Of course*, Nate would be recognized here.

I cursed softly, sitting more on my butt and drawing my knees up to my chest.

My phone started ringing.

*Ricci calling.*

I hit accept. "Hey."

I flinched, hearing the catch in my voice.

"Oh. Whoa. You okay? Did you see the pics I just sent?"

My heart sank, but I didn't know why. "I saw them."

She was quiet.

"You okay, babe? You don't sound okay," she murmured.

I set the phone on the floor, putting it on speaker, and I rested my cheek against my knee. "I'm... I've seen him for the past two days."

I heard her swift intake of breath.

"It's why he's here, Ric."

"Oh. Babe. I didn't know that would happen that fast."

"He met up with our PI, so it made sense to move fast before he could get his own side assembled, you know?" Acid filled my mouth as I said those words. It felt wrong. It *tasted* wrong.

It was wrong.

“What does...?” She sounded so hesitant. “What does Daddy Duke say about all this?”

I snorted. “What do you think?”

“Quincey.” It was a soft sigh from her.

A lump was in my throat, bulging out, choking me. “Yeah.”

“I just want to make sure I’m hearing this right. Your dad for sure wants to fight for Nova?”

“Yeah.”

“You think, I mean, what’s Nate Monson like?”

“Oh.” I bit out a harsh laugh. “He’s prepared for war. It’s why his friends are here, too.”

“I was wondering about that. I mean, that one is missing football practice, right?”

“He missed one. When we got the paternity test results back, I took Nova over there again, and he was gone. I’m sure he had to go back. The other one is still there. He’s the lawyer one.”

“Babe. Man. I’m sorry. Wait. Paternity test?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. I mean, that makes sense. Kinda? It confirmed he’s the dad, right?”

“He is. But I already knew. I never doubted Val.”

“Your sister wasn’t a liar. Now, Calihan, on the other hand...” She laughed, trailing off.

I laughed. It was true. My younger sister was a lot, but I laughed because I needed to. So much was building, rising. Things were escalating. It started when Carl called.

The hotel meeting.

The meeting at the house.

The hotel again.

Every call since then, every visit since then.

The threats.

The promises.

And just now, hearing Ricci's pity, a dam broke inside me.

It was wrong.

I'd been feeling it this whole time, but damn. Damn!

Nova was mine. She wasn't my father's.

Duke couldn't win. I was trying to envision it, but he couldn't. The second I met Nate, I knew my father was going to lose. If Nate was a different person, then maybe. Maybe if he'd been an alcoholic. Maybe if he'd been a drug addict. Maybe if he was sleazy or dirty.

Maybe if he'd been Nico, but he wasn't. He was the opposite of who my sister actually married.

And I knew what Duke wanted to risk. All or nothing. If we had Nova, only we had Nova. There'd be no shared custody. And Nate—I couldn't risk losing her. I just couldn't.

“He threatened me, Ric. He said if I fight him, then I'll lose her for sure.”

My voice was trembling.

“You believe him?”

An image of him as he said those words, staring at me across the top of my car, flashed in my mind again.

He'd been unrelenting in his gaze. I'd been seared from the inside out from those words and the promise behind them.

“Yeah.” I could feel it in my bones. “He'll never stop fighting for her, and Ric, we don't have anything to fight him on. Valerie put his name on the birth certificate. The test came back that he's the father. He was never told he had a daughter. He's already gone to lawyers. I mean, he had one flown in. It's one of his best friends.”

“Why do you think she never told him?”

A snort ripped from me. “Who knows. Maybe she was afraid of losing her, too? Because Nico was already in her life

by then.”

Sounding surprised, she said, “You’re right. Nico. He was an asshole from day one. You’re totally right.”

“I didn’t know Nico was that bad. I swear I didn’t.”

“No one did. Val hid him.” A pause from her end.

I was just biting back tears. They were threatening to choke me.

“Val never changed her last name. She didn’t take his.”

I took in a deep breath. “Yeah. I never questioned her, figured it took time or something. That should’ve been a flag.”

“Is Nico going to be a problem for Nova?”

“No.” Thank God. “Carl dug up his current case. He’s in for robbery and he said the evidence is bad. Unless he cuts a deal, he should be going to prison for a while. It’s not his first offense.”

I tasted sour on that note, because that’d been another thing Valerie hadn’t told anyone.

“Well, that’s done. He’s gone now, and Nova got Nate. Have you talked to Graham or Calihan about what’s going on?”

Another snort from me, but the heaviness slammed down on my shoulders. That was a whole different battle. “No. They’re angry. They thought Nova would be left to them.”

“I can’t imagine what they’re thinking either. This must be a total slap in the face to them.”

“I know.”

I wasn’t close to them.

There was a year separation between my mom and Guy, her husband at that time. She had had a weekend fling with my dad. I was born, but by that time, she’d gone back to Guy, realizing he was her one true love. She already had Graham a year before me, then Valerie a year after me, and Calihan two years after Val.

“Cal took it the hardest.”

“No one’s reached out since you took Nova?”

“Stephanie has. A few times.”

“Right. Your mom.”

“Right...”

She sighed again. “Want me to come over?”

I looked up at the empty studio and the snow falling outside. “No. I was about to do some dancing, then head in to spend time with Nova.”

“Okay. Well, I’m here for you.”

I could hear she had more to say. “What is it?”

“Quince.” Another sigh from her.

“What? Just say it.”

“You were a principal dancer for three years, and that’s after an entire career of dancing. I know you have money saved.”

God.

She was going there.

I didn’t want her to go there.

*I didn’t want to go there.*

Not yet.

*Please, I was begging her in my head. Not yet. Don’t say it.*

“Ricci,” I warned.

I reached out, placing my palm on the floor. I was leaning down, pressing down on my hand.

I didn’t want to hear what she was going to say.

She hurried, her voice rising. “We both know what your father is going to say. It’s what he’s always going to say. Babe —” She broke off, and I could hear her taking a deep breath. “You and me, we don’t always talk about what went down in your childhood, but it wasn’t right. What he did—”

I shoved to my feet. “Don’t, Ricci! Don’t say something you can’t take back.”

My chest was so heavy.

Something was pressing down on it.

My head was starting to spin.

She kept on, sounding almost desperate, “Look, your dad. He’s—he’s cold, Quince. It’s never been anything he’s out and out done, but he always made you feel guilty about having relationships with other people. I got a pass because I was in dance with you and you needed one friend, but how I saw it. Anyone you liked, he’d say one bad thing about them. Then another bad thing. Then another. He planted seeds in your head, and he turned you against people. I know your mom. She’s freaking kick-ass, but it’s like you can’t let yourself love her like a mom. And it’s your dad. It’s all him. It’s like if you love someone else, you can’t love him or something. Whether Nate is in the picture or not, that’ll happen with Nova if you don’t fight him. Leopards don’t change their spots, babe.”

“Ricci!”

She was crying on her end. I heard her sobs. “This might be a blessing. You never know, just... I just have to say that I’m here for you if you want to move out on your own. You can live here. I know it’s not what you’d be leaving, but it’s better than nothing. And I’d help you with Nova. You’re not alone. Okay? I... you have to hear that. You are not alone. I’m prepared to go the distance with you.”

I almost crumpled.

It was the lion pressing at the gate, wanting to get in.

The gate kept rattling, shaking, trembling. She opened it, and there it was, an ultimatum she wasn’t putting into words. She didn’t need to.

I knew it.

She knew it.

Everyone who knew my father knew it.



He would fight for Nova for the sheer sake of winning, and if we lost, we lost everything.

I couldn't let that happen.

I knew what the end would look like. I felt it in my bones, and if I walked into that house, told Duke *again* that I wanted to compromise with Nate, he would tell me to either get out or get behind him. It was an either/or scenario with him. There was no gray. No in-between.

It was how it had always been.

I wasn't ready for that.

"I have to go." I said it so faint that I barely heard myself.

"Quincey?"

But I was already reaching for the phone to end the call. "I have to go."

The light on my phone cut out, and I was alone in a studio with snow falling all around me.

A sob caught in my throat. I didn't want to feel right now.

I wanted to dance.

So I did.

LATER THAT SAME DAY

**N**ate: I want to see my daughter today.

**Quincey:** Give me a few days.

**Nate:** No.

**Quincey:** Please.

**Nate:** I want to see my daughter *today*.

**Quincey:** I'll bring her to you.

*The next morning.*

**Nate:** Legal papers will be drawn up concerning my daughter. My question is, what stance should I let my lawyers take? Is it a full-on custody battle, or are you going to be cooperative?

**Quincey:** I am asking you for a few days.

**Nate:** No. You brought Nova to me, then left. You and I need to talk about this ourselves.

**Quincey:** I. Need. More. Time.

*Later the next day.*

**Nate:** Fine, but I want Nova here for the whole day. My sister is flying in to see her.

**Quincey:** I'll bring her within the hour.

*Three days later.*

**Quincey:** I'm ready to talk.

**Nate: Where?**

**Quincey: My lawyer's office. I'll text you the address. 3 pm.**

**Nate: See you then.**

## QUINCEY

I was nervous. I didn't want to be, but I was.

Who was I kidding? I was always nervous for almost everything in my life. I just hid it well. Dancing and being Duke Royas' daughter would do that to anyone.

"You ready?" Phillip was a friend from college. He was also my personal lawyer now.

I nodded.

"Okay. So I've done some research of my own since you called me. Logan Kade doesn't specialize in child custody cases, so that's a plus for us. It's also a plus that he's the only lawyer coming today. That's a good sign. I think Mr. Monson will be open to working with you, that is, if this is still what you want to do?"

I couldn't risk losing Nova.

I jerked my head up and down. "It is."

"Okay." His phone buzzed then, and he hit the button. "They're here, Annette?"

"Should I show them to your office?"

"Please. Grab coffee and drinks for everyone, too."

He released the button, and then we waited.

I stood.

No. I should be sitting.

I sat.

No. That was rude. I should be standing.

I stood again, just as we heard murmuring from the hallway.

Phillip's secretary was getting their drink requests as she opened the door.

"Just water," Logan said, leading the way. He was dressed in a three-piece suit and carrying a briefcase.

But my eyes were on Nate. I couldn't pull them away.

He was also dressed in a suit, a coat over, and damn, he looked good. I couldn't speak for a second. I could only stare at him, at the broad shoulders and jawline.

I was getting warm, but that was my nerves. Yes. My nerves. I was going with that, and I turned, tearing my gaze away.

Phillip coughed next to me, moving forward. "Mr. Kade." They shook hands. He turned to Nate, who stepped inside the room. "Mr. Monson."

Nate gave him a nod before his eyes drifted back to mine. "Where's Nova?"

"She's at the family estate with her nanny."

Nate's eyes flickered, and his mouth twitched, but he didn't respond.

"Quince?" Phillip's soft tone had me turning back to him.

I always liked Phillip. We dated briefly before finding out we were better suited as friends. We became study partners instead and spent most of our hang-out time in the school library. He was also *not* from my father's legal team, which I was sure Logan and Nate had noted.

"Quince?" Logan repeated, leaning forward. His eyes sharpened. "Are we on a nickname basis all around? Can I call you Phil?"

Phillip groaned, but a small grin showed as he indicated for all of us to sit at the table in his office. He waited for Logan and Nate to take their seats. I was next to Phillip, and

then he sat, saying, “I’ve known Quincey since college. We spent many days in the library. Hence the nickname.”

“When you went to Gammit?”

Phillip nodded. “Yes. You both went to Cain, correct?”

Logan nodded while Nate was staring at me.

Just staring at me.

He hadn’t stopped staring at me.

I felt the heat of his gaze, and my heart was pounding itself out of my chest, but I wouldn’t react. I wouldn’t show anything. Years of discipline had instilled that in me. I could stay in the same position for hours if needed.

Logan and Phillip were still conversing. I’m sure both were feeling the other out. Phillip was a genuinely good guy, so for all I knew, he might’ve just been chatting. I didn’t understand the ways of lawyers, only the way my father used his lawyers. They were sent out as sharks looking for blood, but that was not the point of this visit.

Nate cut through their conversation and abruptly sat forward, folding his hands together on the table. “What’s the point of this meeting?” He glanced at Phillip before looking back at me. “Why do you have your own lawyer, Quincey?”

“Nate.”

He ignored his friend, only studying me. “Cut the bullshit and tell us what’s going on.”

Phillip held a hand out. “Quince—”

Fuck it. I was showing my cards. I had to.

I leaned forward. “I can’t lose Nova.”

Nate’s mouth flattened. “Too late. She’s my daughter. The courts will be on my side, and you know that.”

Goddamn.

Anger spiked in me.

“I know,” I admitted quietly.

“Quincey!” Phillip said again.

I ignored him, and I ignored the keen look on Nate’s friend’s face.

He’d been nice to me at the hotel that night. But now he was a shark, and he was smelling blood. I recognized that look.

“I don’t know if you’re aware of my family dynamics—”

“We are.” Logan leaned forward. His eyes were hard. “We also talked to Graham ourselves.”

A sudden lump was in my throat, and I had a hard time swallowing around it. “You did?”

My voice came out raspy.

“We’ve known Graham since his college football team played against Mason’s years ago.”

Shit. I’d forgotten.

I glanced at Nate. “That’s the weekend you met Valerie. She went to support him. I was supposed to go but decided at the last minute to stay home and train. I had a solo in our production the following week.”

He gave me a stiff nod back. His whole face was shut down. I was getting a wall from him.

I added, “I figured you knew of Graham, not that you actually *knew him* knew him.”

It made sense now, though. Graham had NFL dreams, but a busted knee put him on a course to become a sports commentator instead. He would be in their world.

“I didn’t learn of Graham and Valerie’s relationship until later. She didn’t tell me who her brother was the night I met her.” Then, he asked softly, “What are we doing here?”

“How about—” Phillip stood. “Logan, can you accompany me to get everyone fresh coffee?”

“I don’t think—”

“I do, Kade. I have an aversion to going to the coffee room alone.” Phillip was lying out of his ass, but he was cheerful about it. “Hold my hand, so to speak?”

Logan stared before a grin broke out. He stood, starting to follow him out of the room. “You’re an odd lawyer, Crusoe.”

I heard Phillip laugh, then the door closed behind them both.

It was just Nate and me.

I looked up, swallowing sharply at the slight glare looking back at me.

“My father will never let you take Nova from us.”

“Then you’ll lose her completely.”

Pain sliced through me.

My stomach was doing somersaults, and I felt slightly nauseous.

I rested my hands on the table, sitting at a perfect ninety-degree angle. Shoulders back. Spine straight. I kept my hands on the table. I wanted them open. I needed to convey to him that I was trying here.

“I don’t want Nova to be in the middle of a war.”

His nostrils flared. “I’m guessing you’ve done the math in your head already. You know who I have on my side, and you know we have a whole list of people willing to testify against your father. He’s the problem. Duke Royas is a narcissist, and he has a history of purporting emotional manipulation and controlling his own daughter. Imagine what he would do to his granddaughter? There are a lot of people—professionals—who do not want that to happen.” His eyes narrowed, almost glittering from his intensity. “But you already know this, and that’s why we’re meeting here and not in the conference room of your father’s lawyers. Am I right?”

My throat was burning.

“I don’t have—”

“I do.”



I closed my eyes. He was right.

He'd been right about everything.

I didn't have a leg to stand on. I hadn't given birth to Nova. I had a will that granted me partial guardianship. That was it, but I didn't have the financial means at my disposal that he did. Duke would make sure of that.

His chair shifted as he leaned forward, and he spoke, "How about I tell you what I'm prepared to do? I am prepared to purchase a home here. I am prepared to live here for the next year so that Nova still sees familiar faces. I am prepared to let you live with Nova and me. I'm aware that you had to leave your last position, but I've already made the calls. The nanny who basically raised my sister and me is packing her bags as we speak. She can come up at a moment's notice. I have a sister who flew to be here. I am on good terms with your other family, and they've expressed that they would love a reconciliation with you. You will be able to stay in Nova's life. You will also be able to pursue your dance career again if that's what you choose."

I was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I was pretty sure I knew what it would be.

His eyes hardened again. "Having said all that, you need to handle your father."

I waited for him to say more, for him to demand that I cut my father out.

Nothing came.

"That's it?" I frowned.

He nodded. "I'm not going to tell you what to do about your father, but he's going to be a problem. We all know it. It's up to you how you direct your relationship with him and Nova moving forward. However, let me make one thing clear. If he tries to force a wedge between myself and my daughter, I will come out with guns blazing. There is no gray there. Do you understand me?"

Duke was mine to guard Nova against. I was getting him.

“I was going to move in with my friend.”

He paused, hearing my admission. “My sister’s here and already looking at houses. She’s got her eye on a couple that’ll give us plenty of space for you to feel like you have your own place. If that’s what you’d like.”

“Rent?”

He only shook his head slightly. “Don’t insult me.”

No rent. I was guessing he would say no to utilities as well.

“Give me a few days to think about it?”

“What’s there really to think about? It’s a win-win situation for you.”

“You’re asking me to move in with you, knowing what my father will think about that.”

“What’s the alternative?” His head lowered, his eyes still on me. His whole face was still a mask, but he had softened his tone. “I’m not saying this is how it’ll be in the future, but to start, I think it’s a good plan. I’ll help you handle your father if that’s what you need.”

“Are you wanting legal documents drawn up?”

Because that was the kicker. Whether he was going to make me sign away any fight I might have over Nova.

I waited, that lump in my throat getting bigger and bigger.

“Yes. I want you to sign something that will say you are not going to fight me for Nova.”

There.

That was the other shoe.

He just dropped it.

My throat was back to burning. My stomach was seizing up.

“But those papers won’t say that you have no right to see her. I wouldn’t do that to you. Or to her. I’m trying to find a compromise for both of us.”

I didn't have a choice.

I nodded. "Okay. I'll move in."

"You'll sign?"

I would. "I'll sign."

---

"ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?"

The papers were drawn up. Both lawyers were here, and Nate and Mr. Kade had moved to a conference room so we had some privacy. Phillip insisted.

I nodded. "I can't risk losing Nova totally."

Phillip's face tightened. "He can't make you do that."

I met his gaze unflinching. "You know he can, and you know he would. It's all or nothing with Duke. I can't risk that, and if I have to choose between Duke and Nova, I'll choose Nova every minute of every day." I looked down at my hands. Both were in fists and pressing down on my legs. I hadn't sat like this for so long, not since my childhood years. "Nova isn't my daughter, and she is his. That's the truth, and there's no way around it. A will would get ripped to shreds if we pursued this. There's nothing wrong with Nate Monson, whereas everyone knows that's not what lawyers will say about my father."

Phillip swore softly.

"I can't fight Nate on my own, so this is the only move." Everyone knew it. My team just didn't want to admit it, so I would.

I leaned forward, picked up the pen, and signed away my fight for Nova.

It was the only way to stay in her life. That was all that mattered.

"I'm sorry, Quincey."

I looked away, tears burning to be shed.

I wouldn't. Not here. Not yet.

Tonight. Tonight, I would crumble.

“Your next battle is going to be against your father.”

I jerked my head in a nod. “I know.” And that one would be all-out war. “Are you ready for him?”

No. I turned, seeing the resolve settling over Phillip. I was feeling the same.

I said, “I'll have to be.”

He nodded a few times, swallowing, then stood, gathering the papers. “I'll take these to Monson, but I can say this now. Concerning your father, it'll be an easier fight with Monson and his team at your back.”

That was true.

It would be easier but not any less painful.

## QUINCEY

THREE DAYS LATER

“Can we go over the plan again? I’m confused about the details.”

We were in Ricci’s SUV, heading for my father’s estate. I’d spent the past few days ironing out the details for our “escape” plan and going over everything with Nate, or more accurately, his sister.

“I’ve packed my stuff and Nova’s. Emily is coming with us, at least until we figure things out.”

“What about the first nanny? Emily usually works evenings, right?”

I gave Ricci a grim look. “We couldn’t trust her.”

Ricci was dressed in black, said she needed to dress the part. Her red hair was pulled up in a tight bun and she grimaced back at me. “She’s sleeping with your dad?”

I nodded. “Emily told me.”

“Right. Emily is awesome.”

Awesome indeed.

“Emily knows the deal? That your dad is going to flip a lid, and when you don’t return with Nova, he’ll probably fire her?”

Another grim nod from me. “I’ll keep paying her as long as I can.”

“I bet Nate would pay her?”

I shared a look with her before she turned back to the road.

“He said his original nanny could come up, but she’s not here yet.”

“But you met his sister, right?”

I did. “Aspen is awesome, and she swears by their nanny, too, but...”

Ricci’s mouth tightened. “You’re moving into enemy territory.”

“Yeah.” I expelled a ragged breath. It was hard to think anything except what Duke had ingrained in me since I was born. “It’s how my dad views the world. Hard to shake that off, ya know.”

“Yes, but we’ve been over this. How you view the world and how your father views the world are totally different. You are allowed to have your own thoughts, and it’s okay that they’re in direct conflict with Duke’s.”

“I know. I do.” I was allowed, but there would be ramifications. That was just the deal here.

Ricci softened, reaching over and squeezing my hand quickly. “We’ll get through this. You and me, together.”

“Thanks, Ric.”

She gave me a smile before another firm nod. “Back to business. Your father is not at the estate? He and Nanny One are at the Savoy?”

“Correct.”

“Awesome. He usually stays late, doesn’t he?”

“He does. Emily’s with Nova right now, and she’s got her bags all in my vehicle.”

“The rest will go in this vehicle.”

“Yes.”

Ricci turned down our driveway.

My stomach just turned to knots again, all clenched up.

The air shifted, growing tense.

Ricci lowered her voice. “Everything will be fine. I promise.”

She couldn’t promise that, but I knew I would be fine as long as I had Nova in my life...as long as Nate allowed her to be, that is. “I know.”

We drove around to the back door, the area that Duke wanted the staff to use. Emily was hurrying in and out of the house, carrying bag after bag. Her arms were full. She’d drop what she had, then go back inside for more. My car was packed to the brim, and as we pulled up, she was waving her hands in the air.

“We have to hurry. Doria just called me upset because your father ended things between them. She said he’s on his way back now.”

My stomach plummeted.

“Are you joking?”

The whites around her mouth told me she wasn’t. She was in a full panic.

“Where’s Nova?”

“In her playpen. She’s fine. I have a few more bags to grab, then we’re done.”

“I got the bags. Emily, grab Nova.” Ricci touched my arm. “You do a run-through of the house, make sure you have everything you need. You might not be able to come back for a long time.”

I knew. God, I so knew.

All three of us broke off, going to do what we were assigned.

My heart was in my mouth as I went from room to room. I heard Nova starting to cry, and my heart stretched going to her, but I was the only one who could make sure everything I needed was packed.

We were finishing up. Emily had Nova in my car, and she was behind her steering wheel, white in the face.

Ricci was panting when I met her at the doorway. “You got everything?”

“I—” I’d already packed all my dancing stuff, but there was a picture in there I needed that was irreplaceable. “The studio.”

Ricci swore. “Okay.” She tightened her hold on the bag she was carrying. “I’m sending Emily ahead, then I’ll pull my car around to the studio. You go and look through it now.”

“On it.”

Ricci went out the back door. I shut it behind her, then turned to sprint through the front door and across the lawn to my studio. I was crashing through the door as I heard gravel under tires.

Turning, I felt my entire body seizing up, but it was Emily driving my car.

Oh, thank God.

I waved as she went past.

She gave me a jerky wave back, and I could see her arms trembling, but she kept going.

She kept going. That was all that was important right now.

Ricci wouldn’t be long behind her.

I needed to make this fast.

When I was inside, I had a moment.

Everything slowed, though I was moving at the same pace.

I could hear my heartbeat thundering in my ears, and a wave of emotions rose. They were in my chest, my throat, they were spilling out of me.

I had danced in this room since I was eight years old.

When I was six, I started dancing, then Duke had this built because I was voracious in my appetite. He was tired of hearing my tapping shoes through the house. I stood there, the



mirrors surrounding me on the wall chambers, and I had memory after memory blasting me.

My hand on the barre.

My first tutu.

The first time I stood on my toes.

The icing of my toes.

The blood.

The pile of hairpins on the floor.

The bandages.

The sports tape.

More icing.

The instructors I had. So many. They came in, they exited, and I had another who would comply with my father until they spoke against him. Then a new one would come, and it would repeat over and over throughout my life.

Junior high.

I had my thirteenth birthday party here.

High school.

Then my summers between after I went to a dance school.

My summers during college.

My holidays during college.

I grew up in this room, almost more than I grew up in the house.

This was my house.

The loft above where I did everything. The nights I slept there.

The days I napped there.

When I laid and listened to music.

I made out with a few boys up there, too.

Then the days I had Nova in here with me.

Her high shrieks filled the room. Her giggles.

Her crawling. Then her walking. Then her running.

I was crying as the time came back to me, and I knew there was really only one thing I needed from this room. I grabbed the picture of Nova in her first tutu for a baby. I held her hands as she walked wearing that tutu, and Emily had taken the photograph.

Ricci was waiting for me, scanning my face as I walked to her SUV.

“You ready?” she asked as I got inside.

We would be fine.

I felt it in my bones.

A calm settled over me.

I would freak out in a minute, but for now, there was a deep feeling this was right.

I nodded. “I’m ready.”

**NATE**

**A**spen was next to me when the nanny showed up first. She pulled into the driveway, and we waited.

We waited some more.

And more.

Aspen shifted. “She’s never been here before?”

I moved forward. “Right. I’ll go and help.”

Aspen moved with me, passing me, and as we both approached what I could now recognize as Quincey’s car, the lady driving was definitely not Quincey. I knew the plan. Aspen stood in front of the car, the headlights still on and blasting her. She waved, wearing a tentative smile.

I knocked on the passenger window, leaning down.

The lady looked scared out of her mind. Her hands were shaking, but she rolled the window down.

“Emily, right?”

She moved her head up and down, her hand going back to gripping the steering wheel.

I looked at the back seat, seeing Nova there. “This is my sister.” I nodded toward Aspen, who was probably the closest person to define what an angel on Earth looked like. She was soft and warm and smiling, and people generally melted into puddles at just meeting Aspen. “If you’d like, she’ll take Nova in? I’ll carry all the bags. You can go in with her and start to get settled in?”

Aspen was still smiling, but now rocking on her feet. Her blond hair up in a braid and without make-up she looked twelve.

Nova was starting to cry.

I moved to the back door, but the nanny cried out, “Wait! I —”

Aspen was starting to come around to my side. We both paused.

The nanny seemed frozen in place, staring at us. Her eyes were as big as saucers. “Can I...I know you’re Nova’s father, but can I take Nova inside?”

I eyed her. She didn’t look able to stand on her own.

“Um. How about you try carrying your purse first? I swear my sister is safe.” The reassurance sounded outrageous, but I’d been cautioned what to expect from this move. Duke Royas was the peak definition of a narcissist. Those leaving him might feel as if they were leaving an abuser at some point, and at that moment, I believed what I’d been told. This nanny was so frightened, she looked ready to piss herself.

“No. I—” She turned the car off and was scrambling to get out.

The doors unlocked, so I moved before she could.

She was running around the car. Abruptly halting in front of me, she had to catch her breath. She tried to get between Nova and me, but I was already leaning in and starting to unbuckle my daughter.

“Let me. Please. I—just let me take her.”

I moved, placing two hands on her shoulders. I could feel her entire body shaking. “Emily.” I moved my face so I could see her eye to eye. She gulped. Her eyes were bugging, moving all over the place. “I’m not saying this to be insulting, but you are not capable of carrying my daughter right now. I am calm. You are not. Aspen is equally calm as well.”

“I am. I totally am.”

I was trying to steady this nanny just by my touch. “Quincey is coming. She won’t be long behind you, but until she does, I’m going to let Aspen carry Nova inside. You can stay with her at all times, but my sister will be holding my daughter. I’ll be bringing in all the bags. Okay?”

She looked ready to argue.

I was going to have to be firmer. “There’s no area to discuss this where the outcome is any different. I’m sorry, but I won’t allow you to touch my daughter in your current state. Hell, you probably shouldn’t have even been driving her. What I’m trying to say is that you need to settle first.”

Aspen stepped up. “Hey. How about we do this? You and I walk inside together, and Nate will bring Nova? We can all hang out until Quincey arrives with the rest of the stuff.” She flashed me a gentle smile, her eyes flashing as she took hold of the nanny and began to usher her backward and out of my hold. “There’s no hurry with the bags. We can carry them in later; all we need is Nova and a diaper bag.”

She was right.

Emily was letting herself get walked inside, but at the door, she cast another worried look over her shoulder.

I dipped my head down. “I got Nova. I’ll be right in.”

Turning, Nova had her penguin half stuffed into her mouth.

I chuckled, bending down and undoing the seat belts. Lifting my little girl in my arms, I welcomed her, and I smelled her little smell. Baby wipes. That shit should be sold as perfume. I juggled her up and down, just a little bit, and she started giggling, thrusting the penguin at my face.

“Hey, hey. What’s this? I thought we were friends?”

“Ayayayay mmmmbubueeel penna.”

“Yep. I so agree.”

---

IT WASN'T MUCH LONGER before an SUV's lights hit the house, and they pulled up next to Quincey's car.

Aspen had shown Emily to the area of the house where Quincey would be living. She came back, moving to my side as I was bouncing Nova up and down in front of me.

"You know she can walk on her own, right?"

I flashed a grin at my sister. "I know, but then she'll be running, and I'm a new-enough dad that I just want to hold her. She's letting me hold her, so leave me alone. These days are not going to last."

Aspen chuckled. "You're already so wise, Ancient One."

"Watch it." But I was grinning, and so was she.

She got serious. "Val's ex? Did you hear back from your PI?"

I grunted, getting real serious myself. "Too many strikes against him, he's going away for a long time."

"That's something then."

"Yeah." It was, but for thirteen months he'd been near Nova when I hadn't a clue.

I hated that shit, but there wasn't anything to say, not anymore.

We moved back to watching Quincey and her friend, whom I had only heard about, move toward the house. Both seemed emotional. Quincey was blinking back tears. Her friend looked like she was holding back some, too, but they seemed a bit steadier than the nanny.

"They don't look as bad as Emily."

I grunted. "Duke Royas is going to have the police here within the hour."

"You want me to get Logan?"

Mason had to return to Boston long ago for his practices, but we all decided Logan should stay, and it was for this

phase. Duke was going to throw everything he had available at us, but we had Nova. And now we had Quincey.

“I think this is why Valerie did what she did.”

It was just coming to me now.

Aspen frowned at me. “What?”

I was watching Quincey and her friend starting to load up with bags before carrying them inside.

I stated, “She wanted me to get her away from him. She knew I’d move heaven and hell for Nova, but she wanted Quincey to stay with her. That’s why she left Nova to this aunt.”

Aspen sucked in her breath. “What a risk, though.”

“No.” No. It was ingenious, and something Valerie would do. Regret burned through me, but I let out a sigh. “Asp, I need you to entertain your niece for a while.”

“Finally! I’ve been waiting for this moment.”

After transferring Nova over to Aspen’s arms, I went and opened the door just as they were about to open it themselves.

Quincey and her friend blinked at me, startled.

I grinned. “You really thought we wouldn’t be watching for you?”

Quincey ducked her head, but I saw her cheeks were flushed. The friend was gawking at me. Chuckling, I moved and hit a buzzer by the door. A second later, Logan’s voice came over the intercom. “You rang, Your Highness?”

“They’re all here now.”

He was silent for a beat, then all business. “Coming down.”

Quincey and her friend took the bags farther into the house, then set them down. Quincey was eyeing Aspen, who was on the floor with Nova, but then she straightened and rounded right into me.

I caught her shoulders, feeling her tense as she gasped.

My hands curled around her. I couldn't stop myself, but I was refraining from pulling her into my chest. Instead, my hand grazed down her arm, to her hand, and I took her keys from her. I ignored her friend's little chuckle as I stepped back. "Make yourself comfortable."

Hearing Logan's footsteps coming down the hallway, I motioned as he came within eyesight. "We'll carry everything in. Aspen can show you where you'll be staying."

Logan raised a hand. "Yo. Armed and ready for some fireworks."

The friend groaned. "Again. They *all* look like that?"

Aspen shot her a grin.

Logan just smirked.

I shared his look. "You've matured. No comeback?"

He tsked me, frowning. "I'm happily in love, my soul brother." He raised his chin at Quincey. "When your dad calls, just hand me the phone."

"Are you serious?"

He dipped his head down. "It's why I'm here." He clasped me on the shoulder. "Why he pays me the big bucks."

"Your retainer is still being debated."

He laughed, his fingers curling in on me before letting go. "How about whoever carries the most bags in only has to pay me a third of what I quoted them?"

I snorted. Logan wasn't going to charge me for this, and we both knew it.



## QUINCEY

**T**hey were laughing.  
I was dumbfounded.

How could they be laughing at a moment like this? That wasn't rational.

I turned to Ricci. "Have I made a mistake? I have, haven't I? Oh my God. What are we doing? How do we get out of this?"

Ricci shared a look with Nate's sister before moving toward me and curling an arm around me. "Okay. Normally, I wouldn't recommend you have a drink, but I think tonight is an exception. And you heard Nate. Why don't we hand your phone over right now? That way, you don't even know when your father starts calling."

Oh God. "He's going to send police here. He's going to say we've been kidnapped or something like that."

"We'll hold off on the booze until the cops leave then."

I was almost swaying on my feet.

The police.

We were here.

Were we?

Really?

Yes. We were. I had to take a second because I was in shock.

We were in a position where I was expecting red and blue lights to roll up wherever I was, and in my emotional state, they were coming to take me back to him. I knew rationally that wasn't the case, but I wasn't in a rational state right now.

Trauma. That was the state I was in.

Ricci was watching me with concern, and she had reason. I knew what I was feeling. It was something I'd endured through the years, but this was different. This was a break from Duke, and I was almost cursing over what a mess my life had become. Ricci didn't—well, no one knew I'd gone to see a few therapists over the years.

They were all paid for by Duke, so when my problems started to lead back to him, the counseling got cut off real quick. Still, there'd been one counselor who'd been so kind. Her office was in Portland, and I did the drive every few weeks to see her. I was sure she had moved down to California by now, or that was what her email said. It was a customary one sent to her previous clients, but my email had been bcc'd, so I assumed all the others were, too. I'd been sad to see she was moving, but she wasn't too far away. She had followed up with me and given me lists of resources and other referrals to places I could go that weren't paid for by Duke Royas.

She helped more than the others.

I shut it all down.

In a switch, it had to go because I couldn't live in that world any longer.

I had shit to do and a child to take care of now. End it all.

All that was gone in the blink of an eye.

“Quince?”

I heard Nova crying in the distance and moved for her. My voice sounded like it was coming from so far away, not from me. “I need to go to Nova. I'm sure she's scared.”

“Uh. No.” Ricci was frowning but stepped aside. “Nova's here, and she's happy as can be.”

I heard a baby crying.

Whose baby was that? But it didn't matter. Nova was smiling and trying to pull out chunks of Nate's sister's hair. I thought she stopped doing that, but I guess she hadn't. Now she was trying to put Miss Penguin inside Aspen's head.

I stepped forward, smoothly taking Nova to me and cuddling her against my chest. "Heya, little Nova Beanie. How are you doing?"

She took one look at me and started shrieking.

I closed my eyes, leaning forward to rest my forehead against her shoulder. I wanted a second, one second, and then I'd let her down. She wanted to run, and she probably wanted to eat.

"I have some milk in a bag for her." I looked at Aspen. "Could we warm some of that for her?"

Nova was still shrieking in my arms.

Aspen and Ricci shared a look.

"Uh. Quince." They must've come to an unspoken decision because Ricci stepped forward and moved to take Nova from me. "I can see the kitchen from here, so how about I go and warm Nova some milk? Aspen will show you where your rooms are and everything. You can get settled in, too."

I was in a daze, but I noticed that Ricci was reaching into my pocket for something.

My phone.

She handed that off to Aspen, who tucked it into her pocket and smiled brightly at me. "For Logan. Just thinking ahead."

He would need to hear from me, though. That was my thought about Duke, about when he would call, but a wave of exhaustion hit me. Could someone be both ready to run a marathon and sleep forty-eight hours all at once?

The front door opened, and Nate came in first.

His eyes found me, darkening. His lips thinned, but he didn't say anything. His arms were completely full of our

bags. He deposited them on the floor and turned to head right back out. His friend was coming behind him, doing the same.

Aspen gently touched my arm. “This way.”

We had staff who did that stuff.

I frowned, going with her. “I don’t remember the last time I saw my father carry someone else’s bag for them.”

That was an odd thing, right? Was I wrong?

I blinked a few times, noticing the hallway now.

The floors were hardwood. The walls were painted white with no paintings or pictures. It was a bare wall, but all of a sudden, I remembered that he just bought the place. Hell, he was getting *settled in* himself.

I hadn’t asked about the house.

Was it safe for Nova?

Had he baby-proofed everything?

What kind of paint was on the walls? Were those lights LED?

“Did Nate go through all the rooms here?”

Aspen put a hand on my arm, and she must’ve heard the alarm in my voice because she said soothingly, “He did. We walked through everything together. We looked at every wall socket. All the furniture was bought with rounded and soft ends, and the ones that aren’t have been baby-proofed.” She stepped closer, making sure to look me in the eyes. “The house is safe. That was very important to Nate. I promise.”

“But that was fast, wasn’t it? How did you get that all done?”

“It’s still in the process of being purchased, but the previous owners okayed us to move in ahead of the closing date. And it happened fast because I still know a lot of people in the area. I made calls.”

“Calls?” I didn’t let her finish. “Us?”

“You and Nate. Nate. And all the guests who are going to be here.”

Right. Because he had a tribe behind him, and I had Ricci and Emily.

“I have a small tribe, too.”

Phillip.

That was it. Those three.

Was that sad?

That was definitely sad.

I stopped and turned. “Am I wrong in doing this?”

Aspen’s eyes were wide, taking me in. She bit down on her lip and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. It was already there, so her movement was a nervous gesture. She seemed to rock back on her heels as she thought of a response, at least until her eyes suddenly grew more focused. “No.”

I waited to see if she had more to say.

She didn’t. It was a simple no.

I jerked a nod. “Okay.”

She nodded back, her shoulders loosening. “Okay.” She started forward again. “Nate thought you might want your own section with your own entrance.” She went past a large living room, going down the long hallway until it divided. She pointed to the right. “That goes to Nate’s bedroom.” She went left, and I saw that we stepped into an apartment. Or at least it looked like its own apartment.

There was a living room. A kitchen. A small dining room. Farther past was a small hallway. There was a big bedroom. She continued to the left, showing me another attached area.

She gestured toward a door and another door. “This is where your guest bedroom can be.” Emily stepped out from it, her bags now covering the bed.

“Do you need me to help with anything?” Emily asked, her eyes bright and shining.

Emily wasn't staying here, but I guess I hadn't informed Nate of that. I shook my head. "No. You can continue unpacking the bags, but those will all go in the other room." I glanced at Aspen. "I'm assuming the big room is mine?"

"Oh! Yeah." She frowned but pointed at the last door in this area. "That's the guest bathroom. I'll show you your room."

My room was large, the bathroom extending off from the left side of the room. She went to the right to a closed door. Opening it, she said, "Nate thought this would be a good room for Nova."

I was seeing that.

There was a crib, a rocking chair, and a changing station already in place. There was a chest of toys in one corner. The other corner was full of stuffed animals with a particularly large ostrich and giraffe almost stretching to the ceiling. There were even bookshelves filled with children's books against one wall.

I glanced, seeing what I assumed to be a closet as well.

This room had its own little hallway going to the door, but on the other side of the room from where we came in was another door. I didn't have any idea where that one might lead or what it would open to.

Aspen went to it, a faint smile on her face shadowed by something else. She opened it. "His room attaches to hers as well."

She stopped just inside his room, not letting me walk around it.

That was fine.

I moved back into Nova's room, already doing a scan to see if everything was kid-proofed and safe. She said it was, but I needed to see it for myself. The electrical sockets were covered. There were no sharp edges on any of the furniture. Furniture like the bookshelves and dresser were securely strapped to the wall. That was impressive.

“Who was your designer?”

Aspen opened her mouth, then closed it. She didn’t answer.

Okay, then. That wasn’t my business, I guess. As long as everything was fine for Nova.

“Would you like me to start unpacking Nova’s things in here?” Emily asked from behind me.

I heard the slight tremor in her voice, and irritation sparked in me.

I didn’t know why. It wasn’t irritation at her.

It was... at everything. At this situation.

I swallowed a knot, feeling it choking me, and spoke around it anyway. “Yes. That’d be great, Emily.”

“Do you... do you want me to stay the night as well?”

Tonight was an exception for Emily’s normal hours. Then again, nothing about tonight was normal. It was all an exception.

It was the beginning of my new life. And I had no idea how I felt about it.

“No.” I gave her a smile, knowing I couldn’t have done any of this without her. “Thank you for your help, Emily. If you could unpack Nova’s things, and then you could go home after that? Take a day off or maybe a week. I think I’ll need time with just Nova to start getting comfortable here.”

She dipped her head in a nod. “Of course.”

Aspen had fallen silent, moving back as I began to move toward what would be my room.

I had cleared the doorway and moved past her when Emily spoke up. “Quincey?”

I paused, looking back.

“No matter *anything*, this was the right thing to do.”

My eyes burned, but I gave her another smile. “Thank you.”

She blinked back some tears.

It hit me like a tsunami then.

He did this to her. He did this to me.

He had done this to so many.

It wasn't right that my father could affect someone hired by us. It wasn't healthy. It was toxic.

The lump in my throat lessened by a little bit.

"I'm sorry." Aspen followed me, wringing her hands. "I assumed she was staying here."

"Where are you and Mr. Kade staying?"

"I'm in the pool house, and Logan's upstairs. He said he wanted to be in the house for Nate."

Right. Because they were only here for the moment.

*I* would be the one staying.

Me. Nate. Nova.

Like how a family should be.

But that was the thing...we weren't a family.



**NATE**

**W**e were finishing up the bags when Logan said, “Heads-up.” He nodded to the street.

A line of cop cars had turned on the road leading to the house.

“Three.” Logan whistled. “Damn, he must be poker buddies with the chief.”

“Or the chief likes to go to his casino and gets the VIP treatment.”

Logan grunted. “I forgot about that place. That could be a connection we’ll have to get creative about.”

I didn’t want to ask what Logan meant by that. At this point, what I didn’t know might do better for me down the road.

I shot him a look. “Nothing illegal.”

He snorted, grinning. “It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

“Or that I really do know you.”

He gave me a veiled grin as the first squad car parked right behind Quincey and her friend’s vehicles.

I didn’t like that at all.

Judging by Logan’s growl, neither did he.

“Fuck,” he said, pulling out his phone and hitting a couple of buttons. A second later, he said, “Aspen. Come out here.”

“Why are you getting my sister involved?”

The first two officers had gotten out and were rounding the vehicle, starting over the lawn.

“You kidding me? Seattle loves her.”

Aspen came out, but if I’d been nervous about my sister, I didn’t have to be. Her jaw was firm. Her eyes were blazing, and she had her phone up.

“You’re going live?” Logan asked. The amusement in his tone was mixed with awe.

“No, but I’m recording, and if they make one wrong move, this is going to be uploaded to one of Blaise’s social media accounts.”

My brother-in-law had followers in the millions.

Also, considering how he didn’t give a damn what people thought of him, a video like this would be on-brand for him. His PR team wouldn’t have a problem with it.

“Officers.” I nodded to the first one.

Officer Gravers and Officer Diaz.

The first nodded at me. “You’re the owner of this home?”

“I’m in the process of buying it, yes. There’s a legal agreement between myself and the current owners.”

They didn’t say anything at first, their eyes scanning behind us, trying to see inside the home.

The speaking one motioned to the two vehicles they had blocked off. “You know the owners of these two vehicles?”

“I do, yes.”

“May we please speak to them?”

“Concerning?” Logan stepped forward, his lawyer voice on. It was no-nonsense, and he was just looking for them to fuck up.

The second officer seemed to sense this and took a step back.

“I’m his lawyer.” Logan gestured toward me, his tone sounding considerably more hostile. “What’s the basis of this

visit? You're required to inform us of the reason."

The two cops shared a look, one stepping back and his hand moving to his radio.

He didn't need to call for backup. Two other cars idled in front of my house, both with two officers and all watching this event.

Gravers nodded to the house. "We got a concerned call about a possible kidnapping. Is there a Miss Royas inside?"

"There is, but she's playing with Nova."

The two cops shared a sharp look at the mention of Nova.

I'd had enough. "If you were called by Quincey's father, he wasted your time and effort. Quincey and *my daughter* have decided to live with me."

Both their eyebrows went up at the mention of "my daughter."

Gravers' mouth flattened, and his eyes went hard. "This is a child custody dispute?"

"No."

"No?"

"No." Logan's tone was harsh. "As of three days ago, Miss Royas signed a legal and binding agreement between herself and my client concerning the custody of Nova Nathaniel Robertson. You can call your supervisor up and make a request to my office and also to Miss Royas' attorney's office to obtain what legal documentation you need. Just know that any further errand you might be sent on on behalf of Mr. Duke Royas has no legal standing. And once this has been retained, any further action could be viewed and will be documented as harassment. I'll be making the appropriate legal claims for that to happen."

The one was squinting his eyes at Logan. "Where are you a lawyer from?"

Gravers' radio went off as Logan clipped out, "Boston."

Gravers stepped back, listening, and returned a moment later. He nodded to Aspen. “That Blaise DeVroe’s wife?”

“That’s my sister, and yes. She’s married to Blaise DeVroe.”

He reassessed me. “So you’re Nate Monson?”

I nodded.

Logan gave the other two squad cars an assessing look, smirking at the same time as he sighed. “We shouldn’t have to give you our famous connections or give you a ballpark guess at how much money Nate, Aspen, or myself have for you to return to your vehicles and continue with your evening’s normal activities. Mr. Royas sent you on a wasted trip.”

They shared a look, but Gravers held his hands out. “We need Miss Royas to come out and tell us she’s not here under duress. We can’t leave without that.”

Logan was going to fight it, but Quincey called from behind us, “I’m here.”

She stepped out, her face pale, but her chin up and firm. She stopped beside Aspen. “I’m here under my own volition. I’m no longer living with my father, and he has no legal standing over Nova. He would know this if he had taken the time to call his own lawyer before calling Bud.”

The two cops grimaced at that name.

I was assuming Bud was their boss, the Mr. Casino VIP.

Quincey’s eyes chilled. “Leave. Now.” She went inside without a second glance.

Logan was handing over two business cards as I took over. “My sister has a video of this whole thing if you’d like to give that to your boss? If not, get the fuck off my property.”

They bristled but didn’t dispute me. The three cars left not long after.

Logan murmured, “That was a bit too easy.”

“I know. Aspen gave you Quincey’s phone?”

“She did.”

I held out my hand. “I want it.”

He hesitated. “You sure? If he calls, I should talk to him.”

I shook my head. “He’s not going to call.” I nodded in the direction of the cops. “That was his move tonight. That was his only move, which means he probably guessed we’d have everything locked up tight, and he probably did call his attorney.”

“You think he sent them anyway?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“To make a point?”

I gave him a look, eyebrows up. “It’s something your father would do.”

Logan whistled. “You’re right. He’d do it to let her know that he can send cops to her new front door.”

“Psychological warfare.”

He grunted. “More like emotional abuse.”

“That, too.”

He was eyeing me, a dark look passing over his gaze. “Maybe I should stay longer than we talked about?”

“No. I need time with Nova and with Quincey to sort everything out.”

“You sure? I can have Taylor come here. She’d have no problem with that. They’re pretty flexible about covering shifts at her job.”

“I know, but I’m good.” He didn’t know that I was giving him and Aspen one week, and then both were being sent back to their respective loved ones. What I said, I meant.

I was going to take this time to bond with my daughter and figure Quincey out. I still hadn’t decided what role she would play in my daughter’s life, despite what I said verbally in our meeting.

We went inside, and I noticed Logan glancing at me. “What?”

He smiled. “You become a different beast when it comes to your daughter. I like it.”

I just shook my head. With Logan, I didn’t know if that was a good thing.

“Go and call your woman. I know you’re missing her.”

He smirked at me but headed upstairs right away.

Aspen was waiting inside, watching out the window. She sighed, turning back to me. “Are they going to be a problem for you?”

I went over to her. “No.” I pulled my sister to me, hugging her. “Thank you for being here.”

She hugged me back. “Anything. I love you, big brother.”

I caught the back of her head, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I love you, too.”

The first night’s battle was done. And we were victorious. I knew another one was coming, but first, I went in search of my daughter. I was needing some Nova hugs the most.

## QUINCEY

**W**e were here.

We were doing this.

Right?

Right.

Why was I asking myself?

It was done.

Here. Both of us.

And I couldn't sleep. Like zero, zilch, nada. Not a wink of it.

One in the morning, and I went to the bathroom. I peeked on Nova, and she was good. Curled on her side, sucking her thumb still. So freaking cute. Her penguin clutched under her arm, her little ass in the air. I almost chuckled but clamped it down.

I didn't want to wake her.

Two in the morning, and I was getting water from the kitchen. Then I peeked on Nova again.

I needed to stop. I was going to be the reason she woke up, but the little bug was sleeping soundly.

Good. That was very good.

I kept trying to reassure myself as I went back to my room, climbed into bed, and closed my eyes.

Three in the morning—was that a noise from Nova's room?

I sat upright, the cover thrown off, and I was hurrying over, more like scurrying. If she was sleeping, again, I did not want to wake her up. She had serious pipes on her when she needed to rally. Oh boy, could she rally.

I tiptoed in, and then stopped in my tracks.

Nate was on the floor next to her, sitting with his knees drawn up and resting his arms loosely around them. His legs were spread wide, his head turned so he could still see her.

She was sleeping, her blanket pulled up through her arms. Miss Penguin had been kicked to the side and a little snore was coming from her.

Maybe I made a sound? I didn't know, but he turned and his eyes caught mine.

I almost stepped back.

I wasn't prepared. Stark panic was in his gaze and he didn't hide it from me.

I waited, expecting the mask to slam back in its place.

It never did.

He continued to stare at me.

Feeling a pull, I took a step forward.

Another step.

Nova was asleep so in a way, it was just us two in the room.

He held my gaze the whole time.

Awareness spread through me, making every cell in my body alert.

The air in the room was... it was... I couldn't place it, but it felt *more*. It felt beyond us, as if something were wrapping around both of us, bringing us together.

Or maybe that was just me being foolish?



The moonlight was bright outside, shining through the curtains and spilling into the room, casting us both in light and shadow at the same time.

I shivered, not a bad one, but not a good one. Just an *aware* one.

He continued to stare at me, his eyes intense, piercing into me.

I moved forward again and slowly lowered myself down so I was sitting facing him. I pulled my knees up, my arms resting loosely around them. We were mirroring each other, and because he still hadn't put a wall between us, neither did I.

Not this night, not our first night all of us were here.

My breath was short. My chest was rising. I felt my nipples harden as I took him in, all of him.

He was in only sweatpants. No shirt. No socks. Just his pants.

The moonlight hit him in the exact right light, showcasing defined shoulders and arms. His chest. The shadow tapered down over his stomach, and I couldn't see it. That was in darkness, but his side showed not an ounce of fat.

Feeling a breeze that moved over the back of my neck, I lifted my eyes and almost gasped again. He'd been watching me watching him, and a whole other awareness passed between us.

Lust filled his gaze, and it was hungry.

I felt it match a need inside of me. My mouth was suddenly dry. My throat parched.

Then it was his turn.

His eyes trailed down me, over my tank top, lingering on my skin, my breasts. My shirt was made of soft material and it bunched at my waist, showing my sleeping shorts' waistband. The side of my stomach was exposed and then he moved further, his gaze going over my thighs, my knees, my calves, my feet, and back up.

I felt touched by him.

I should've been repulsed.

I wasn't.

A throb had started and it only intensified as his eyes went to my lips, up to my eyes. He held my gaze, then dipped back and stayed on my mouth.

That same lust was washing through me, hitting my insides like angry waves against a cliff's edge. It felt violent, but desperate at the same time.

My breath hitched.

I licked my lips.

I sat and watched him. He sat and watched me.

Neither of us spoke. Neither of us moved. Not an inch.

But I wanted him.

Then Nova rolled over, a snore left her, and it did nothing to break the mood.

I still wanted him, but neither of us did a thing about it. That night was a truce in our war.

We'd go back to hating each other in the morning. Hating, but needing.

## QUINCEY

I wasn't sure what I had expected, but over the past three weeks, it wasn't what happened.

And that was a big nothing.

Nothing happened.

There was no drama.

There were no more police visits.

No calls from my father.

No emails.

Nothing.

I had expected some drama with Nate, but there was zilch on that front, too.

He seemed to sense when I wanted time with Nova—when I wanted to feed her, hug her, play with her, change her diapers, chase after her. And the times when I was tired, he sensed that, too. He stepped in, and even as I would start going to her room, I'd hear his low croons, which were usually followed by her laughter.

Nova was generally a happy baby, thank goodness. Then again, that should've been expected if I was just going off Valerie.

Val was the happy one. Not me. If Nova had come from my loins, that kid would be screaming more than not. And judging by Nate, well, I couldn't judge that. He'd been an

alpha dick when I first met him, and I had to give him credit. I understood.

Yet since I moved in, he was the opposite.

I hadn't expected him and his people to step up how they had.

They took up my fight. I guess it was his fight, too, but it still seemed as though they had rallied around me. Especially Aspen.

Logan, too.

Before he left, he told me to call him if my father made any moves. I wasn't totally sure what he meant because I was getting a sense he wasn't just talking about legal moves, but I let it go. After Aspen and Logan left, Emily started up again. Nate mentioned his Miss Sandy was an option as well, but I liked the schedule we had.

Once Emily started, things really did settle down.

She and I already had a schedule sorted. We both helped with feeding Nova. When she went down for a nap, I began using Nate's pool house as a dance studio. There was hardly any furniture in there since he'd just moved in, and the glass doors and mostly floor-to-ceiling windows felt eerily similar to my old studio.

After a long dance, I came back to the house and helped Emily with feeding Nova again.

It was the afternoons when I started to get restless.

Emily left around five or some days at six. We both traded off just being around Nova.

It was nice, and I knew it wasn't a normal situation.

Nate had started spending more time in his office. Then he began leaving for business meetings. In his file, Carl had noted that Nate came to the city for investment properties, so I assumed Nate was off doing that sort of work. If he was around during the day, he spent time with Nova, but he was usually around in the evenings, and that was when he really stepped in.

He fed Nova.

He played with Nova.

He held her, sat with her.

He was obsessed with her.

I understood.

So, since I got her during the day, I started giving them time in the evenings.

And because I had the time, I'd go back into the studio.

I was used to dancing for hours, on and off, all day long. And then the shows. Sometimes, we did two shows a day. Sometimes. Not always.

I missed those days.

“Have you thought about returning?”

I was stretching, my head by my toes, when Nate spoke up.

Startled, I whipped up. My heart leaped up in my throat, but then I relaxed when I spotted him. He was in the doorway, holding Nova. Both were quiet and watching me.

Seeing me looking at her, Nova started shaking her arms around. “Penna! Mebgggme. Sloof.”

Miss Sloth had replaced Miss Penguin. She was waving the sloth all around, and her little legs began pumping.

Nate knelt, placing her on her feet, and he stood back, letting her go.

She ran to me, her chunky little body weaving a bit.

Nate chuckled. “It’s sheer stubbornness that keeps her going. She runs with that sloth, and it’s too big for her, but she won’t let it go. She’d go down with the ship before she’d drop that thing.”

I grinned, scooping her up and giving her a big kiss on her stomach. She shrieked again, but it wasn’t long before her body was twisting. She wanted to run. So I let her go, and as

Nate and I both followed her, both sticking to our sides, I remembered his initial question.

“I haven’t.”

He looked up, those eyes so steady on me.

Flushing, for some reason, I ran a hand over my hair. “Thought about going back, I mean.”

“Ah.”

“Not that I’m opposed to it, though.”

*Why was I still talking?*

He probably didn’t really care. Nova might’ve seen me, wanted to see me, and he brought her out to the pool house. He was making conversation and being polite. That was all.

Was that all?

Why was I questioning it?

“Why do you ask?”

I had to know.

Why did I have to know?

What was going on with me?

I was acting like I was in high school talking to the popular quarterback.

“Did you play football in high school?”

He had settled down on the ground because Nova found some of the toys I stashed for her over in the corner. She was putting those big blocky puzzles together or just banging the pieces against each other.

“What?”

I was being so weird.

I frowned, scratching at my forehead. Crap. I just loosened some of my hair. I scowled but started fixing my bun. “Why were you asking about me going back to dancing?”

“Uh.” He stared at me a moment, his hand automatically catching Nova before she fell backward. He righted her, answering, “You have time now, and I noticed that you spend a lot of time in here dancing. It’s what you did before, you know.” He nodded at Nova, and seeing she was watching him, he gave her a wide smile. She immediately lit up.

God.

She loved him already, so much.

*I can’t compete with him.*

I tensed up, not knowing where that thought came from.

It wasn’t a competition. Nova loved both of us.

But that was the thing. We weren’t equals.

I was back to scowling. Honestly. What *was* going on with me?

“You don’t have to go back if you don’t want to. I didn’t mean anything by asking.”

He thought I was scowling at him.

I smoothed out my face, silently cursing, and then tried to smile. My whole face felt jerky. I was the opposite of what I used to do professionally. So not smooth.

“I’m not—no. I mean,” *Breathe, Quincey. Breathe. Slowwww down.* I could hear Miss Clara’s voice again in my head, and it worked. My breathing automatically evened out, and I sat on the floor, reaching forward for my toes, stretching down to rest my chest across one knee.

Home. Being in this position felt like home.

I could feel my heart rate slowing, steadying, and I shifted to the other leg. I moved my arms over my head, graceful, until everything flowed naturally again. I was envisioning going through water, it moving over my body.

I took another breath and sat up. That was better. “Since Valerie died, I’ve thought about nothing but her.”

A dark look flashed in his gaze. “Have you heard from your father at all? Logan asked this morning.”

Right. Back to business.

He was only being polite by asking earlier.

I needed to remember that.

“No. It’s not what I expected.”

He frowned. “Yeah. Me neither.” His hand flashed up, catching a puzzle piece that Nova threw. He put it back down, almost as if he didn’t know he did it. “That alarms me, to be honest.”

I grunted. “Me, too.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded, feeling my throat burning again. I moved my legs together and bent forward, turning my head and resting my cheek over my thighs, just short of my knee. I could sleep like this. I murmured, almost to myself, “He’s gearing up for something. Something big.”

“I don’t know what he could do, though, unless he tried to take over your charge for some reason.”

Panic slammed in my chest. It was icy cold. “What?”

“Does he have anything on you that he could stretch? Anything to make it seem like you’re not sound enough to be Nova’s guardian?”

*Yes. So much.*

That burning doubled. “No.”

“Then the only play he’d have, but I can’t see him even attempting it, is a coup by your other family members.”

“What?” I was tasting acid.

“Your mom. She’d have to go to his side, a united grandparent front against you. But there’s no way Graham or the other sister would go along with it. Well, I can’t speak for the sister. I don’t know her, but not Graham. If anything like



that was even in the works, he would've called and given us a heads-up."

I had started to tune him out.

I had problems growing up, so many of them. But I conquered every single one of them.

There was no way... Was there?

All my therapists, though. He paid for them. He'd have those records, those notes, because I knew he made them share their notes with him, regardless of any doctor-client confidentiality. He ruled the roost and held the purse strings when I was younger. He'd been my father. He'd been paying my bills. He only chose the therapists who would agree to his terms and conditions, and the ones who wouldn't, I never went to them. That one therapist had been the exception, Naomi.

I should look her up, find her phone number.

I should call her. She'd know ways to help me with problems that I wasn't even aware I was having. It was how she had always been for me.

"Quincey?"

"Aahhhaamama!" Nova shrieked, pumping her hands all the way up, and then, hearing herself, she began laughing.

My heart stopped. Mama? Had she called me that?

No. She was staring at the wall, and I looked.

It was a picture of a woman with red hair. Not Valerie. It looked like a piece of art the designer had chosen to make the pool house feel more like home, but Nova was now pointing and staring at the picture.

"Mama." She was saying it over and over again.

Nova couldn't talk when Valerie died.

I bent my head over my knees, and I let the burning move through me.

I wasn't surprised when I tasted salt on my lips a moment later.

Valerie.

*Why did you have to go?*

**NATE**

THE NEXT NIGHT

“Hey, loser.”

I gave Graham Robertson a look as he tapped me on the arm, passing to slide in the seat across from me.

“You don’t know me well enough to use Logan’s terms of endearment.”

He laughed, taking his coat off and putting it on the chair next to him. “You’re right, but we’re family, so I figure I can. And who says it was Logan’s term of endearment? Maybe that’s what Val called you on your ‘off’ times?”

I relaxed, then sat up. “Was it? Did she?”

“No.” Another laugh from him as he grabbed the drink menu. “Val just called you ‘him’ or by your name. That’s about it. She didn’t talk about you much, to be honest. Didn’t have to, I guess. We all knew she loved you.”

I felt a good one-two punch at everything he just said.

Valerie.

I’d been so focused on Nova that I pushed my thoughts and emotions about Valerie to the side. I didn’t know if that was fair to her or not, but Nova and the fight for Nova took first priority. Hearing that information now, regret sliced through me.

If she had told me? What then...

But I hadn’t called him to discuss Valerie. It was the other sister I needed information on.

The waitress came over, getting our orders. When she left, Graham lifted his chin toward me. “So, what’s up? I’m guessing you called for a reason, and talking about Val’s term of endearment isn’t it?”

I liked Graham.

We’d known him since college, though not well. Mason had met him at a football camp, but it wasn’t until after college that we got to know him better. He suffered an injury and went into sports broadcasting instead of an NFL career. Then when my brother-in-law and Aspen lived in Seattle, and Graham was here, it was inevitable our paths would cross more and more. Because of all that, I felt comfortable viewing Graham as a friend.

“Has Duke Royas reached out to your mother at all?”

The waiter had come over, and he was in the midst of lifting his glass for a drink. He froze right before the glass touched his mouth at my question. Then he set it down and scowled at me. “You’re serious?”

I had to ask. “Yes.”

“Fuck no. I hate that dipshit. Not only did he fuck over my mom, and he wasn’t in the standing to do that in the first place, but he’s been in Quincey’s head all her life. He’s turned her against us. Swear to God, she felt guilty about just having a meal with us.” He made a gun motion pointing at his head. “That’s how engrained he is in her head. Poisoned my own sister against us, against all of us.” He paused, frowning, and gripped his water tighter. “Why are you asking?”

“Because Quincey moved in with me.”

My statement was the equivalent of a mic being dropped.

Graham could only gape at me, and as far as I’d known Graham, he wasn’t a guy to gape. Always charming. Ever smooth. Maybe one or two retorts to Logan, but he was mostly a laidback and unshakeable guy.

Graham Robertson was shook now.

“You kidding me?”

“No.”

“When? I mean, fuck. Fuck! That’s great, right? That means you have Nova then?”

I nodded. “We dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s, but we have her. Both Quincey and I do.”

“In your house?” He jerked upright and shook his head briskly. “Wait a minute. You have a house here? Since when?”

“About four weeks ago, maybe a little less.”

“Holy shit. You Fallen Crest people move fast once you know what you want, huh?”

“Want my daughter? Fuck yes. You have kids?”

“I don’t, no. Val was the first in the family to have them.” Graham winced, reaching for his beer again. “Is that why you’re asking about Duke? Is he making things hard on Quince? Fuck, of course he is because he’s a dick.”

I nodded. “He’s been quiet lately. I was wondering if I needed to be gearing up for a fight that I can’t see coming.”

“Oh. Well.” He thought about it, taking another sip of his beer. “I mean, if Quincey and Nova are with you, then there isn’t much he can do. Right? Unless...”

“Unless?” I raised an eyebrow.

He took another drink of beer and grimaced as he swallowed. “Man, I don’t know if I should say anything. I mean, that’s for Quincey to tell you.”

“Quincey isn’t sharing. If I need to know something, then I *need* to know. I can’t fight a battle if I don’t know all the plays.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I can see that. But I feel like I’m betraying her if I tell you.”

I couldn’t fault him, but it had to be said. “This is Nova. She’s who we’re all protecting at this point.”

He grunted. “Fuck.” He hissed that word. “I know, and I can totally see Quincey not sharing because yeah, I can’t

imagine what she's going through right now. He's been in her head all her life, literally. She's probably detoxing from his toxin, you know? There's absolutely no way he'll go to any of us to move against her. No way in hell. He knows that's a lost cause. We all hate him, but the only move I can see him making is either declaring you unfit or declaring Quincey unfit."

"He has no standing against me."

"Yeah. I wouldn't think so. He'd know that, too. You're stacked with everything. Job. Money. Family. Connections. I can only imagine shit you might've pulled when you were younger, but I can't see any judge taking him seriously. So, then, it's Quincey." He was grimacing again.

"I have to know, Graham."

"I know. Just feels wrong to tell you this way." He took another drink, downing half his beer.

I had yet to touch mine.

"Fine." His shoulders slumped down. "She's not had an easy life. Duke fought for custody of her, and he fought nasty. He went deep into our mom's history, pulling up a history of drug use. And it wasn't that bad. I mean, it was, but it wasn't anything current. She had a time in her life when she got dark, and she sought out drugs. That's when she met Duke. It was a bad couple of years, but she got sorted. She and my dad are happy again and have been for a long time. She lost Quincey, though, and the way the lawyers painted her, it was bad. Real bad. I was young, but I remember when they'd come back from the courthouse some of the times. I just felt empty, like I knew something bad was going to happen. But yeah, I'd imagine he might try that with her. Dig up and air whatever dirty laundry that fucker can."

"With what? I need to know what ammunition he might use."

"Him, to be honest. He's the bad shit in her life, but that's not how the lawyers will put it. She had an eating disorder for a good while, and I know it's cliché with the dancing world,

but it happened. They might say other things, but I think that was the biggest issue for her for a while. She wasn't taking care of herself."

Jesus.

My mouth dried up, thinking about that, thinking about Quincey being in that position. She was full of fight from the moment I met her. She'd only been about the fight.

"But, yeah. It's him. He's the root of anything bad she's been through."

I sighed on the inside, because damn. That meant a lot of personal hell Quincey was going to go through.

"You think he'll do that to his own daughter? His only flesh and blood?"

He considered my question, his fingers tightening around his glass. "Yeah, man," he bit out. "Quincey was always a possession to him. He wouldn't allow anyone else to have her, and I have a hard time believing he won't think the same about Nova. In his mind, Nova became his when Valerie put Quincey down as her guardian." He gave me a hard look. "You're the card he didn't plan for, so with you in the deck, I'm not sure what he'll do. I wouldn't put it past him to go after Quincey, though. If he got her out of the way, then it's between him and you."

I nodded, feeling a heaviness that was always there, but I was just reaffirming what I already knew was coming. "Thanks, Graham."

He picked up his beer. "Do me a favor?"

"Yeah."

"I know your group. I know battles aren't anything new to you guys, but in the process of all this, try not to hurt my sister? And don't let her know I was the one who told you about her history. We all lost Val, Quincey, too. On the surface it won't look like we're grieving, but we are. Each person in our family pushes that shit deep, though we still feel it."

I nodded. He wasn't saying anything I didn't understand. "Not planning on doing either."

---

I WAITED until the drive back home to call Mason.

He picked up after the first ring. "You hanging in there?"

"Did I wake you up? Can you talk?"

"I'm good. What'd Graham say?"

"I think he's going to go after Quincey, and I think he's going to set me up during that process."

Mason had been kept abreast of everything. He, Logan, and I called each other daily.

There were also texts. Emails. Sometimes a FaceTime was necessary.

Distance aside, it was like we were all still living together, so he knew exactly what and who I was talking about.

A low curse was his response.

"Yeah." I clenched my jaw because what else could I do? "I really, really want to just annihilate this guy."

"I know. I'm getting there myself for you. Want me to call up some back channels? I can see if my dad knows any dirty dealings he's got?"

"What was the mob connection we found in the beginning?"

I asked Mason because he was going to have his own guy do a deep dive into that connection specifically.

"That looked like a line of credit from a family in Canada. It's been resolved, and it doesn't look like there's anything current going on there."

"But he could reach out to them. That's an open resource for him."

"Yeah."



“Your dad still works with the Red Demons?”

“I’m not sure, but they’re not that far up north. They branched to the Midwest and South, or that’s what Channing told me. And Nate, brother, I’m telling you that Channing *does not* want to bring that MC back into his life. They are not people you want to be in bed with.”

Channing was another friend from Fallen Crest, except he was from our neighboring town.

There was a lot of history with us all, but suffice it to say that he had connections to the Red Demons through family and his business. No one was saying he *wanted* to have those connections, but he did. And I’d be a fool not to look at that avenue.

“I’m asking because I’m wondering if they could keep an ear out? See who he might approach to try to set me up, because if he does, it’ll have to be something nasty. Like heavy enough to put me in prison sort of thing.”

I heard his indrawn breath. “I think you’re giving him too much credit.”

“No.” I knew he’d say that, and I knew it sounded like a leap, but my gut was telling me to prepare for the worst. “I don’t think we’ve even turned page one in the book against this guy. I think he’s a whole other sort of monster. Think about it, even the whole radio silent thing he’s playing is another form of warfare. The guy’s a nasty sonofabitch.”

“You want me to call Channing for you?”

Did I? “No. If I want Channing brought in, I’ll call him. You should stay clear.”

“That’s not how this friendship works, my man.”

“It does this time.”

“Dammit, Nate!” he snapped at me. “Don’t do this. You fucking finally reached out and needed me. I was there for you. All the shit you’ve gone through in your life—”

I knew where he was going. I stopped him, my voice low. “Don’t go there, Mase. That’s high school shit. Keep that back

there.”

“You were hurting, and I wasn’t pushing you enough to let me in. And I pushed you out when you first came back.”

That was the shit I didn’t want to go over. “You had your own crisis to deal with back then.”

“I know, but... let me help you this time. Please?”

Mason was saying please. That wasn’t the norm, ever.

There’d been a time back in the day when I felt like I lost two families, but things changed.

I’d been an asshole at times, pushing people out, but I changed in college. I righted myself and never looked back. I wasn’t going to let Mason make me look back either.

“Mase.” I gentled my tone. “It’s not about you from back then for me. You know about my brother.”

He was quiet for a moment, then said a ragged, “I get that. I’ll back off.”

“Thanks.” I let out some air, loosening my grip on the wheel. I was driving as if I were in a blizzard with whiteout conditions. “Maybe see what Logan thinks? He might know someone we don’t know up here who could keep an ear out.”

“I will. Who knows what he might come up with? But anything illegal, let’s keep him out of it.”

I started grinning. “Brother, you’re staying out of that, too.”

A dark laugh came from his end. “Who’d think we were in these positions right now? Looking back, Logan and I should’ve been in prison for how many things we pulled? Now you’re the one trying to keep us clean and on the straight and narrow.”

I laughed, but a thought came to me. “Fuck. You don’t think my line is tagged, do you?”

He got quiet. “You gotta make a call to get that figured out.”

“Will do. Signing off now.”

“Keep me updated.”

“I will.”

Shit.

I hadn't thought of that, of him bugging my line or hell, even the car I was driving.

I should've.

Or was I being too paranoid?

Maybe he wasn't that bad?

No. My gut flared up. I was dead right.

## QUINCEY

“So...nothing?”

Ricci was just as dumbfounded as me, but I nodded and shrugged to her question. She called, asking if I wanted to meet up for coffee, so I gave Emily the day off. We went to a local coffee place that had a corner area for kids to play. There were usually only one or two children using it, and today, it was just us with Nova. Nova was having a ball throwing the balls into a little ball pit they had. Total love for balls here.

So far, none had escaped or hit any other coffee-goers, so success.

I was sitting on the floor, Nova standing in front of me, and Ricci was sitting on the chairs kitty-corner from us.

Her mouth gaped before she took a sip of her chai tea. “I can’t believe that. I mean, we were sneaking out like you were an ex-convict.” She narrowed her eyes at me. “How are things with Hottie Patottie?”

I grinned, feeling the back of my neck heating.

Nate was... Nate was a different story.

Her eyes went wide, and she leaned forward. “What? Oh my God. Tell me something happened? Did something happen between you two?”

*I wish.*

Wait.

Panic seized me. Where did that thought come from? I mean, I knew, but that was not good.

I shook my head. “It’s not like that.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Then why are you all flushed? You only get like this when you’re attracted to someone.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “That’s a big deal, Quince. You’re attracted to your baby daddy?”

“He’s not my baby—”

“Yes, he is. The only difference is you didn’t get to test out the goods before he became your baby daddy. And he is *feine*.” She leaned back, fanning herself. “Give me the deets. What’s going on between you two?”

“Nothing.” And it was true.

Except that Nate was perfect.

And he was an amazing father to Nova.

And he seemed to step into the role almost seamlessly and so smoothly. It was like he’d been her dad this entire time. Basically, the exact opposite of my own father.

Nova had then grabbed a stuffed koala bear and was trying to eat it.

I tried to take it, so she began waving it around instead.

Nope. She wasn’t content with that.

She reared back, and the koala bear sailed clear across the coffee place.

It smacked a lady on the side of her face.

We had our first casualty.

Ricci smothered a laugh but got up and retrieved the bear, murmuring apologies before she came back. “I’m taking that as your little girl wanting something to happen between her new mommy and daddy, too.” She was wiggling her eyebrows as she handed the koala back to Nova.

As she took it and started to do it all over again, I blocked her throw this time, which she loved.

And we had a new game going now.

She was babbling, flapping her arms, and picking up/throwing the koala bear over and over again.

I sighed, then reached out as she started to wobble once. She righted herself, clutching the bear to her for a moment.

“Nothing is going on between Nate and me.”

“And if something did happen?”

My insides were already melting, doing somersaults in glee, but anything happening between us would be bad. Really bad.

“He could have anyone, Ric.” *Why me?*

“So? What are you saying? He wouldn’t want you, or it shouldn’t be you?”

I mean, why would he want *me*? Look at all the baggage I’d brought him already.

But I didn’t say that. Instead, I blocked another koala toss and handed the bear back to Nova. “I was so terrified once I knew what I was going to do, going against Duke, but since that first night at Nate’s, it’s been silence from him.”

“And you think anything between you and Nate would... what?”

“It’d just make it all the more complicated.”

I could tell she wasn’t following my thoughts, but she went with my subject change.

She asked, “Has Duke frozen your accounts?”

I looked up, feeling a headache coming. “Yes, the ones where his name was on the account, too.”

Nova went over to Ricci, handing her three balls.

Ricci took them and piled them on the chair beside her.

That meant Nova needed to give her more balls. So she did. I scooted back, giving Nova more room to run so she wouldn’t trip over my leg.

Ricci asked, “You’re good for money? I mean, you told me before you were. Is that still the case?”

I nodded, focusing mostly on Nova. I had no idea why I didn’t want to look at my best friend. “Everything has been... too good.”

“What do you mean?”

Nova started to run, then dropped a ball and bent over. She reached for the ball, but it rolled out of reach. Holding the other two to her chest, she started to follow it, going past Ricci. We both waited, but the ball stopped.

Nova grabbed it and stood upright, wearing a proud smile on her face. She started to turn, a foot went around to step in front of her—and she wobbled.

Ricci darted for her, but I leaned forward and grabbed her.

I was bent forward, my reach beyond my legs. She was far enough away that my face was just above the floor, right next to my toes. As I grabbed Nova and waited for her to steady herself, I turned my face sideways, and because I couldn’t help myself, I raised my other arm for fourth position. I closed my eyes, and for a moment, I was home again.

Then Nova was running again, and I straightened back up, ignoring Ricci’s pointed look.

I knew she meant well for me. Leaving Duke seemed to have no consequences based on what I’d told her, so in her mind, it was time to return to everyday life. And because Nate was being so fantastic, I was given an opportunity to return to my career.

I didn’t know how to explain that it all seemed temporary to me.

I was on shaky ice that looked coated with snow. I knew the foundation under my feet was thin, but someone not walking with me would have no idea. It was a matter of time before it shattered, and I fell through.

“Something’s going to happen, Ric.”

“I know!” Her eyes flared up. She was smiling, not understanding my meaning.

“No.” My tone was flat, and I gave her a look. She saw the warning in me. “I know something bad will happen, and I can’t move forward because I’m just waiting for it.”

She frowned, a dark shadow coming over her face. She straightened back. “Have you talked to Nate about it?”

I shook my head. “I think I’m scared to rattle that cage, too. He might be scared, and then what? Kick me out?” Because he could.

I had to remember that I signed that contract, giving up any fight for Nova.

My throat was starting to burn, and I swallowed, trying to ease it. It only burned even hotter. My chest felt like it was being squished into my body. Something was trying to make my insides cave in on themselves.

“I didn’t get the sense that he scares lightly.”

I glanced over. “What do you mean?”

Nova decided to run out of our corner, but Ricci grabbed her. When she protested and started to squirm out of her hold, Ricci took her hands and began moving them around in a tiny cheer motion. She did it absentmindedly, saying to me, “Your baby daddy hasn’t once wavered. Once he found out about Nova, he was all fight and all fierce the entire time. He didn’t ease up until you moved in. Did you notice that?”

I had. Oh boy, had I. Or my body had but definitely not going there.

So not going there. That’d be bad.

“What about it?”

She kept on, “And the night you moved in, remember how at ease he was? Him, his friend, and his sister? The cops showed up, and nothing happened. They handled it. Normal people would get nervous when the police arrive. Not your guy, not his team. They didn’t bat an eye. I’ve started



wondering if you're the one new to this world, and it's the one he lives in?"

"What do you mean by that?"

She shrugged, releasing Nova when her attention went back to the ball pit. "I think you should ask Nate what he thinks. Has he said anything to you about what Duke might do next?"

I confessed, "I haven't been able to bring myself to ask him."

I'd been too scared he'd realize what he was up against and kick me out.

"Ask him." She flashed me a smile. "Ask him tonight, with wine. Make sure there's lots of wine."

"He gets Nova in the evenings."

She pffted at that, rolling her eyes. "I have a feeling he'd be just fine if you 'crashed' an evening with him and Nova. I think you know that, too."

But I didn't.

I didn't really know anything, except that my father hadn't once reached out.

And I didn't know if I was hurt or relieved, or if I should feel any of those emotions?

But maybe she was right. Nate said he'd help against Duke, so it was time to have that conversation with him.

"Oh. She's going to squawk."

Ricci was right. Nova's face was getting red, and she pushed out her butt as she did right before she let loose with a wail. It was time to head back.

## QUINCEY

He was shirtless.  
Oh God.

Shirtless!

My body was reacting, almost quivering, and I was embarrassed as I came down to the kitchen that night.

Who was this person? I didn't recognize myself.

Relationships were a struggle as a dancer. At least for me. I found it challenging to be the partner the other person wanted. I didn't have a lot of time and had even less time when I became a principal dancer. We danced for hours every day, and that wasn't counting the shows. Sometimes we did two shows a day.

Because of that, I had a few lovers over the years. We'd meet or call, and then we'd go about our lives. It was probably much the same as what Valerie had with Nate. But maybe because of dance, or maybe it was just how I worked, but I'd never been one for relationships.

I wasn't one for romance either.

Despite the romantic, sensual magic that I tried to convey through dance, it had never made sense to me.

Sex had been an urge or a need that I took care of, like eating. Or needing water.

The whole heart palpitations, fluttering stomach, weak in the knees experiences were alien to me.

“Hey.”

Nate had turned and saw me, and so like him, he wasn't ruffled one bit.

I moved farther into the kitchen, seeing Nova in the corner. She was taking a bunch of plastic cups and bottles from one corner of the room to the other. I paused, watching her. Always so busy and with such an unknown purpose.

Nate chuckled. “She's very intense when she's working.”

Something eased inside me. My chest felt looser, and not wanting to second-guess that, I moved forward. I slid onto one of the barstools. I was also trying hard not to only watch his chest.

Or his back.

Or how his muscles seemed to be endless and smooth, and how he moved so lithely through the kitchen.

Nope. That wasn't drool at the corner of my mouth.

Still, I pressed my lips together, brushing my mouth with the back of my hand.

He caught the motion, his eyebrows dipping together. He paused, his eyes going back to my mouth, lingering. Darkening.

I was pulling myself out of this lust-filled spell, but he yanked me back down, with just that one look.

Then, as if he couldn't help himself, he yanked his gaze away and turned to the fridge.

Reaching in, he pulled out some salad. “Are you joining us for dinner?”

His voice was hoarse.

I needed a second, because that look from him unearthed a wash of yearning in me—yearning that I hated feeling. A slight gurgle left me, and I looked to him and he had stopped, once more. That sound seemed to ripple through him as well.

The lust was still there for him. I saw it waving like wind slowly moving through a bonfire. The flame swaying back and forth. He didn't bank it.

I couldn't bank mine either.

Then, abruptly he put the salad on the counter before me.

"I—"

He said, cutting in, "Because that'd be nice since we do all *live* together."

The back of my neck got all hot. Why was I reacting to that, too?

I crossed my arms in front of me but hugged the counter. "I can do that."

"Good. We gotta get to know one another, whether you want that or not."

He turned back for a bowl, and I almost sagged back in my chair.

Get to know each other. What did he mean by that?

Not...

No way.

Not what I was thinking, that's for sure. Ricci was in my mind. Hell. Ricci was in my body because my stomach was doing those same damn somersaults right now.

I groaned internally because I couldn't blame Ricci.

This was all on me.

Nate was gorgeous, and wealthy, and young. He was Nova's father, and I was living with him. I was single. He was single—was he single? He hadn't said anything about a girlfriend, and as far as I knew, he hadn't been meeting up with anyone. Hell, maybe he had a similar relationship with another woman like he'd had with Valerie.

Because he wasn't here all the time.

He could've been meeting a woman. What did I know?

“Are you single?” I blurted out the question and made myself hold firm when he looked at me.

He raised one eyebrow. “I assumed your PI would’ve included that information in his report.”

I shrugged, telling myself my cheeks weren’t hot or flushing as I looked away. “He didn’t, but I just thought I should ask. Because of Nova, I mean.”

Nova, who was starting to wander into the other room.

I moved off the barstool and went over, gently herding her back to the kitchen.

He hadn’t answered. “Are you?”

Pausing, Nate stared at me for a moment, a long moment.

An emotion was there, simmering just beneath the surface.

I was staring back, the back of my neck heating again.

My throat dried.

He hadn’t answered the question.

“I’m single.”

I could’ve sagged from the relief.

“Oh.” I looked down, still herding Nova forward.

“You?”

“What?” My head jerked up at his soft question. He was staring at me. Oh. Right. “No. I’m not—that’s not me.”

“What’s not you? Being single?” He put a few slices of bread on a pan, laying it out. There was a bowl of melted butter next to it with garlic seasoning beside that. “Or don’t you do relationships? Or just sex?”

He was teasing me.

God. My throat was suddenly so parched.

“Relationships.”

He flashed me a side grin. “Sex?”

“Why are we talking about this?” I felt like I was a shy and clumsy junior high school girl all over. I groaned. “I bet you were popular in high school.”

Both his eyebrows shot up at that. “I can guess how you jump from one thought to the next sometimes, but not that one. You lost me.”

I pressed my mouth tight. I wasn’t explaining that jump either.

I said instead, “You were, weren’t you?”

“You weren’t?” he countered, a small sparkle in his eyes.

My whole body was warm, and my organs were all melting as he was coating me with a blanket inside my body. It was nice and not at all normal for me. “No. I wasn’t.”

“Daddy Duke didn’t let you party with the delinquents?”

I barked out a laugh. Nova looked content to go through her emptied bottles and cups again, so I sat down to help block her in. I started stretching once I was down there, and I bent forward, my forehead going to my knees. I took a deep breath in, resting my arms behind me on the floor. My fingers moved to grip my shirt’s sleeves, knotting them, and I took that one moment to center myself.

I missed dancing.

Moments like this reminded me of the reasons that I danced.

I needed to dance again.

Pushing that thought away, I sat back and blinked a few times. Nate was watching me, almost curiously. He was finishing up buttering the bread. “You do that so naturally as though you don’t even know you do it.”

I considered his statement. “I probably do. I’ve been dancing since I was three. It’s just what I do.”

“You danced through school, too? Is that why you weren’t ‘popular’ as you put it?”

He was teasing. I recognized the tone, but that just took me back to those years.

“There were times I had some people over to the house, but it was weird. They were all ‘approved’ by my dad to hang out for that day or that event, like a birthday. And after, I couldn’t keep them. I wasn’t allowed to have friends except for Ricci.” That wasn’t totally true. “I had another friend. We danced together until she was hospitalized in seventh grade. They moved away after that.”

“What was she hospitalized for?”

There was a big boulder sitting smack in the center of my chest. I spoke around it. “An eating disorder.”

He was quiet, but he had paused. All his focus was on me, and man, it was a lot of focus. Intense focus. Unwavering focus. A girl could fall in love simply from the focus he was giving me.

I needed to tell him.

“We both had it. We were eating disorder partners, which, if you know anything about the disorder, is not a good combination.” I didn’t want to look at him. I couldn’t. I pulled my gaze to Nova, who had chunky legs, chunky arms, and a chunky face, and she was so perfect, I wanted to cry. “One of my therapists told me it made sense that I developed an eating disorder. Not because of my dancing, which you’d think, right? But because of my dad. She said it had to do with not feeling loved by him. That got transferred to looks, my dancing, and that’s what I could control. I couldn’t control him loving me, but I could control what I thought might make him love me. I kinda over-controlled it, if you know what I mean.” Gah. I made it sound so trivial, and it wasn’t. “Surrah and I danced together. We worked out together. We stressed together. And we were competitive. When Surrah left, I kinda stopped trying with friends. There was no point.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What?” I lifted my head, looking at him.

He was frowning, but not at me. “You had a friend. You both had eating disorders. She got better and moved away?”

I stared at him a moment. “She didn’t get better.”

His head jerked around, his eyes lifting to mine.

I recognized the stricken look in him. I used to feel that way, back then.

“She never got better. She was hospitalized, and for some reason, they thought her being around me wasn’t good for her. They moved away because of me.”

He was staring so hard at me now.

Shame crept up in my throat. It was threatening to coat over my neck and up my face. I felt it starting to squeeze around my lungs, putting them in a chokehold.

“What happened to her then?” he rasped out.

“She died.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry.”

I had to say the rest. He needed to know. “You asked me before what my father might use against me. That’s what he’ll use against me. Surrah’s parents sued us after she died. They blame me for her eating disorder.”

He took a beat. Just one.

“You know that’s bullshit.”

I frowned, and my voice came out raspy this time. “What?”

“No one can blame another person for their psych disorder. If blame was going to be assigned, it’d go to the parents, and there’s a whole environmental/biological argument happening there, too. Nature and nurture shit. There’s a ton of literature debate just on that subject, so Surrah’s parents suing yours was a payout. That’s it. They wanted money, and if they really blamed you, they just wanted a scapegoat.”

I was stunned.

No. I was speechless.



I was trying not to gape, but I was. “I said that to you and nothing. You took one second before responding with that.” I stood from where I’d been sitting. Nova was sitting on the floor in the far corner. She was sucking her thumb, staring at both of us.

She was going to start getting hungry soon. It was nearing her eating time.

I needed to check her diaper, too.

Going over, I scooped her up but swung back to Nate.

I didn’t know why this was affecting me how it was, but it was. Everything he did affected me.

“Look...” He was trying to be gentle.

Fuck that.

Anger exploded inside me, but I held it back. I was being burned on the inside.

“I can guess about your sad and lonely childhood. I’m even willing to put a good ninety percent of the blame on your father, despite what I just said about Surrah’s parents, but if you think anything you say to me is going to shock me, you’re wrong. You grew up without a mom. You were a dancer. You had a friend. You had an eating disorder. So did she. You got better at some point. She didn’t. And what? You got crosses to lay on me, do it now, but if you’re looking for a pity vote from me, that shit ain’t happening. I’m not that guy. I’ve seen, done, and been through too much.” He had a serving spoon in his hand, and he laid it down before taking one step toward me. “Since we’re laying it all out right now, I’m going to tell you what I *am* scared of. You. We’ve not talked about your dad for a long time, and I shouldn’t be doing it this way. My intention was not to have the shock effect, but I’m worried about you. I think your dad will come at you at some point because of your past and the reasons you were in therapy, and I need to know you’re not going to fall apart because of it. He’s going to take everything he knows about you, all your triggers, and he’s going to press every single one of them. All at once. You’re going to feel like a fucking demolition ball has swung through

your body, and it's going to keep swinging until he thinks he's torn you completely down. Now. Me? He's going to throw shit at me, too, and maybe try to set me up. I'm ready for it. I have fail-safes in place, so I'm telling you, after this, I'll be standing. I need to know that you'll be standing, too. Nova will need us both."

I wanted to kiss him.

No.

I was weaving on my feet, but I grabbed the doorframe. My fingers sank in. I had Nova in my arms.

I steadied myself, and I took a beat, just as he had.

He was right. All of it.

I closed my eyes, feeling everything in me swirling and spinning.

He was right about everything.

"What do I need to do?"

His eyes fell to my lips, darkening. Then he folded his arms over his chest, and his eyes lifted back to mine. "You need allies from your past to rally around you."

My mouth dried again because I knew who he was talking about.

"No," I whispered, a clammy fear starting to crawl up my legs.

"Yes."

"I can't."

He grated out, "You have to."

I looked, but his eyes weren't on me. They were on Nova.

"You know who it's really for. Neither of us has an option here."

Right.

Right!

Nova.

I sighed. *Are you sure you meant me, Valerie?*

“I’ll call my mother tonight.”

He jerked his head in a nod. “Quincey?”

I’d been about to take Nova back to her room. She was starting to squirm in my arms. “Yeah?”

“I’d like to hear more about you, about anything, if you’re willing to share again?”

A rush of pleasure and warmth pushed out the fear.

I nodded. “I’d like that.”

I meant that, and that surprised me. I didn’t share, and it was something I usually had to force myself to do, but with Nate, I wanted to share. I wanted him to know everything about me.

That should’ve alarmed me.

Nova whacked me across the face with one of her bottles. A distinct smell started to permeate the room as well, and I grinned.

I was thinking I needed to be more alarmed about Nova’s gift for me instead.

**NATE**

FOUR NIGHTS LATER

“**W**e should’ve brought Nova.”

I threw Quincey a look because she’d been the one to suggest we use Emily for the night.

“You said she’d be a distraction.”

“Exactly.” Her lips were thinned. We were in my SUV, heading to Graham’s house for a family “reunion” dinner, and what I said was correct. Quincey had been torn whether Nova should come or not. She went back and forth until saying what I just responded to her with, which was correct. Nova would be a distraction. Everyone loved Nova, and the dinner talk we needed to have would not be kid-appropriate. Nova might not understand, but kids sensed everything.

After her confession, Quincey relaxed around me.

The night and immediate day after I pushed her about reaching out to her family, she’d been tense the whole time. She’d been wound up like a sober virgin at a sex club. There was an intense dancing session in the studio—aka the pool house—and when I say intense, it was *intense*. She didn’t know this, but most nights she went in there, Nova and I curled up in the back of the pool house to watch her.

She was beautiful to watch.

There were no other words to describe her movements.

I did my homework, so I saw recordings of some of her previous performances. I knew she was talented, but watching her live and in person was almost a religious experience. There

was a reason Nova never moved out of my lap or made a sound. We both knew that when Quincey danced, we were watching magic happen. She was special—special in a way that she didn't seem like she was from this world kind of beautiful special.

I could better articulate myself, but with her, sometimes the words weren't there.

That night, though, it was a five-hour dance session.

Nova and I hadn't lasted the whole time, but it was painful to pull ourselves away.

It was on the third day when Quincey showed up in the kitchen, her phone in hand and a white stress line around her mouth. I could see she was biting the inside of her lip. Her hand was trembling as she shoved the phone to me. "Call them. Call him. I don't care. Call someone."

I took her phone, frowning at it until I saw the contacts she had pulled up.

Without giving her a second to back out, I pressed Graham's name and hit speaker.

The ringing filled the room, and he answered a beat later.

Quincey looked ready to faint, so I started the conversation. Graham was quick to catch on, inviting us for dinner. At first, it was just him, his girlfriend, and the two of us with Nova.

Then Calihan found out about it and demanded to be included.

I knew this because I was included on the family text chain.

Quincey never okayed it, so I did.

Three hours later, the mom and stepfather were coming as well.

Quincey never okayed it, so I did it again.

She knocked on my door thirty seconds after I hit send and declared while hugging her phone against her chest, "Nova

isn't coming. Emily can babysit."

And that was that.

Now that I was thinking about it, the dinner had been Graham. All Graham. Quincey just never said no, and throwing her a frown, I asked now, "Are you still wanting to do this? I can turn around."

She didn't answer.

So I took *that* as an answer.

I slowed down and hit the turn signal.

"What are you doing?" She jerked forward in her seat.

"You didn't answer. I'm taking that as a response that you don't want to go. I'm turning around."

"But—what? No one does what I want."

That was...a weird thing to say. I shot her a look, starting to turn off the road before doing a U-turn. We were still in our neighborhood, so traffic was sparse enough for us to do that safely. "I'm not going to make you do something you don't want to do."

She was twisting her hands together, and she looked down at them. "I thought that was the whole point. I don't want to reach out to my family, but I have to for Nova."

"Right. For Nova, but maybe we can rethink this in a way where you're not twisted up in knots."

She looked up, her eyes piercing mine. "You'd do that?"

"Of course."

She took another beat, just staring at me. Then she pressed her lips together, swallowed, and looked forward. "I can do this."

She was still trembling, still white around her mouth, but she was looking forward with a different feel to her. Determined. And I caught an underlying fierceness from her.

Alrighty, then.

I could work with this.

---

WHEN WE PULLED UP, my phone buzzed.

Quincey jumped. “What was that?”

I pulled out my phone, the screen lighting up with another text.

Another.

And another.

“Oh.” A distracted frown was sent my way as she began to straighten her hair for the thirtieth time. It was pulled all the way up in a bun, and she kept smoothing out the ends. They were already pressed flat. I didn’t think she knew she was even doing it.

Then I went back to the texts. They were all from Logan.

*Buzz.*

One from Mason.

*Buzz.*

Another from Matteo. Another friend of ours.

“I—hold on.” I opened the first.

**Logan: Duke’s team reached out.**

**Logan: They’re making a motion that Quincey is mentally unfit.**

I cursed.

“What?”

“I need to read through these and make a phone call.”

Her pupils were dilated, and she bit down on her lip. “That’d be really self-involved of me if I asked if those were about me. They probably have nothing to do with me. Your friends all have full and busy lives themselves.”

Yeah... Shit.

I decided and sent a quick text back to Logan.

**Me: Hold on. I'll call in ten minutes. Need to handle something first.**

My phone buzzed right away after, but whoever it was would need to wait.

I tucked it away and moved around the SUV to Quincey's side. She was already out and looking like death warmed over.

She couldn't tear her gaze away from the house, and she couldn't stop biting her lip.

Fuck it.

I moved in and touched her lip.

She went completely still, her eyes enlarging, and even though she didn't move a muscle, I felt her shrinking back from my touch.

I pressed there, and she let it go. When she didn't immediately bite down again, I moved back. "No more hurting yourself, please." I ignored her slight groan and placed a hand behind her back. With a firm but gentle touch, I walked us inside.

I knew Graham would be watching for us, and he proved me right.

He took me in, then his sister, and whatever he'd been thinking or feeling was masked.

"How about it, Quince?"

"What?" She faltered, going up the first of the steps.

He pretended to whip out a microphone and began bouncing his shoulders up and down. He started to sing the song lyrics, at the same time bobbing his head to the right. "How about it? Family karaoke night? You and me? I need a partner. Cynthia doesn't think I know who Lady Sovereign is." He turned to face inside and raised his voice. "But HA! Little does she know that 'Love Me Or Hate Me' is my most favorite song EVER!" He threw me a grin, moving aside so we could enter. "What do you all think I listen to to warm up before my games? I didn't get pumped up to Yanni."



“Who’s Cynthia?”

That grin went to his sister, and he moved to shut the door. “My girlfriend. Be nice to her. She’s meeting the rest of the family tonight.”

Quincey froze again. “Are you kidding me? You’re introducing her to the family *tonight*?”

“Yeah. Why not? It was in the text.”

“I thought when everyone else piled on that you wouldn’t bring her. This is the worst night to have her meet me.”

He laughed.

A golden retriever came barreling from the back, followed by a yell. “She got loose!”

Graham flashed Quincey a smirk. “Cynthia’s my dog. My *best* girlfriend. I named her after my favorite Atlanta housewife.”

A female was coming from the back with a rueful look on her face. She was slim with her hair up in some ’do. She saw us and stopped in her tracks. “Oh, good gracious. The guests are already here.” She glared at Graham. “You could’ve told me they were here. I haven’t even gotten dressed.”

Graham went over, throwing his arm around her and walking her to us. “This is my girlfriend, and no stress, Quince. She’s met the family already.”

“You’re—” Quincey’s mouth dropped open. “You two are together?”

The girl’s cheeks pinked, and she held her hands together, clasping her fingers tight. “Calihan had a hard time with it at first, but we’ve moved past that rocky ground. Thank goodness your mom loves me.” She started laughing and tipped her head up to see Graham shooting me a concerned look before his frown found Quincey. “Oh.” Her voice trailed off.

“I don’t know you. I’m Nate.” I held my hand out, giving both siblings a look. “What’s the awkward history here? I have

to know all the gossip because Logan will be pissed if I don't fill him in."

Graham relaxed, barking out a laugh. "That Kade doesn't change, huh?"

"Have you met my friends?"

"It'd be cool to all get together. When does Mason's team...?" He trailed off after his girlfriend's elbow nudged him in the chest. Hard. "Sorry. Uh, this is my little sister's best friend. My other sister. Calihan."

"Britney grew up with us. She and Calihan were, are, inseparable."

"We still are. I'm technically her roommate." Britney held her hand out. "You're Nate Monson. I've heard a lot about you, and when I say a lot, I mean *a lot* a lot. You're all anyone talks about in this family now. You, and the whole situation. You know." She shot Graham a frown. "You are supposed to stop me when I ramble like this."

He beamed at her, tapping her nose. "I happen to think it's adorable, so I'll never stop you."

"Oh God." Quincey moved to the side. "I need a drink. Do you still keep the liquor back here?" Britney blinked a second, then shot after her. She linked their elbows. "Let me show you. Cal and I were experimenting, and I think we found the next big drink. Everyone's going to love it. We're thinking of putting it on our YouTube channel."

They turned the corner, and I found Graham inspecting me.

"What?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You look intense."

"I feel intense." My phone started buzzing again. "I need a room and thirty minutes to have some hard conversations. Your sister can't overhear in any way."

His eyes got hard, but he nodded. "Follow me."

He took me to the basement and into a far back room.

I was reading through the rest of the texts as soon as he left, shutting the door.

**Logan: You need to call me.**

**Logan: Seriously. Now. I don't care if you're fucking.**

**Logan: Or driving.**

**Logan: K. I care. Be safe. Wrap yourself.**

**Logan: Not talking about the seat belt, but do that, too.**

I had to laugh. Even a crisis didn't deter Logan. I thumbed through to Matteo's first before Mason's.

**Matteo: Guys said you're in Seattle? What's going on? Call. We're due, man.**

We were.

I clicked on Mason's last.

**Mason: Logan called, so I know what's going on. Call when you can. We should do a three-way call. Also, Sam wants to come, leave the kids with Malinda before heading up. You down for that?**

I hit call for Logan as I replied to both Mason and Matteo.

Mason was first.

**Me: You know I'm always down for visiting and seeing you guys. Never ask, brother.**

His response was automatic.

**Mason: I figured, still you got a lot going on now. Still no Channing yet?**

**Me: Not yet.**

Logan picked up right then.

"Dude." He grunted. "I'm fucking Taylor right now."

I started laughing at the same time I heard her voice in the background. "He's winning at a video game. And he's not being a gracious winner." She was laughing as she said all that.

There was a muffling sound, then he said to her, his voice sounding at a distance, “You love when I’m a gracious winner. You tell me all the time when you go do—”

“*Okay.* Not the right talk when your friends are on the phone with you.”

Logan laughed. “Nate’s not my friend. He’s family. We’re like a mob family.”

I laughed. “We’re not the mob.”

He lifted the phone back, and his voice was clearer. “We should be. We’d be awesome at getting shit done.”

I needed to send my text to Matteo.

“Hold on. Let me call you back in a minute.”

“Okay.”

He hung up, and I was typing next.

**Me: A lot is happening, but we need to do a phone call. Warning. You might be mad at me.**

**Matteo: Fuck. Okay. Call when you can. We play there this Sunday. You want to come to the game?**

**Me: Of course. Make it two?**

**Matteo: Course. Call later, for real. I don’t like not knowing what’s going on.**

Yes. It was time to let everyone know what was going on. I did what I could on my own, but even though I was used to operating as an individual, I wasn’t anymore. Our group, we were a package deal, and Mason was right. I needed to ask for more from them.

I couldn’t tell Matteo and not tell Channing.

I called Logan again.

He picked up. “Mason wants to do a three-way. You have time now?”

“No. We’re at Graham’s now.”

“I didn’t know that was tonight. How’s that going?”

“It’s...” I hesitated. “There are family issues here.”

Logan grunted, and I could hear an explosion from his end. He added, “Well, we all got experience there. I’m starting to think our families are normal. Like, who does have a nice and loving home nowadays?”

From his end, Taylor spoke up, “That’s...sad.”

Another grunt. I could hear his voice turn from the phone. “Don’t feel sad for me, baby. I know there are amazing peeps like Malinda, and your dad is pretty cool now.” There was some silence from his end, just the sounds of their video game in the background before Logan came back. “So, talk later tonight?”

I frowned but didn’t push about what just happened on his end. “Yes, and Matteo’s playing here on Sunday. I’m going to go and take Quincey.”

“If she’ll want to go. Does she like football?”

“That’s not been a conversation we’ve tackled, but I will in the future.”

“Good. You should, considering her brother and our guys.”

I hid a smile. “Right. Thanks for the advice.”

“Well. I am your lawyer. I’m all about giving advice, but I’m not cheap.”

I barked out a laugh. “Yeah, yeah. And yes, if she wants to go, I’ll take her. No one’s said anything to Matteo about Nova?”

“No. We’ve been on lockdown, just me and Tay and Mase and Sam. That’s it. Even the kids don’t know, so they won’t spill to Heather and Chan.”

“I’m going to have to tell them, too.”

“That’ll be a good conversation. Heather and Channing are cool. They won’t care about the timeline of when you’ve shared with everyone. You don’t have to share all the shit about Dick Royas.”

“Yeah, they are.”

We were both winding down. The emergency had been successfully put off for the next phone call.

Logan was on the same wavelength, saying, “Okay. Have your dinner. Text us when you can do a call.”

“It might be late.”

“That’s fine. You know that.”

We said our goodbyes, and I was moving back through the basement for the stairs when I heard someone coming down. Quincey had worried eyes and carried a glass in her hand. She paused on the stairs, gripping the railing tight. “Hey.”

I paused, too, taking her in. Something was going on. I was expecting this, but the look she was wearing now seemed like a different sort of something happening. Something bad. Something that needed to be handled now. The problem: I didn’t know what the something was, and I didn’t know how to get her to say what the something was.

This girl had walls.

She had wall after wall after wall, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had walls even to herself.

What I did know was that she wasn’t as hard as she first pretended to be. I got glimpses of the little girl inside her at moments, and this was one of them.

“What’s wrong?”

She let out a gust of air. “How do you do that?”

I migrated closer. “Do what?”

“Look at me and know what’s going on inside me?”

She seemed genuinely curious. I frowned a little. “I’m getting to know you, that’s all.” I moved closer, putting one foot on the bottom step. There were three separating us, and she was gazing right down at me.

I asked again, “What’s wrong, Quincey?”

She tore her gaze away, bending her head. “This was a bad idea.”

“What was?”

“This. Coming here. Asking them to be allies...” She trailed off because I was done hearing this. I climbed the stairs, placing a hand on her hip as I gently moved her closer to the wall so I could go past her. “What are you doing?” Her voice rose an octave.

I ignored her, going up and stepping out into the hallway. We were just off the kitchen, where I saw more people had arrived. I skimmed over everyone, and conversations quieted. They were getting tense, straightening into an upright position where they’d been leaning or slouching.

I saw the mom. The husband

I saw the other sister, and that was the problem.

She wasn’t alone. She’d brought another two friends.

I lingered on them, studying them.

Then I turned to Graham’s girlfriend, who’d been laughing with the girls. Her eyes were a little glazed, but not much. She seemed flushed on the forehead, not the face. She was nervous.

Graham was my last stop, and he’d been waiting.

He was not happy.

He transferred his gaze to Quincey, who’d followed me up but was standing at a distance behind me.

Fuck this.

I jerked my head at the two friends. “Who are they, and why are they here?”

Calihan got red. Her chin jerked up, and she turned to face off against me.

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m going to stop you before you say something you’ll regret. This is not a social fucking outing. You think this is easy for Quincey to be here?”

Calihan’s eyes flashed. She raised her chin up even higher.

I kept on. "I don't know the exact history or the details. Nor do I give a shit about that." I swept everyone with a look before finding my target. "What I do give a shit about is my kid. That's why we're here. I'm an outside observer, but observing, I can tell it's a big deal that Quincey reached out and came here. You might have anger on your end concerning her, and I'm guessing that's the reason you brought two more friends; to shit on this night for her, but *girl*, you're not just shitting on only her anymore. I'm in the mix now and so's Nova. If you'd like to salvage some of the night, your friends have to go. And if you can't drop the chip on your shoulder for the night, you best be going with them until you can see beyond your own issues and to the one who's really needing everyone to be together on this. Nova." I waited for a beat because I'd thrown a lot at her. "You decide."

And I waited again.

There was silence in the group.

I skimmed a look at Graham, who seemed surprised, but not in a bad way.

"Graham," Calihan hissed.

Okay. That's all I needed to know. She thought this was the moment she could call in her reinforcements, which meant she thought there was space and time here where I'd allow that to first be negotiated. No. There were no negotiations right now. Her shit came later. Nova was first.

I reached behind me and took Quincey's hand. "We're out."

I began leading her to the front door.

The mom dropped something. It clattered to the floor, and she hurried in front of us, blocking us with her hands up and spread. "Wait. Wait. Please."

Quincey had a tight grip on my hand.

I stopped, and she moved all the way up against me. I could feel her tension, and I could feel her chest rising up and down at a rapid rate. That was too rapid for my liking.



I locked eyes on the mom. At a glance, she seemed nice. She also seemed desperate. She tried looking at Quincey, who moved behind me, her head ducking down into the back of my neck.

She started shuddering.

Fuck.

There was so much pain here, and it all started with the fucker named Duke.

“Quincey, please stay. I’m sorry about Calihan. She didn’t realize how important—”

“Yes, she did.” I stopped her. I shifted my hand to lace my fingers with Quincey’s.

The mom jerked her gaze back to me, and she swallowed, taking a step back. Her hands lowered.

I tried to gentle my tone, but I was pissed. “I’m going to give you my assessment of everyone in this room, and you can tell me if I’m wrong or not, but I’ll be honest. I won’t care. You, you seem nice. You seem like you care, and you seem *very* happy that Quincey is here. And I think relieved, too. You also seem on edge and fearful because you know your other girl has some residual anger issues and came here to throw her little tantrum, maybe try to put Quincey in her place. You disagreed, but you’re scared to speak up for whatever reason. Your man. He seems nice, too. Loyal. Gentle. But quiet. He’s in the background letting things play out, and that’s probably how his father was, and his father’s father, and your man seems like he likes that role. He’s content with that role. Graham, I’m not going to assess him because I know him. I like him. I respect him. The girlfriend, she’s nice, but she’s nervous, too. She also knows the two friends shouldn’t be here, and she was nervous about my reaction. She was the first to clue in, knowing there’d be fireworks when I got up here. Probably the reason she downed more drinks than she might’ve normally drunk for a night like this. The two friends, I’m not going to assess them because they shouldn’t be here. And they know it, but they signed up to be pawns. Now, Calihan, that’s a different matter. Right now, I’m not liking her

one fucking bit. She seems like a spoiled brat, and that word can easily be interchanged with another that rhymes with witch. And when I say that, you need to know I'm not judging her for being a brat. I'm not judging anyone here." I looked at the sister. "These are facts on how I see the dynamics playing out, and I don't care two fucks that you might have reason to be a brat. God knows that I've been a dick, an asshole, and all other forms of a male brat in my youth, but it's not the time or place to handle that right now. Right now is about hopefully coming together so we can keep Dick Royas away from Nova. And if you're going to be a brat, I don't want you involved. Now, we'll leave and let this family handle their shit. When it's handled, give *me* a call."

And with that, we left.

## QUINCEY

I'd never seen anything like it. Ever.

Nate almost dragged me to his vehicle because I was so stunned. I couldn't move.

I held onto him with two hands, but as soon as we were seated, a laugh began low in my belly. It wasn't a happy laugh. It was a WTF laugh with a hint of hysteria and an edge of something unbalanced inside me.

He—I couldn't. I just couldn't.

Calihan showed up when Nate was downstairs, and I knew the night would end badly. She came in and breezed past me without a hello. Her two friends followed, both giving me nasty looks. It didn't help that both were dancers, and I'd beaten them out for solos over and over again in the ballet company. There'd been years of that, so Calihan fully knew who she had picked to bring to this dinner.

They were there to make me feel miserable.

It didn't work.

Not this time. Holy moly, not this time.

Nate didn't let anything happen. He said his piece, waited, saw that he didn't get through to her, and decided not to waste his time.

My body was throbbing. I wanted him. Badly.

I was aching because I couldn't go there. I wouldn't be able to handle a fuck from him. I knew it. I just knew it. This

man, he was too much for me. Too hard. Too sexy. Too demanding. Too commanding. Too, just too. He could become an addiction that I'd never come back from.

I couldn't do that because of Nova.

The thought of her was like a cold shower hitting me, and the lust that he'd ignited was doused to a slow, smoldering fire. The embers were still going but just barely. They were smoking, but this way, they weren't inflamed. I wouldn't do anything that I'd regret in the morning.

He started the engine and pulled away from the curb. "You okay?"

My stomach let out a loud grumble, and I laughed. My hand covered it. "Yeah. I'm...I'm good." I turned to him, a new appreciation brimming in me. "Thank you for that."

He pressed his mouth tight. "That girl wasted my night. I'm pissed about that."

Another growl from my stomach.

He threw me a slight grin. "Let's have dinner before heading back. We're already out. Emily is watching Nova. Let's take advantage of the night."

A sensation zinged through me, setting my insides awake and excited. I was trying to tell myself not to look into that comment, but I recognized the butterflies in my stomach for what they were. They were starting, and the few times they'd started fluttering before, I was already past the point of cutting someone off. The feelings were already in there and rooted.

This was so not a good idea, but I sighed. "That sounds like a good plan."

Dinner, that is.

My feelings, not a good plan.

One meal wasn't going to hurt at this point.

---

I WAS WRONG. One meal hurt, *a lot*.

It was Keela, and that was the first moment I knew something was off.

Keela was expensive and exclusive. The clientele was wealthy and famous.

I loved Keela. I *loved* loved it.

It'd been kept for special events, so I'd only been there a few times. And part of that reason was because it was confidential. When you showed up, you called ahead. They waved you in using a few different entryways. We didn't have paparazzi in Seattle, but there were gossip bloggers who sometimes hung out in the coffee places nearby, just to keep an eye out for who might be going to Keela. I never cared. No one in my family or life was famous. Principal dancers didn't get a lot of attention in the mainstream media. That suited me.

They had us drive in using a back alley that dipped into a basement garage. That was new.

The greeter met us at the door wearing a professional smile with our menu already in hand. We were also greeted with two glasses of champagne.

"Mr. Monson." The waiter nodded his head briefly to us.

Nate reached, taking my hand in his.

My pulse kick-started at the contact. I knew I should pull away, but when he laced our fingers, that died down. I couldn't.

I didn't want to stop touching him.

I only wanted more.

The inside of Keela was a fairy botanical garden. Trees. Lights. Actual birds. They had a whole fountain and a small river that ran through the restaurant as well. The sounds of trickling water soothed me as if somehow reaffirming the romantic notions I was starting to get regarding Nate.

Nate Monson.

I needed to remember his full name. It gave me a degree of separation.

Nova's father.

That stung a little bit.

Valerie's baby daddy.

There was a full knot forming.

Valerie. He had a relationship with Valerie, my half-sister, not me.

I was here because of Valerie.

I was an interloper. I was the outsider.

I almost stumbled when those thoughts hit me at full blast, reminding me that I was only here because of a piece of paper. Valerie gave me Nova, which must've been on a whim. It had to be.

I didn't deserve to be here.

Gah.

I didn't deserve to even have Nova, to even be in Nova's life.

No.

I gritted my teeth, a selfish wave riding through me, firming my spine almost literally.

I did deserve to be here. I did deserve to have Nova in my life, and if the only reason was because of Valerie's whim, then so be it. I was too selfish to step back.

I needed Nova, not the other way around.

Nova would be loved by anyone, possibly everyone, but I needed her. Me.

She was saving me. I wasn't saving her.

Was that a fair thing to do to a little girl? Use her to save me? Give me purpose?

Dancing had been my purpose, but if I was being honest, dancing had been my escape from Duke. Always had been. It was the one thing he allowed me to keep in my life, and I persevered. I went to the top.

Then Nova came, and the world had meaning for the first time. Dancing had been my path until Nova happened.

“You look like you’re having deep thoughts.”

We’d arrived at our private alcove. We had the corner of the river running around us, trees blocking our view from others in the restaurant, but I could hear the glasses and silverware scraping over the plates. It was slight, but there. The murmur of conversation was almost soothing as well.

I shook my thoughts clear. It wouldn’t change a thing anyway. “I’m fine.”

I gave him a small smile as the waiter held my chair for me.

Water was already on the table for us, and our server disappeared. He’d be bringing bread and wine when he returned. Or she. They usually had a full team taking care of the tables.

“You like Keela?”

Despite my heavy thoughts, I did relax, the feeling that this place always gave me. Or how I remembered it from the few times I’d been here. “I do. I think the last time I was here was the night I danced in Seattle’s Nutcracker. I came here with my father and my agent.” I had to laugh. “My agent dropped me when he found out I was quitting dancing to raise Nova.”

“Then he’s a shitty agent. You can get a better one.”

He sounded so sure, and he was looking at me as if he believed what he said because it was the most sensible thing in the world. I almost had to laugh at that, too.

I realigned the cloth napkin on my lap before raising my face. “That world doesn’t work like that. You get what you get. Sometimes you have to shut up and take what’s dished to you.”

He raised an eyebrow with a smooth chuckle. “No offense, but that’s bullshit. You’re talking like I don’t know the world of agents.” He leaned forward, dropping his tone, but his eyes

took on a whole smoldering effect. “I think you’re forgetting who my best friend and brother-in-law are.”

Right.

God.

Right.

I had forgotten.

“I feel a little foolish.”

“If you want a better agent who will work with you through your life transitions, I can put some feelers out. I have a feeling you’ll be snatched up within hours, so heed my advice? Pick who you want. Put a list together of a few options, and we can strategize on how to make that happen.”

“I got my last agent through my father.”

His mouth flattened. “I’m not surprised by that. I more wonder who he didn’t pick for you.”

“You think there were others interested in representing me?”

He gave me another look. “I’m willing to bet money there were.”

I...I’d never thought of it that way, but deep down, I knew he was right. *Again.*

A surge of anger flooded me, and I had to grab my chair’s armrests. My fingers dug in.

My father had totally and completely done that to me. I even had others approach me. They asked for a phone call, handed me their card, and what had I done? Nothing.

Because I went with who my father wanted.

And I never considered the other options. They’d barely registered in my head.

A slight gurgle rippled up my throat. “Ever feel like you’ve been on a train all your life, and you’ve been staring out the same window the whole time because that side has trees and forests and they are familiar, but something happens



to draw your attention away, and you get a glimpse of the other side of the train, and you realize you could've been watching the ocean instead? That was a whole long sentence, but while you love trees, you might've seen some whales? Or dolphins? Or just cute seals."

He glanced around us. "I don't know. I'm preferable to the trees right about now."

I grinned, a sudden ball of tension expelling from me. It left an imprint inside, one that was lined with sadness.

I'd missed so much, and I was just starting to realize it.

Bread and some wine were brought over. We gave our orders not long after, but I was distracted. I didn't remember what I ordered. I pointed and said, "I'll take this, thank you." As soon as he had gone, there was a pulse between Nate and me.

He was watching me, waiting.

I had more to say, but I needed to say it in my own time. He was unnervingly able to read me, so I'm sure he also knew that, too.

I took a sip of my water, passing on the wine. "Ever been around someone who was emotionally manipulative? Or maybe it's mentally manipulative?"

He grimaced, taking a sip of his own water. "I've been around people who've been around people like that. My parents and I butted heads when I was young, but it was more of a direct and blunt disagreement. I knew what they wanted, and they knew I wasn't going to do what they wanted. There was no manipulation about it, just straight control."

He hadn't mentioned his parents this whole time, and I realized how odd that was. His friends, yes. His sister, yes. Not who he should've mentioned, though.

I felt almost shy asking, "Are you close to your parents?"

A thin line formed around his mouth. "Not really."

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to know about it, but it felt intrusive to ask.

Nate sighed, putting his water down. “They made mistakes. Or I was the mistake. I don’t know now, to be honest, but time’s passed. They went on a whole spiritual journey a few years back, trying to make up for things, but too much time passed for me. I’m cordial with them. I’ll call them if I need to, but I don’t look at them as parents anymore if that makes any sense?”

Yes. A whole resounding yes because I was there with Duke.

“It does.” My one hand had been digging into the armrest. I let it drop into my lap, my other holding onto my water like it was made of gold. “I’ve always known that my father was controlling, but I’ve always thought I chose to remain with him. Before I left to move in with you, it never occurred that maybe I’d been staying with him because of him, not me. Like I didn’t know I even had a choice not to live with him.” I cringed at that terminology. “To stay with him, to live with him, it means the same. To be on his team. And if I’m not on his team, then I’m out. That’s a form of manipulation, isn’t it?”

“That’s very controlling, yes, and emotional manipulation. I’m going to hazard a guess, but he made you feel guilty about loving your mother?”

*Yes.*

“Your brother?”

*Yes.*

“Both of your sisters?”

*God, yes.*

“And I bet you even like your stepfather, but you’ve barely had a conversation with him?”

My lips parted in shock. “How do you know this?”

He inclined his head, his eyes never leaving my face. “Because that’s a toxic, controlling relationship. You’re blind to it when you’re in it, but everyone else sees it.”

That had my whole face warming but from mortification.  
“Everyone?”

“Everyone.”

I was taken aback. By him. By the situation. By how he was even speaking.

I shouldn't have passed on wine. I wanted the room to swim around me. I think I needed it at that moment.

I gestured to him, nodding, but I didn't want to look at him. Anywhere but at him. “You say it all matter-of-fact.” I looked now, and I was angry. I was pissed. I wanted to hurt him, but I knew it wasn't him whom I wanted to hurt. He was just the one here. “You don't know me. You don't know my father. You don't know anything. You fucked Valerie, and your sperm attached to her egg during one of those bed romps, and here you are. You're inserting yourself into my life, and you're \_\_\_”

I needed to stop.

My God, I needed to stop. I was so wrong, but the anger was still there. The words were still there, and I wanted to say them. I yearned to say them.

What was wrong with me?

The room was starting to spin now. It was about time.

I felt like I was dancing again.

For a moment, I closed my eyes, and everything was fine. Everything was right. Everything was how it was supposed to be, but I knew that wasn't the truth. I was deluding myself.

I was doing what I had always done growing up. Lying to myself and letting myself believe the lie.

I wanted to lie to myself now. I wanted that so bad.

I wanted to tell Nate Monson to go to hell. I wanted to stand, call my father, and have him take Nova and me back to the estate.

I wanted to go back to that misery because it was the misery I knew. The misery I was comfortable with.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I was angry with Nate because he showed up and upended my life.

I wasn't angry with him. I wasn't even angry with Valerie.

I was angry with myself because I chose to believe my own lies for so very long.

I was such a screwup. "I'm so sorry. That was out of line. I was out of line, and I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"What? No. How are you thinking that?"

But it was. Horror was starting to replace the anger, and I felt it starting to pummel my organs. The room kept spinning, spinning. I felt like I was doing a pirouette, and I couldn't end it. "If I had fought him more. If I had begged Stephanie to take me in? Hell. I should've done something." I felt wild inside. I was still spinning. I couldn't find a stronghold, but I looked at Nate. "I should've made him hate me, or at least not want me. I could've done that. Instead, I was the perfect daughter. I tried to be the perfect daughter, the perfect everything for him. What was I thinking? Why wasn't I thinking?"

"Okay." Nate made to stand.

"No." I was the one to shove my chair back.

The room was dancing, round and round.

The river was with it.

The trees were one constant blur. They were going around me, and I was still spinning.

I was going to be sick.

"Why is this all coming out now?" a whisper from me.

Nate stood. I more heard him than saw him, and he walked around the table, touching my arm.

The touch was helping to steady me. Some of the spinning started to ease, but it was still going. It was moving at a slower pace.

I was going to fall.

I felt the crash coming.

I looked up as Nate drew even closer to me. I gulped. "I'm so sorry."

His eyebrows pinched together. "For what?"

That answer was so simple. "For me."

He stared at me, long and hard. I almost thought he was going to draw me into his arms, but he didn't. His hand adjusted his hold on my arm. Then a flat tone came from him. "You're being melodramatic. Get the fuck over yourself."

**NATE**

**D**inner was a disaster.

She was freaking. I didn't think comforting her would help, so I went the opposite.

I might've chosen wrong.

After my words, she couldn't function. I thought she would crumple, but she just swayed and replied to my questions with one or two words. She mumbled everything. By my fifth bite, I knew nothing could salvage the evening, so I asked for the bill, and we took the leftovers home.

My phone had been buzzing at a regular rate throughout dinner, and after a quick glance, I left them unread. Logan and Mason were waiting like they said they would. The texts were from Graham, and I guessed the rest of his family members, judging by the first few words I glimpsed in each text. There'd been a call by a number I didn't recognize, and whoever it was had left a message.

I also wasn't dealing with that at that moment.

We walked inside, and Quincey went off to relieve Emily.

She had taken a car service here, so I ordered another car to take her home.

**Me: Seeing the nanny home, then I can call.**

**Logan: Sounds good. I'm still beating Taylor at video games. Could do this shit all night long.**

**Mason: We don't want to hear about your foreplay. Sounds good, Nate. I'm watching tapes.**

Hearing a soft tread coming from the back, I put my phone away. Emily came out, her coat already on, and she gave me a sleepy smile. "I fell asleep putting Nova to bed. It's been a great shift. I almost feel bad being paid for tonight."

"I ordered you an Uber."

"Thank you." She was rubbing at her eyes. "Oh." Her hands dropped. "Quincey just asked me for my hours. I thought she knew you were paying me now?"

Another thing we needed to have a discussion about. It hadn't been something I intentionally forgot to mention to Quincey, but now after her little outburst, I was thinking it could simply return to the back burner. No point in adding fuel to this situation's fire.

"Just tell her that you need to tally them up. I'll handle it."

"Okay. I can do that."

A set of headlights turned down our road, and both of us were guessing it was the car I ordered. She moved to the front door, and I followed her to make sure. When she was off, and the car was gone, I checked on Nova first. She was sleeping soundly and looked like an angel.

Quincey left her bedroom door open, so I moved through Nova's room to look in on her, too.

She was in her bathroom.

I heard the water running and considered waiting for a moment. But what for?

She was angry. She was sad. She was a mess.

I was being honest.

She also wasn't the only one with a tragic life, so I didn't know what else to say to her?

My mounting frustration meant I had an urge to head to the gym instead of my office for a phone call. I would do both because any conversation about Duke would make me want to

punch someone. I went back to my room, changed into some workout pants and a tank, and headed downstairs to the gym.

I plugged my phone into the speaker system and made the call.

They each answered just as I threw my first punch at the weight bag.

“What are you doing?” Mason asked.

“I’m working out as we do this call.”

“Nice! Mase, you hear that? We got the alpha asshole Nate on the phone. I love the alpha asshole Nate.”

“Don’t rile him up, or you’ll be flying there to bail him out of jail.”

My grin was faint, but it was there. They were joking, but if Duke had been in the gym, their statement wouldn’t have been too far off.

I sighed before throwing a jab. “Logan. Tell us what happened.”

He started, and I kept throwing punches the rest of the night.

My knuckles were swollen by the time we were done. The skin tore over three of them, and I left that gym with bloodied hands. What a fucking metaphor for the shit that I was living through.



## QUINCEY

I had an emotional hangover.

I'd been a bitch the night before—the biggest—and Nate was right. He'd been so right. Melodramatic? Plaster my face in the dictionary next to that word.

He even told me he'd gone through things in his own life, and there I was, wailing about my own. I had one controlling father. I didn't even know all that Nate had gone through in his.

Nate had asked about dancing, and the agent conversation last night. He was right about that, too.

I was getting tired of how right he was all the time. Like, screw him and the saintly horse he rode in on? Then I looked around, and I was on his bed, in one of his bedrooms, in his house, and yeah.

Melodramatic and hypocrite could both be my new labels.

I glanced over and saw it was nearing five in the morning. Nova might already be awake, or she might sleep till seven. I was almost hoping for seven, but I knew that was a long shot. Nate had been up late. I heard him when he came back from the gym.

Or I might've seen him because I'd been sitting in the living room, in the dark, spying on him.

After I took a shower, I came out to apologize. Nate hadn't been around, so I went in search of him until I heard him in the basement gym, and he'd been on a call with his friends.

I recognized their voices by now.

I couldn't make out all the words, and I began to feel guilty for eavesdropping, so I moved to the living room by the basement door. I kept the lights off, telling myself that I was really just trying to fall asleep.

I was lying, though.

I wanted to see Nate walk by, all sweaty and hot from the gym. He did, and he walked through a ray of moonlight, and I almost slid to the floor in a heap of hormones.

I was all over the place. Sad. Mad. Self-loathing, but I rounded back to my hormones. It was how I started the night, so I was now telling myself that at least I was a well-rounded human being. The meaning of that phrase didn't fit my personal meaning, but I was still going to cut myself some slack.

Which was something I was proud of because cutting myself slack was not something I'd ever done. Ever. Seriously. *Such a perfectionist. Always a perfectionist.*

Getting up, I washed up.

I was feeling lazy today, so I slipped on some flowy yoga pants, a tank. Yoga shoes. Padding quietly into Nova's room, I found her still sleeping. She was curled over, her penguin by her head and a blanket covering one toe. I pulled it off and laid it over her before heading for the kitchen.

All the lights were off, so I was assuming Nate was still sleeping.

"Morning." I heard the low rasp from the kitchen table.

I jumped but laughed. "You're not sleeping."

I could see him better as I came more into the room. He raised an eyebrow. "Am I supposed to be?"

A whole burst of nerves hit me, and I needed to get this over and done with. If I didn't, it'd ruminating, and I was learning that I was terrible with anything ruminating.

I linked my hands together and stood before him. “I’m sorry about last night. Emotions were already high because of my family, but I think I would’ve been a mess anyway. The longer I stay away from my dad, it’s like the more things start to become clear. It’s making me a little bit crazy, and I didn’t use to be melodramatic. At all. There’s a reason Calihan is angry with me. I was stuck-up, and I was always just so perfect. I was locked down. This is the first real opening I’ve given her to get back at me, and that’s what she was doing. She was taking a swing because I’ve shut her down by not letting anyone else in. But all that aside, I lost it last night, and I am sorry for that. It won’t happen again.”

His eyebrows bunched together. “Look, what I said was wrong. I went for the shock factor, thinking it’d help you. It didn’t. I apologize for that, but for what you just said now... First off, I’m not your father. Second, I never want you to apologize to me unless you’ve done something to hurt Nova or me. And three, you’re making yourself vulnerable. Am I getting that right?”

*Jesus.* “Yeah.”

“The fact you’re making yourself vulnerable and you think it’s okay that your sister is taking ‘her chance’ speaks volumes about your relationship.” He had a coffee mug in front of him, and standing, he took the cup to the coffee machine. He filled it, then reached for another. That one was filled. He added the coffee creamer I used, the healthiest I could find, and dumped the exact portion I always used before handing me the second mug.

I took it, slightly stunned. “How do you know how I take my coffee?”

“We live together.”

I rotated around as he took his coffee back to the table. His laptop was there, his phone next to it. He had headphones plugged in.

I said, “I never get my coffee when you’re here. You’re usually gone or working when I get mine.”

He opened his laptop, his eyes finding me over the screen for a moment. “You’re not the only one who can use a PI.”

“Carl was never that detailed.”

“Mine was.” He went back to his computer, and it felt like the conversation was finished.

I moved around the kitchen, starting to make breakfast, when he spoke again.

“I have a friend who plays for the Raiders. He offered me two tickets for the Sunday game. Would you like to go?”

I froze, then swiveled back around.

Was this a date?

But no... He didn’t look like he was asking me out on a date. He spoke matter-of-factly and business-like.

He stated last night we needed to get to know each other. Was that what this was?

I was going with that. It felt more comfortable in that situation.

Just two adults raising the same child, getting to know each other to make things easier and less complicated.

“I’m sure Emily could watch Nova.”

“You don’t want to take her with us?”

An eighteen-month-old? At a football game in October? In Seattle?

But before I could say anything, he waved his hand. “Never mind. You’re right. It would be a good idea if it were just us two. Media doesn’t usually care about me, but I don’t want them to start now.”

Media. Right. The gossip bloggers. This was never an issue in my life.

I was struck again at how similar but so different our lives were.

I needed to get out of there. I needed to dance but not here. Not so close to him.

“Do you—” I paused. No. I needed to ask. “Do you mind being here for Nova until Emily shows? I want to go somewhere right now. Maybe a walk in the gardens.”

An emotion flickered in his eyes, but he nodded. “I can be here all day if you need that? I know you like having Emily, but you’re more hands-on than most parents with nannies.”

I was because I had that privilege. I had the time, and I was in a situation where I could pay for help. It meant a great deal to me. I wanted to soak up as much Nova time as possible, but I needed to be somewhere *not here* right now.

My legs were itching for it.

“Thank you.”

I fled after that, totally fled. I had my purse in hand, the coffee with me, and I was pulling out of the driveway within five minutes. From there, I didn’t have a set location in mind, but body memory must’ve taken over.

I pulled up outside an old studio I used to go to. It was one that was always open for dancers.

No one else was there, so I programmed the music and went to the barre.

“Quincey?”

I stiffened but turned.

Matthew Chiltress was coming toward me.

Internally, I was weeping but also happy. I’d danced a few productions with Matthew. He was one of the stars in the Seattle ballet scene—well, in the national scene now. He was ready for a day of dancing in his gray top and black tights. His hair was combed back. He looked vital and alive, and I was so jealous.

“Matthew. Hello.”

I pulled on my dancing mask—chin up, shoulders back, arms at the ready. I lifted my mouth in a small smile. It was one that he couldn’t tell if it was polite or a fuck-off sort of

smile. I always loved giving one of those. I'd been so good at them.

He paused, taking me in.

His eyes darkened in appreciation before he gave me a slight wolf whistle. "You're looking amazing. Motherhood agrees with you."

Motherhood with a nanny, he meant. No one believed I was actually the one raising Nova.

"Thank you. And you look amazing as well."

A cockiness flared before he masked it, moving closer. "I was just talking about you the other day with another girl."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She was a dancer in New York who recently moved here. She's new but getting a master's degree in dance therapy. She doesn't know the area that well, and I thought you might be a perfect person to show her around. You're local and you have time now. She's looking for places to set up dance therapy programs. She mentioned nursing homes or other shelters that deal with people who have experienced trauma."

*You have time now.*

It was a small dig from him. Since I wasn't dancing, I had all the time in the world.

"Why did you think of me?"

He frowned. "I don't know. But here you are, and I've been meaning to reach out. Maybe I telepathically called out to you to come see me?" There was the old Matt I remembered. He'd always been a flirt. A dancer first, a flirt second. He sidled even closer, folding his arms over his chest. His muscles rippled from the movement. "Really, Quince. How are you doing?"

I forced a light laugh as I edged back a step. My hand reached behind me, finding the barre, and the touch settled me. "I'm good, Matthew. Really. How are you doing?"

He noted the backward shift, and a knowing smirk filtered over his face before he let out a sigh. He moved to face me at the barre, his hand touching it as well. “There’s a new production in town, a new choreographer.”

“Yeah?”

My chest tightened at the thought of something new. Jealousy spiked through me.

We both bent forward, heads moving past our knees. Or mine was. I heard Matt answer, and we both paused and held the stretch, letting our lines show. “Too bad you’re still not dancing. You’d be perfect for the lead. They’re looking for a Latina lead, but I told—”

“Who is it?” I jerked upright, my heart pounding more than it should be.

Coming back from being gone so long would be hard but coming back to be a lead was not realistic.

But... I couldn’t help myself.

“What?” Matt straightened upright, frowning. “I didn’t think you could dance anymore. That’s why you left.”

“Things have... I might be able to do a production.”

His lips parted in surprise. “Well, then. The casting is in a couple of weeks. I can show you the routine.”

“I can do that.”

He stepped back, seeming to reassess me. “I heard your agent dropped you.”

“I can get a new agent. You know I can.” Why was he now fighting me on this? “What’s the issue, Matt? Why even mention the opportunity if you didn’t think I’d be interested?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it and shrugged. “I’ll let the new choreographer know. I’m the male lead.”

Of course, he was.

My chest tightened up. “Who’s my competition?”

A dry laugh. “Everyone, but no one’s going to be expecting you. I’ll only tell Patrice.”

“That’s his name? The new choreographer?”

“Her name, and yes. She comes to us from Switzerland. It’s through Seattle Dance.”

I moved my head up and down. I figured. They were more progressive than the other two established companies. “Thanks, Matt. Thanks for telling me.”

He let out another sigh, letting go of the barre. “You want me to show you the routine? I mean, it’s almost like kismet.” He shot me a teasing grin.

I ignored that, saying, “I’d like that.”

For the next hour, he moved me through the steps.

He broke each section down, moving me through each at a fast pace so I could get the steps down. It was complex but new. There was some hip-hop, some step, and some modern thrown into it alongside the usual ballet. I loved it, and he was right. As we began moving through the steps at a faster pace, my heart was pounding, wanting to burst out of me.

This dance was for me. I felt it in my blood.

I just needed to make sure I wasn’t rusty.

When other dancers started coming into the building, we slowed and began going through the arm motions.

Matt wiped some sweat from his face, his eyes gleaming. “I forgot how fast you pick up on routines.” Then he sobered, his arms dropping completely when the door opened, and a group of girls came inside. They looked over, gasping when they saw Matt, but he turned his back to them. He lowered his voice. “I’ll talk to Patrice, and I’m fairly certain I can get you on the call list, but you know they send out last-minute changes through agents. You think you can get one in time?”

Nate. Nate had contacts, and he was right. I was hoping he was. I could put feelers out and see who got back to me.

“Let’s hope.”



“About that other girl? The dance therapy girl. Should I give her your information?”

I hesitated, but that right there was my answer. “I want to focus on this routine and the agent first.”

“Okay. She’ll be around, so there’s no hurry for that.”

I dipped my head in a small nod. My chest was heaving from the workout. “Thanks, Matt. I mean it.” Bending down, I grabbed my phone and headphones. I was walking to the door when he called after me.

“I wasn’t lying when I said it was nice to see you. I’ve missed dancing with you.”

My chest warmed.

With Matthew, and with certain dancers at the level he was at, you never knew if they were genuine or not. It was nice to feel that he meant what he said.

“Back at you.”

## QUINCEY

I hadn't shared with Nate about the casting or the show, but I talked to him about finding an agent. I reached out to a few I knew from before, and so did Nate. I considered asking other dancers, but Matt was right. If I was going to go in for that casting, I wanted it to be a surprise. There was a risk reaching out to the agents I did, but I knew most would keep it close to the chest. Or I was hoping. One agent from Nate's contacts suggested meeting at the football game instead of a whole separate dinner.

I wasn't a football fan, but I was game. It seemed more low-key than a dinner, and Nate would be there.

I didn't know why that helped ease my nerves, but it did.

"So this friend who's playing, how do you know him?"

We were driving there now, and the traffic was horrible.

And because I couldn't help myself, I asked, "If we're late, this agent won't hold it against me, will they?"

I hated being late for anything.

He chuckled. "No. He's probably going to be late as well, but you don't have to worry about that. We won't even talk until during halftime or after the game."

"What? Why?"

"Because this guy is Mason's agent, and I know how he works. The fact he's coming is a good thing. It means he's

serious about trying to represent you, but he likes things to be casual. He likes to try to get a feel on the athlete.”

I pulled at my shirt, smoothing it out.

It was already smooth.

It'd been smoothed out for the entire drive and the whole thirty minutes before that, but I smoothed it out again.

“This is not how we do things in my world. We don't use *outside* agents.”

“He's not an outsider.” Nate glanced over, and I knew he was going to say all the same things he mentioned before. It sold me then, but now I couldn't help but feel how preposterous this whole thing was. We used people inside our world. They knew the ins and outs, and they had the contacts. They understood the dance world and the culture.

This guy wouldn't know any of that.

“He already represents a dancer, and trust me, he's got the contacts. You said you wanted someone new, a new feel and a new vibe.”

I snorted. “I was an idiot.”

He frowned. “I don't understand the nerves. Just see how it goes? You aren't locked into anything just from meeting him. You don't know if he'll even want to represent you. He might meet you and hate you.”

I gasped. “Really?”

He shrugged, a little grin tugging at the side of his mouth. “Just saying. You're fucking uptight as hell right now. *I* wouldn't want to represent you.”

“Take that back.”

“No.”

“That's not nice.”

“I'm being honest.”

“You're being mean.”

“You’re acting stuck-up right now. Stop acting like a ballet snob.”

I glared at him. “We *are* snobby in that world.”

“You said you wanted new. He’s new, and before you start judging him, I’d hold off. He’s a shark when it comes to who he picks to represent. He only picks the big stars.”

Well. That was something, I guess. “Who’s the other dancer?”

“I’ve no clue. It’s not my job to sell you or him to either of you two. I’m brokering the meet.”

The meet. Right. At the football game. “Does he represent this friend of yours who’s playing today?”

“No.”

“Will he hate me if I don’t know anything about football?”

Nate snorted. “If you were a football player, yes. Since you’re not, I highly doubt it.”

“You don’t have to be an ass.”

“I’m just being your counterpart. You’re being stuck-up. I’ll be an ass.” He glanced over, his eyes sparkling. “I’m a lot nicer than I used to be. I can be an asshole, but I doubt you want to meet him.”

I stared at him, narrowing my eyes. “You were an asshole when I first met you.”

“That was different.”

“There are different types of asshole from you?”

He gave a short laugh. “Lots of different types. You met the alpha protective asshole and the ruthless asshole.”

“Do I even *want* to ask the names of the other categories?”

Nate gave me a blinding smile. “There’s the smart-ass asshole. The just all-around dick asshole. The mean asshole. The calculating asshole. All kinds.” His smile turned sly as he focused on the street again. “The coward asshole.”

“What were you like as a kid?”

I'd been laughing as I asked, but the mood in the vehicle shifted so suddenly that it startled me. I felt tension seeping into my bones, making me sit more upright. I'd been lounging, getting comfortable in our conversation.

“The short answer?”

I was almost holding my breath. “Any answer.”

“When I was little, I was fine. When I got older, I was messed up.”

“We've been over my sad and lonely, privileged childhood. I was, too.”

His lips curved up, but there was no smile there. “I have some friends who have always known themselves. They've always been so sure of the path they're going to take, whether it's right or wrong. They didn't give a fuck. They're going to do it. I wasn't like that. I didn't know what I was doing half the time, not until I lost someone. Then I almost lost everyone until I got my head on straight. I was mixed up inside as a kid. Guess that's the answer for you, but”—he glanced sideways at me—“I was probably one of those rich, privileged assholes you hid from in school.”

“You *were* popular.”

I knew he was. He referenced it earlier how I wasn't popular, but he hadn't claimed his status during that conversation.

“I was in the circle of the most popular. I think that's the best way to say it.”

“I think Valerie loved you.”

His eyes sharpened.

I turned away, looking almost distracted out the front window. “I think she loved you, but I think she knew you didn't love her. And I think she wanted to take anything you'd give her, so that's why she never pushed for more from you. I think she knew she'd lose you.”

I didn't know if he was listening. I didn't think I was saying it for him, anyway.

“And I think if she hadn’t been with Nico when she found out she was pregnant, I think she would’ve told you.” I looked at him now. “I can’t help but wonder that if she had, would she be the one sitting here?”

A wave of sadness moved through me, but it was a good kind of sad. If that made sense? But to me, in that vehicle, feeling an uncharacteristic closeness to someone who was uncharacteristically placed in my life, it felt right at the same time to say all that I had.

And that right there made no sense to me.

---

I’D GONE to a few football games in high school, but that’d been it. It wasn’t my sport, and it wasn’t my escape from Duke, so it ceased to be in my world. I was now remiss because I loved football. Though, maybe I loved attending a game with Nate?

We went in as normal fans, but Nate was getting recognized. Not a lot, but enough that he was getting more attention because of the initial attention. He moved, placing his hand on the small of my back, and he urged me in front of him. We were in the concessions line.

His head bent to mine. “Ignore the attention. It’s my relation to Blaise. No clue why these people loved him so much.”

I glanced but saw the faint grin on his face. “We should have more talks about *your* family.”

He glanced down at me.

“I know. I know. The PI file, so yes, I know the players, but those files don’t share everything.”

“Thank fuck for that.”

The line was moving at a good pace, and we only had six more people in front of us.

“What do you want to know?”

“Are you close to your brother-in-law?”

A wry laugh came from him as he reached for his wallet. Four people to go.

“Define close?” Another laugh, but this one sounded more wry. “Actually, I didn’t like the kid when I first met him, but he tends to grow on you. He treats my sister well, so that’s really all that matters.”

I was reading between the lines, and it seemed he adored his brother-in-law. “You love him, huh?”

His eyes lifted, and I saw I was right.

“Wait till you meet him. He’s a lot. You watch soccer?”

I shook my head. “No. It was only dancing for me.”

“Is that normal?”

“No. Well, sometimes. It can be. I chose to really immerse myself. It’s competitive the higher you go, and you can’t lose the edge, ever. I know a lot of dancers who aren’t like that, though. They live normal lives with families.”

“I get it. I think. I was shipped off to a private boarding school for a bit, so I get that world.”

“You were shipped off?”

His eyes were lidded. “My parents didn’t approve of my friends’ influence on me.”

“Did they have a right to be worried?”

Two people to go.

One.

He grunted. “Yes, but also no. It didn’t deter me from leaving as soon as I could and then still getting in trouble with those friends afterward.” His eyes grew distant.

It was our turn, and feeling his gaze weighing on me, I stepped to the counter, giving my order. Nate was next, and I didn’t fight him when he moved to pay. I’d been living with him long enough to know he was going to pay no matter what. He just did it.

After getting our drinks and food, we moved through a large crowd of people. He shifted again, stepping behind me. He had the majority of the food, but he still managed to clear a hand to rest on my back.

It was doing all sorts of things to me.

My stomach was flip flopping all over inside.

I was attracted to Nate. I'd always been attracted to him, but that attraction was almost out of control by now.

I needed to rein it in and deal with it.

Once we were through that group, there was a slight clearing of people. Nate moved back to my side. His eyes grew fierce. "Since we talked about my parents before, I need you to know that I will never be like that with Nova. I'll never ship her away. I'll never feel like she's a mistake. I'll always love her and put her first."

Heat filtered through me because he wasn't just letting me know he'd always be in Nova's life. I was getting that. I got that message loud and clear the first moment I told him about her. He was telling me something else.

My mouth dried.

He was going to be a good father.

Correction, an amazing father.

My stomach shifted, and I felt an opening forming in the middle of my chest.

Dear Lord.

That made me even more attracted to him.

I whispered, "Just don't be like my father."

"Never," he whispered right back.

We were in our own little world right then, our own moment.

The people ceased to be.

The stadium faded.



All the noises, the sounds, even the beverages and food we were holding, all of it was gone.

I'd moved beyond the attraction.

I was starting to fall for him.

Oh no.

## NATE

“M onson.”

I looked at the aisle and stood. “Dierek, you’re late. I’m surprised you still came to the game.”

Mason’s agent laughed, then groaned. “Traffic and a small crisis that got sorted out. Apologies, but I still wanted to show up.” He clasped me on both shoulders, looking me up and down. His empty chair was on the other side of Quincey. Before moving past, he said, “Congratulations on the news.”

“Thank you.”

Dierek was our age, a few years older, and he had no children. As far as I knew, he had no relationships either. He was married to his job, but he was one of the top agents in the world. I’d say it was working for him. He was also a good-looking bastard, and until that moment, I never thought about his looks.

I was thinking now because he shook Quincey’s hand and held it way longer than he needed to hold it.

“So sorry again for my lateness. You’re the beautiful Quincey Royas.”

“Hello. And thank you. It’s nice to meet you.”

He was still holding her hand.

That was unprofessional of him, like highly unprofessional. He wanted to represent her, not fuck her. There were lines. Roles.

I stomped down a growl, because what the fuck?

But he was moving past her, starting to let go of her hand.

It would be irrational of me to rip them apart.

I was asking myself if that was irrational. That was probably a sign.

Jesus. Logan would be laughing his ass off at me.

Why'd Mason refer him again? Right. Because he was the best agent in the business.

Everyone else was starting to sit. Someone just scored.

They were still shaking hands.

“Okay.” I pushed Dierek into his seat.

Both turned to me, shocked.

I ignored them, gesturing to the field. “It’s an important play.”

A gurgle left Quincey’s throat as she continued to stare at me.

I coughed, clearing my throat. “Since it’s the fourth quarter, I’m assuming you’ll want to have dinner with us afterward?”

“Yeah.”

I liked Dierek. Or I had, until today, until he held Quincey’s hand for an inappropriate length of time.

I told him, “Matteo will be joining us.”

“That’s good. I haven’t talked to Matteo in a while. It’ll be good to catch up.”

We were on our feet in the next second. The momentum of the pass interception by Matteo’s team led the charge through the rest of the fourth quarter. Dierek talked to Quincey a bit more, but everyone was cheering so loud that conversation was minimal between the two.

And I was also watching that like a hawk.

I needed to cool it. Severely.

She expressed a wish to get a new sort of agent, and I delivered. Dierek was interested, so despite being new to her world, I knew he'd be good for her. Her *career*, I mean. Good for her career.

I was a jealous fucking asshole.

Jealous.

Jesus.

I was rarely jealous when it came to women. Then again, I'd never cared enough about a singular woman either. Except for Valerie, but she'd been different in a lot of ways.

"Hey." Quincey was laughing and nudged my shoulder with her hand. She held out her phone. "She's so cute."

I heard the adoration and felt it deep inside. Emily had taken a picture of Nova in her crib. She was tangled up in a blanket, her penguin, a dolphin, and a whale. She looked damned cute.

"She loves the marine mammals, huh?"

"She does." Quincey took the phone back, sending off a text. "I think she gets it from Stephanie..." She trailed off, a look of horror flaring over her face.

"Quincey?"

"Oh my God." A soft utter from her.

Something happened on the field again. Everyone was roaring around us, jumping to their feet. Quincey stayed sitting. So did I. I bent closer to her. "What's wrong?"

She turned those horrified eyes my way. I had to crane to hear her. "I forgot she's not mine. I forgot that she came from Valerie." The horror was quickly turning to shame, and something worse, something darker. "That's horrible of me. To forget... and I thought she actually came from me for a second. I'm going to be sick."

She shoved up from her seat and darted past me. She was up the aisle in a flash.

"Nate?" Dierek leaned over.

I glanced at the clock. There were thirty seconds left.

Grabbing my coat and hers, I stood. “I have to take care of this. We’re eating at Peluzza. Seven. Reservation is under my name.”

“Okay. Yeah.” He nodded in the direction Quincey had gone. “Is she okay?”

I hesitated, but he needed to be told something. “Uh, yeah. It’ll be fine. A recent death in the family.”

With that, I headed after her. She was long gone by the time I got up to the walkway. Upset females generally went to the bathrooms, didn’t they? I had no clue, so I veered toward a staff member standing by the entrance. “A female ran past, looking like she was going to be—”

“She took off down that hallway. The bathrooms are right there, so I’m sure she’s just ahead.”

“Thank you.”

The staff member was correct.

I rounded the curve, and Quincey was there. She was wiping a finger under both her eyes, and she expelled some air before turning to come back. She saw me then, faltering, but she looked fine.

“You okay?” I asked as I drew near.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” Her smile was shaky. “I’m just—I forgot, and I can’t forget. I can’t forget Valerie. And I can’t do that. It’s not right. Or fair.”

Fuck.

This was partly on me, forcing her to sign that paper.

“Valerie wanted you to raise Nova for a reason. She’s yours now. In Nova’s eyes, you are her mother, or she’ll grow up thinking of you as her mother.”

“But she’s not mine. She didn’t come from me.”

“Nova needs a mother who’s here. We’ll talk to her about Valerie. She’ll grow up loving her mother, but she’ll know that

she has two mothers. One's here, and one's in heaven. You're not going to replace Valerie. You're just filling a new mothering role."

"And if you meet someone?" Her voice grew hoarse. "If you fall in love and that woman doesn't want me around? What's protecting me from you taking Nova from me then?"

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

If Logan were here, he'd be pulling me away. He'd be telling me not to say anything or promise anything that I wasn't sure about following through on, but I was staring at her, and she was hurting. I was feeling her hurt, and that was making me hurt.

Nova was new to me, but this was also new to me.

I was starting to realize how much of a selfish bastard I might've been.

Still... I clamped down on spilling words that the rational side of me knew I might regret one day, so instead, I drew her to my chest. My hand cupped the back of her head, and with her in my arms, I whispered over her head, "You will always be in Nova's life. I promise you that."

But I wasn't saying how she would be in Nova's life. I couldn't. I couldn't promise her what she needed me to say.

I was a right dick, such a bastard.

But I couldn't say anything more. I just couldn't.

Her hands lifted, grasping onto my arms, and she sagged against me. "Thank you."

I could feel her relief.

Yes. A bastard. That was me.

**NATE**

**I** knew the game was done, and people were starting to leave even before the time ran out. Matteo's team won by a last-minute touchdown, so the local fans weren't happy. Matteo would be, but I wanted to get a start on heading out for the restaurant. But I was also feeling like a shithead over Quincey's feelings, so I needed to try to do something.

I texted Dierek.

**Me: Do you have your own car? Or do you want a ride to the restaurant with us?**

**Dierek: I took an Uber here. A ride over would be nice, then I could talk more with Quincey. Where are you?**

I shot him a pic of the door we were at, taking Quincey's hand to hold her up.

My phone buzzed a second later.

**Dierek: I'll be there in a bit.**

"What's going on?"

Quincey asked, and outwardly, she looked fine. But to me, she seemed more vulnerable. More raw. More open to me. Maybe that was my guilty conscience sparking up? I needed to check that in place, and I said, a bit gruffer than necessary, "Waiting on Dierek. He's going with us to the restaurant."

"That's right." She closed her eyes, swaying to me. She groaned. "I was so unprofessional up there. This..." She

waved at herself. “This isn’t me. Not normally. The last thing he’ll want to do is sign me now.”

“Your sister died. You quit your career, took Nova in, and now we’re gearing up to fight your father in a yet-to-be-determined custody battle. Give yourself a break. You deserve some leeway. Besides, Dierek wants to talk to you. That’s a good sign, or he’d be long gone by now.”

“You think?” She’d been biting down on her lip but now seemed reassured.

“Yeah.” *Unfortunately.*

“Good. That’s a relief then.”

*Fuck no.* “Right.”

My phone buzzed again.

**Logan: Give M a congratulatory lap dance for me. Make it raunchy.**

I ignored Logan, but another text came in right after.

**Mason: Um...**

Alarms went off in my head.

**Me: Um what? Why um?**

Mason never used “um.” I didn’t know that was in his vocabulary.

**Mason: Don’t hate me, but...incoming.**

I looked up, watching the crowd.

I wasn’t seeing anyone I knew. And for some reason, I drew Quincey closer to me, my free hand rounding to her hip and anchoring her in front of me. She stiffened in surprise but then molded back into me.

I hit *call* and put the phone to my ear.

Mason answered the next second. “I’m sorry, man.”

“What are you sorry about?”

Quincey stiffened again, overhearing me. She glanced back but was keeping an eye out, too.



“You’ll find out. I’m sorry, but I’m also not sorry at the same time. So, yeah.”

“What the fuck, Mase?”

“That’s Mason?” Dierek had found us and overheard. He lifted his chin up. “Remind him about our meeting next month.”

Yeah. No.

I ignored that. Dierek wasn’t my agent, and okay. I was going to be a douche about him and Quincey. Apparently, I still had this side in me.

“Your agent’s here. I’ll talk to you later.”

I ended the call before Mason could say anything and pocketed the phone, ignoring Dierek’s slight confusion. I kept my hand on Quincey’s hip and moved her ahead of me. “Ready?”

Another pause before Dierek bent his head and gestured for us to lead the way. He saw where I was holding Quincey, and understanding dawned before he gave me a slight nod.

Well. Good.

I tried to relax my hold on her, not that it was hurting her, but it was possessive. She might not register it, but Dierek did, and every guy who noted Quincey as we moved through the crowd also registered the touch. We were sweeping through the doors when I caught a photographer aiming a camera lens our way, but it was more positioned toward Dierek.

I was hoping it was for him and not us; but there was also nothing I could do about it now.

Even knowing that and trying to tell myself to relax, I kept my hold on her, maneuvering her through the crowd. She never questioned my touch or fought against it. She went with me, moving as I directed her, and it hit me a second later. She was a dancer. She was probably used to this sort of thing, her body easily following commands.

That made sense.

That was what I was going to tell myself, and once we hit the pavement where the crowd had finally thinned out, I forced myself to let her go.

A low chuckle sounded from my right. I ignored that but did ask him, “You know why Mason was apologizing to me on the phone a few minutes ago?”

Quincey had moved, so she was walking on my right side.

Dierek was on my left, and his eyebrows shot up. “Mason Kade? Apologize? I didn’t know he had that in him.” He whistled under his breath. “Nice to know miracles do exist.”

I gave a look. “You could just say you don’t know.”

He flashed me a smile, now fully amused. “I have no idea why one of my best athletes is apologizing to you.”

That made sense. Why *would* he know?

I was probably being paranoid.

Spotting my SUV, I unlocked it. The lights flashed, and everyone turned for it.

Once inside, with Dierek taking the back seat even though Quincey tried to have him sit in the front, I was starting to reverse when my phone lit up.

**Matteo: Hey! Where are you? Come to the family/friends entrance and pick me up.**

**Me: You’re ready? I thought you’d be another hour. We were going to go to the restaurant.**

**Matteo: No. I have some interviews, but we’re guests. It won’t take that long.**

**Me: We’re in the vehicle already. I’ll swing over. Just let me know when you’re coming out.**

**Matteo: Got it.**

## QUINCEY

When I saw Nate's friend on the football field, I knew he'd be huge. That made sense with his position. He was one of the big guys, but when he came out to the vehicle, and when Nate got out to greet him—I hadn't been prepared. I didn't think he'd even fit into the SUV.

Dierek started laughing, noting my reaction. "They've been friends for a long time. Prepare for little boy giggles."

He wasn't on the same wavelength as me, but now that he mentioned it, I was seeing a young Nate out there. He was all smiles, and he jumped into the football guy's arms.

"Matteo, right?"

"Yes. He's a big Hawaiian. That's usually how he introduces himself to people."

I nodded. Got it. Matteo. I didn't want to mess up his name. Unlike Nate's other friends, Nate said he hadn't shared with Matteo what was going on. That meant there was a clean slate when he met me. He might like me at first.

He'd probably start not to like me after the initial meet because most people didn't, but still. First meeting. First greeting. This one could be a positive one. That was my goal. I straightened in my seat, a polite but engaging smile on my face, and waited.

And watched.

And waited some more.

The football guy was juggling Nate a little like we'd do with Nova.

A giggle broke out. I couldn't help myself.

"I told you," Dierek drawled from the back. His tone was full of fondness and envy at the same time. He was watching them, his eyes overcast. One of his arms were crossed over his chest, the other resting on the doorframe. "If I join them, we'll miss our reservation completely."

"How long have you known everyone in Nate's group?"

"I scooped Mason up right away, and everyone else came with him. It must be, what? Almost ten years by now? Nine, maybe?" He glanced at me but turned back to the window. "It seems like a lifetime. I know there's a Channing near where they grew up, and I've not met him. I've met Heather, though. She came out for a visit one time to see Mason's wife. Have you...?" He trailed, seeing me again.

I hadn't met any of them.

I was trying not to have a reaction, but it was there. It must've been on my face.

I felt a slicing going down the middle of my body.

Nate's words from the beginning came back, and now this time, they were haunting.

*I have a whole group. You have no one.*

I swallowed over a lump. He was right. I knew then, but I hadn't been feeling it. I was feeling it now.

Nate and Matteo were starting to turn for the SUV, but Dierek asked, almost gently, "Nate mentioned that your brother is Graham Robertson?"

"He's my half-brother." Normally, I'd say nothing more. This time, it hurt to admit. "We're not real close."

"Oh." His eyebrows dropped back down, and he straightened in his seat.

Nate was coming back to his side, and Matteo was rounding the vehicle, carrying a large bag in hand. He'd been

reaching for the door handle on my door when he looked through the window and saw me. He froze, and his eyes got big. “Whoa!” His voice came out loud and was barely muffled through the glass. “Nate, you have a chick in your car. You got another sister we didn’t know about?”

Nate was opening his door. He paused, saying over the hood, “Shut up. Get in the back with Dierek.”

A wide smile came over the footballer, and he was quickly moving to the back door. Throwing it open, he leaned down and boomed, “It’s Mason’s agent! How are you, man?!” It felt like he was crawling inside the vehicle, but he was just sitting down. One leg. His body. The other leg.

The SUV dipped under each section and again as he settled to get comfortable.

The big bag came in, and he tossed it to the back, then he reached over and clapped Dierek on the shoulder. “How’s it going? Are you finally here to try to steal me away from my team? I don’t think my agent will go for that.”

Nate snorted, starting to pull away from the curb.

Dierek let out a soft sigh. “Hello, Matteo. You played well today.”

“Thanks, man.”

I liked Matteo.

I had turned to watch him, and I was captivated. He had a giant heart in him. I could feel it, and after snickering, he turned to me. “Sup, New Girl? I’m Matteo. I’m a big Hawaiian.” He glanced at Nate. “Logan know about this one?”

Nate adjusted the rearview mirror, pulling into a line of cars all edging toward the interstate. “Logan has actually met this one.”

This one.

I burned from the implication of that.

I was sure they used that terminology in the past for who? What? Nate’s past conquests?

And he was letting Matteo think that about me.

Matteo's phone started buzzing. He pulled it out, swiping over the screen. "That's cool then. I like being the last to meet the new girls, but oh... Uh. So." He looked up, a slight grimace pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Nate's eyes instantly went suspicious, and a cloud came down over him. "Who was that from?"

"No one."

"Matteo."

"What's up?"

Nate was glaring in the rearview mirror at him. "What's going on?"

"Where we eating?"

"Peluzzo." A pause. "Why are you asking?"

"Peluzzo?" He sent off a quick text, then shoved the phone back in his pocket. "Got it."

Nate's face went flat. "You never ask where we eat. Why are you asking now?"

"No reason. Look at all those cars." Matteo twisted almost all the way to the back, pretending to be distracted by the traffic.

"Matteo!"

He turned back, a low mumble coming out. "I don't want to get in the middle of this."

"Matteo, I swear. I will fuck you up if you don't tell me. You and Mason both said something. What?" His voice got firmer. "Is Logan doing a surprise visit?"

He raked a hand over his face. "Fuck's sake, Nate. Man. You get bitchier the older we get."

"Fuck off, Matt."

He snorted, clearly not offended.

“Who is it? Mason would only warn me if it were Logan. There’s no one else he’d even register to warn me about.”

“Yeah. Let’s go with that.”

A pissed-off but resigned shadow formed over Nate, and he let out a sigh. “Fine.” He cast a worried glance my way. “I wanted to do this proper, tell you about Quincey here.”

“Um. Yeah.” Matteo moved forward, his big hand wrapping around the back of my seat. “Quincey. I have a name now.” He held his hand out for me to shake it. “Nice to meet you. How long have you and Monson been boning? You know, he’s not brought any other female around us. Off the bat, I know you’re important.”

My mouth almost dropped, and my hand slid out from his. I turned to Nate. “Is this how your entire group of friends treat each other? Or each other’s whatever? Significant others.”

Nate and Matteo snorted at the same time, both covering a slight grin.

Nate shifted gears, moving now onto a bigger road. “I’d like to say no, but that’s not true. Matteo’s the kindest one in our group. He just doesn’t know the situation.”

“What situation?” Matteo spoke up.

“I don’t want to have that convo in the vehicle. Later. Over drinks. Or at the house.” Nate’s tone grew softer. “There’s someone else at the house I want to introduce you to.”

“Yeah? You get a dog?”

Nate smothered a laugh. “Not a dog, dude.”

“Oh.” Matteo went back to looking out the window. “A pig?”

“Not a pig.” Nate glanced at him through the mirror.

“A hamster.”

“We’re doing this? You’re going to try to guess who you’re going to meet?”

“Why not? Dierek’s keeping quiet. I’m thinking he’s here to watch the fireworks. Am I right, D?”

“You’re not right. I flew in to meet Quincey, actually.”

“You did?” The big footballer suddenly had a new interest in me. He was scanning me over. “You gotta be an athlete for D to make a trip to meet. Let me guess, ice figure skater?”

I laughed. “No.”

“Hmm.” He seemed to be chewing on the inside of his mouth before snapping his fingers. “You’re a horse rider, aren’t you? Rodeos?”

I was grinning, enjoying this. “No.”

“Damn. Racing? No. You don’t look like a jockey. Oh! A race car driver?”

I shook my head.

Through the drive to the restaurant, Matteo alternated between guessing what kind of athlete I was and what kind of pet Nate had at the house. When he guessed a llama, I was laughing so hard that my stomach started to hurt.

I couldn’t remember when I laughed this hard.

Nate cast a grin at me as he pulled up to the front of the restaurant. He jerked his chin up. “Go on. I’ll park and head in.”

Matteo’s eyes were big as he shut his door. “Okay. See you in a few.” He turned to Dierek. “You should take cover. And you should automatically start forgetting everything you hear from now on so you don’t hold it against any of us. I could be your future client. Quincey is probably already your client. Don’t hold anything against her either.”

Dierek chuckled but patted him on the arm. “It takes a lot to scare me, Matteo. I wouldn’t worry.”

We started to go toward the restaurant, but Matteo stayed put. When we looked back, his whole face was grave. “I’m serious.”



A frown pulled Dierek's mouth down. "I promise." He held his hands up. "I think you're underestimating me."

Matteo snorted, his large feet and legs now moving past us. "I think you're overestimating us, but okay. You're not *my* agent."

With that, he led the way inside.

## QUINCEY

**W**e walked in, and Matteo was hustled, literally hustled, into a back room.

A gorgeous brunette linked her arm with his, then saw Dierik and grabbed him, too.

I'd been heading to the bathroom when I noticed and swung around. I took one step to follow, but they were gone. After that, I wasn't sure what to do, so I headed into the bathroom anyway.

I was nervous.

It was obvious something was happening.

After washing, I went back out to the front of the restaurant, and I couldn't see anyone.

For a moment, just a moment, I wanted to leave. I wanted to go outside, call an Uber, and go home to be with Nova. But it was more than that. I wanted to put up those shields around me. It'd been the fortress that my father and his estate had surrounded me with. He had controlled me, but I'd been protected. It'd almost been like a blanket, keeping the cold out, but I wasn't there anymore.

I was here, and I knew I'd have to go in search of whatever back room they had taken the others. I glanced out the door, but I didn't see Nate coming in. He probably came in when I was in the bathroom and got grabbed like the others.

These were his people, his friends, his colleagues.

They weren't mine, but through Nova, Nate was now my family in a way. That meant I would put on a brave face, and I'd walk my rear back there. I'd find wherever they were, and I'd go in to meet whoever was back there.

Unless they truly didn't want me back there?

Maybe this really was only for Nate?

"You're Quincey."

I turned and recognized her immediately. I would've anyway. I was a fan, and I froze for a full beat before an awkward laugh came out. "Sorry. Hi. Yes. You're Samantha Kade, Mason's wife." I held out my hand, and she took it. There was an equally awkward handshake, which I had to laugh at because I hadn't been fanstruck in a while. "I follow you on your social media since your first Olympics. You became an inspiration for me. I'm Quincey."

She relaxed, a laugh easing from her, and moved closer.

She was stunning. Jet-black hair. Dark, almond eyes. Heart-shaped face.

"I know. I'm Samantha."

"Yes..." My breath hitched in my throat. "I—yes. I know. Hi. Quincey. Again."

*So bad.*

I should've taken an Uber home.

Samantha tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, her eyes trailing behind my shoulders. "In full disclosure, Mason didn't want to do this. So I will take full responsibility for this, and I hope we're not going to be too much for you."

"We?" I squeaked. "Who's we?"

She hesitated, cursing under her breath. "Everyone. Like, yeah. Everyone. I'm so sorry. I'm now thinking about it from your point of view, and I'm really sorry. You..." She looked me up and down. "You look ready to bolt."

I was somewhere between wanting to gush at meeting her, dying inside at the same time, and a trickle of fear was starting

to spread at exactly what ‘everyone’ meant. “How many people are in that room back there?”

“Um. There’s me. Heather. Channing. Grace. Matteo, whom you’ve met. Logan. Taylor. Mason, just for tonight because he played on Thursday. And then we invited your brother...” Her voice trailed off when she saw the fear taking me over. “Oh, no.”

I was speculating that Nate hadn’t shared how my night went with my family.

“I thought things were good there?”

Okay.

Adult time.

This was it. Enough was enough.

I couldn’t bolt. I literally had an Olympian here. She’d catch me.

I put on a smile and thought of puppies. Babies. Nova. I thought of Nova, and instantly, I relaxed. I used that genuineness to help sell it. “No, no, no. I had a moment, but I’m good. And I’m super excited—” Another squeak from me on the *super* word. “—to meet everyone. Matteo was talking about Channing just tonight, too.”

“He was?” she whispered. She took my hands and squeezed them. “It was supposed to be a surprise baby shower for Nate, except adult-wise. We flew to Fallen Crest. The kids are all staying together at my dad’s. Then we all flew up here. Mason chartered a flight from California. Matteo was here, and Mason can do a night, so we thought we needed to capitalize and officially welcome Nate into adulthood. And we wanted to meet you and Nova. Oh my gosh, we *cannot wait* to meet Nova.”

This was going to happen. Nate had his people, and I needed to assimilate.

I could do that. I would do that.

“Awesome. Let’s go meet everyone.”

---

OKAY.

They were a lot, but after hanging out for three hours now, I was pretty sure I had everyone down. Maybe. I might've been making up names at this point, but here I went:

Samantha was Mason's wife. Taylor was Logan's girlfriend. There was a seriously sexy blonde named Heather. Who was with a fully tatted-out hottie named Channing. I wasn't going to attempt at recalling the last names. Then there was Matteo and Grace. I was pretty sure Grace and Matteo were *together* together. I wasn't totally sure, but they acted more than friends at times, and there were looks. Lots of looks.

I didn't need to worry about my own family because they only invited Graham, and he came alone. Not that I didn't mind seeing Britney, but she was so connected to Calihan, and there was so much water running over that bridge—enough to cover it completely at this moment.

“Monson is protective of you,” Graham announced, sliding into the chair beside me. He had a pink drink in hand, kicking out a chair in front and lounging back. He threw a leg up and took a good swallow from the pink stuff.

“What are you drinking?”

“No clue.” He didn't take his eyes off the group just across the room.

We'd eaten. Drank. There were lots of stories, lots of laughter. Gifts had piled up in the corner of the room, but we were back to the stories. I had met everyone, and everyone had been kind. So seriously kind, but an undercurrent was running through the room.

One I didn't really know what to do with.

That undercurrent: I didn't belong. I was the outsider.

Even Graham, he belonged more than I did. The guys treated him like he was a long-lost member of their clan.

“How are you holding up?” Graham was frowning at me.

I couldn't help it. I looked at his pink drink. “Wishing I'd had a few of those tonight.”

He grimaced. “Did someone—”

I shook my head. “I'm fine. Everyone's been nice. It's just...” They were all laughing. They were all so comfortable with each other.

“I get it.”

I looked over, hearing his words. “You get it?”

“I get it.” That's all he said.

Graham's eyes darkened, and I turned, but I could still feel his scrutiny.

Okay then.

A beat of silence passed between us. I didn't know what to say.

He leaned forward in his chair. His eyes were troubled.

There was a slight glaze over them.

My brother was buzzed.

Maybe more than buzzed.

I raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“Hmm?” He snapped back to attention, focusing on me. “Right! I wanted to talk to you about something. I don't know if this is the right place, but I never see you, so whatever. Look, it wasn't right what Cali did, but she feels you're only coming into the family now because you need us.” He lifted a shoulder. “And I get that. I mean, if my dad was your dad, I'd need all the help I could get, but she's feeling used. And she's protective of Mom.”

That stung.

“Mom?” I asked.

“Because you treat her like shit, you know? Mom gets hurt by that. You don't even see it. You just, I don't know what you

see, but if my mom was my mom, I'd spend as much time with her as possible." He frowned, his eyebrows pinching together. "Wait. You know what I mean."

I didn't, but I did.

*You treat her like shit...*

Did I?

Was that what he really thought?

Everything was churning inside me.

"Hey, don't sweat it. I'm drunk. Whatever nonsense I'm saying, don't listen to me. You know me, I ramble when I'm like this."

I didn't know him when he was like this.

I didn't know anyone when they were drunk, because I didn't drink.

I didn't drink with others.

I didn't do anything with others.

Because of *him*.

Because of—suddenly, I felt alone and exposed and vulnerable. And I hated it.

Then I remembered what Graham said when he first came over. *Monson is protective of you.*

"What you said when you first sat down. About Nate being protective. Why'd you say that?"

He frowned, some of the glaze disappearing. He shrugged both his shoulders. "Because he is. Haven't you noticed?"

Tonight? Not really.

I gestured to them, a half-hearted motion. "He's with his family."

"Yeah, but it's more. He's constantly looking for you. Like right now, he's probably watching us." He rolled his head around. "Yep. Look at him. He's over there, sitting with his peeps, but he really wants to be over here."

“Don’t say peeps.”

“His people. Whatevs.”

“Don’t say whatevs either. You’re not a teenager.”

Graham grinned, lifting his drink again. “I was an awesome teenager. Too bad Duke kept you away from us all. I was uber popular.”

I was cringing at the “uber,” too, but Graham was going to say what Graham was going to say.

“You know, Val died, and I miss the fuck out of her.” He leaned forward, suddenly looking sober. His eyes were dark. “But there’s been one thing good that came out of losing my little sister.” He motioned to me with his glass. “I got my other little sister back. I hate that she’s gone, but I thank her every fucking night for you. We’re not the bad guys your dad made you think we were. And we love you. All of us.”

My throat was full.

A lump was blocking me from swallowing.

He was right... about everything.

I whispered, “I *really* miss Val right now.”

“Me, too.”



## NATE

“**Y**ou haven’t told her a thing, have you?”

I was outside on the deck when Logan broached the topic. It’d been the elephant in the room, and the accusation I was hearing from him was on point. Everyone knew what was going on, and no one was telling her. They were walking on eggshells around her, a feat that our group usually never did.

Mason was on my other side. “Jesus, Logan. It’s not your kid.”

“I’m her lawyer.”

“You’re my lawyer, and I’ll tell her. He’s mind-fucked her all her life. This is not the easiest topic to broach.”

“You said you talked to her, told her it was an option. She said she knew he would go at her.”

“But talking about it and actually knowing he’s doing it are two separate things. He’s got all her past therapists on his side.”

Logan snorted, rocking back on his heels. “It’s cold out here. Why’d we come out here?”

“I thought we were out here to have this conversation.”

“Aren’t we all staying at Nate’s?”

“Where she’ll be staying, too.”

“Right.”

I let the two brothers squash everything for me.

I rubbed at my forehead. “Why am I missing the days when we could’ve just lit his house on fire?”

Logan snorted this time. “We could sneak on his estate and slash all the tires to his vehicles.”

Mason grinned. “Pretty sure he’s got video surveillance.”

“We can get around that.”

“This conversation is pointless. No one is going to sneak onto his estate to knife his tires. That’s a headache for him, that’s all. Hell, a headache for his staff. He won’t even be fazed,” Mason points out.

“We know criminals.” Logan shot a look at Channing, who was just coming outside to join us.

Channing frowned. “I’m not a criminal.”

“You know criminals.”

Channing shook his head. “My sister is not a criminal either. I don’t know why you keep going there.”

“I’m not talking about your sister.”

Mason growled. “Let it go. This is your point of attack? Nate, you’re fucked.”

Logan stifled a laugh. “I’m just messing around.” He was quiet for a second. “But seriously, Channing, aren’t you tight with that motorcycle club?”

“You’ve been on my ass all night about them. No, I’m not.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“How about you tell us what you *have* done?” If that was Logan’s actual plan, I agreed with Mason. I *was* fucked.

“It’s fine. We have people doing their job, and everyone he brings to the case, we’ll discredit them. We’ll bring our people, and he’ll be discredited. It’ll all work out in the end. Right now, it looks like he’s trying to buy his granddaughter, but Quincey needs to be clued in. *Now*. I’ve been talking to her lawyer, so he knows what’s going on, but she needs to be in on

it. I need her permission to approach her family, too. I know Graham will, but the rest will testify against him?”

“Yes. They hate him. I’ll talk to her tomorrow.”

“Tonight, Nate.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

Well, fuck.

Tonight, then.

## QUINCEY

I knew Nate's house was big, but I didn't realize how big until all of the couples came to the house. Matteo and Grace slept in the pool house/my dance studio. The other three were upstairs, and when I went into my own room, I couldn't hear a thing.

There was a weird flutter in my stomach. It might've been the pizza I inhaled when Logan ordered for everyone.

It wasn't until I went into my room, with a dreamy smile on my face, that it hit me. It was me. It was Nate. It was Graham. It was Nova. It was that I was in a house full of people, and people who loved each other. I mean, I wasn't one of them, but I was like an extended arm. Or a hand. Or I was standing on the sidelines, but I'd only ever been to a house full of people the few times I did Christmas at the Robertson's house.

I...

I abruptly sat on my bed, like a boulder sinking to the bottom of a lake. *Thump*. Down I went.

I had missed so much.

I didn't realize I was crying until a tear hit my arm. Lifting it, I looked at it a moment.

Then I touched my face. It was covered in tears.

"You okay?"

A half-gurgle, half-squeak came from me as I leaped from my bed.

It was Nate, standing in my doorway.

I gestured to Nova's room, ignoring how my heart was racing. "Have you checked on her?"

He nodded. "She's sleeping." He grinned. "Penguin and Sloth are both with her."

"Oh. Good." I wanted to check on her, too. I'd wait, though. I mean, he just looked in on her.

Right?

Right.

What was I doing here?

"Wait. What are you doing here?"

A soft chuckle came from him. He was still dressed from dinner, but he looked a lot more relaxed, except for the tightness around his mouth.

Why I was noticing those details wasn't beyond me.

I was having thoughts and feelings, and I was still crying.

Why was I crying?

Valerie.

I could almost hear her giggling at me.

It was for that reason that I let slip what slipped from me.

"You should've been with Valerie."

Yeah. That.

I was back to that.

Why did I say that?

Nate straightened abruptly, one of his hands falling out of his pocket.

Gah. He looked so good.

All tall. Dark. Green eyes. Broad shoulders. His jaw. I loved his jaw.

“Why would you say that?”

I swallowed—right. That boulder was still there. It was permanently there. I needed to throw up a “road is blocked due to construction” sign in my own throat and make pathways around it. Deal with it. Live with it.

I shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. “Because it’s true.” Blasphemy. That came out as a whisper, totally giving me away.

I looked away.

He didn’t need to see the sadness in me. No one did.

Who would want to deal with that?

He stepped into the room, his head inclining.

I was watching his shadow, and I held my breath, not wanting to hear what he’d say but totally waiting on the edge of my seat at the same time.

“I repeat, why would you say that?”

“Because Valerie was...” Life. “Warm.” She wasn’t cold like me. “Valerie was beautiful.”

“You don’t think you’re beautiful?”

I slanted him a slight, mocking smirk. “I’m a professional dancer. I think I’m beautiful, and I think I’m dreadful at the same time. I’m not speaking for all dancers. That’s just my complex.” That wasn’t my hang up, and he hadn’t caught it. Good. I could breathe easier. “I should go to bed.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Oh?” Of course, he did. He hadn’t come to my room once since I moved in. Of course, he’s only here because he would need to talk about something.

Nothing more.

“It can’t wait?”

He seemed to hesitate but gave his head a slight shake. “It can’t.”

*My father.*

I nodded to him, grabbing a sweater I had on the bed. I indicated that I’d follow him, pulling that wrap on. It was now my shield as I fell in step behind him.

Duke.

It was time

He had struck.

I felt it in my gut.

I was more surprised it’d taken him this long.

The house was mostly dark. I knew he kept a light on in the kitchen at all times, but he was leading me to the porch area, and there were a few soft lights on the table. We stepped in, and I felt the heat. I was glad it was a four-season porch.

Nate moved to sit in one of the chairs, and I took the other. I moved my feet, resettling on the chair. I pulled my knees up to my chest and rested my hand against one, looking at Nate.

“He set a motion against me, didn’t he?”

Nate jerked from the question, the ends of his mouth turning down. “How do you—how’d you know that?”

I gave him a wane smile, but I was really just trying to mask how I should’ve felt gutted but didn’t. “I told you he would go through me. What’s he trying to do? Say I’m incompetent to be Nova’s guardian?”

“He’s saying you weren’t in the right frame of mind to sign her over to me. If he takes that out, he can come straight at me then.”

I sucked in a breath because that couldn’t happen.

I’d never let Nova live with him, and horror quickly settled in after because holy shit, I’d been about to do just that.

“It’s like I finally escaped from an abusive relationship or something.”

“What?”

I was such a fool.

“He took everything from me.” I was speaking to Nate, but I also wasn’t at the same time. I was realizing it as I was saying it. “I have a mother, and he made me feel like she wasn’t worthy. He got in my head and turned me against everyone.”

Holy shit.

He did.

He did all of that.

“He made everyone bad. He made everyone evil. I couldn’t trust anyone, but I couldn’t trust him either.”

I’d lost so much.

“Valerie should be sitting here, not me.” But she wasn’t. She went to Nico. I focused on Nate. “Why didn’t you guys have more of a relationship? You didn’t claim her.”

He sat back in his seat, blinking a few times. “I didn’t love Valerie.” His words came out low but calm. He’d considered this before. He already knew.

“You were stupid. She was an amazing person.” She was everything I wasn’t. I looked away and hugged my knees harder to my chest. “She was so pretty, and her laugh. When she thought something was funny, everyone did. Calihan’s like me. She has an edge to her, but she’s softer, too. I was always so rigid. No one liked me. I didn’t even like me, but not Valerie. Everyone loved her. They adored her. Calihan,” I had to laugh. “Calihan was popular, like Graham. She was nice, but she could also be one of the mean girls. But not against me. I could fillet her with a look, and she always ran.”

Not anymore, though.

I didn’t have that in me.

I moved my head, pressing my forehead more fully into the side of my knee. “I feel so weak now. All my defenses are down. You did that to me.”



“Me?”

I nodded. “Because you’re kind, and letting me stay here, and protecting me. You’re fighting for me, and yes, I know a part of it is because you’re really trying to go after my father, but you’re standing on the line, and I’m behind you. You are shielding me from the evils that await me.”

It felt weird. Vulnerable.

I felt raw.

“Don’t you see, I was going to fight you and raise her in that house...with him.” I could taste my own terror. It was condemning. “How could I have done that? That would’ve been... He’s emotionally abusive. He’s not ever overt with anything. He doesn’t do anything out in the open, but it’s all in the head. The mental abuse. That’s the worst. You question yourself, but he’s in there. He’s controlling you. And you can’t break free, but then at moments, you get clarity, and you’re horrified at what you used to be living in. If I hadn’t signed that paper, you would’ve been right in doing anything in your power to take Nova away from me. She cannot go with him. *Ever.*”

What I would do to protect her... I should’ve had shivers thinking how far I’d go. I didn’t.

“Thank you,” I added, softly.

Nate still seemed torn, not knowing what to say to me.

He raked a hand over his face. “I have to admit, this is not how I thought this talk was going to go down.” His hands went to his armrests. He pushed up. “Want a drink? I’ve been tense, thinking about how to tell you this, and now I need a drink.”

I tipped my head back. “I’m good.”

He looked down at me, smiling back. “Water?”

“No, thank you. I’m good. I’ll keep you company, though.”

He went inside, and I remained, knowing this felt good.

This. Being here.

I felt like I finally had a home, and I now realized I never had one before.

And yeah. I was tired.

I rested my head down, a yawn leaving me. I was going to close my eyes, just for a bit.

Just until Nate came back...

---

I WAS BEING CARRIED through the house.

It was the best feeling ever.

That was new to me, too.

**NATE**

**T**he next few months went by fast.

And not a good fast. A grinding tension-filled type of fast. The bad kind of fast.

I let Logan know that Quincey was up to speed on everything, and there were meetings. There were lots and lots of meetings.

Interviews.

Every member of her family was interviewed.

Quincey herself underwent a voluntary psychological assessment, and Logan wasn't fucking around. He got the top officials to come in for this, and just in case one opinion wasn't enough, he had two to back it up. As he explained one time that they needed to walk into that meeting with so much against Duke Royas that everything would get tossed out in the first attempt.

He used legal jargon, but I wasn't following. I just wanted to know our chances of getting everything thrown out. Logan responded, "We're not going to just win. I'm hoping to do a rain dance on his ass."

"That's good?"

He only grunted. "Stop doubting me. I kick ass, and you know it."

The result, we won. Kinda.

Social services needed to check out the house, do a walk-through, and it would be fine. A caseworker needed to sign off on us as well, and it was just a formality so Royas' lawyers couldn't come back later and claim anyone had been negligent.

It was after our last meeting as the caseworker was leaving when Quincey asked, "That's it?"

Logan glanced over, chuckling. "That's it." He'd been flying back and forth the whole time. I didn't like the reason he was here, but I enjoyed being able to see him on a regular basis again. I missed being in Boston with them all.

"We can travel with Nova? There are no restrictions on that?"

"Nope. You're in the clear. You are Nova's father, legit. Duke can't come after you anymore. She's yours." His eyes went to Quincey. He shifted back to me, narrowing when he saw my face. "You're thinking of visiting, aren't you? You miss us."

I shot him a smirk. "I think you're the one missing me. You keep flying out here. You won't stay away."

I expected a smart comment back, but Logan laughed. "I do miss you. It's not the same. I also miss being on the West Coast, too. There's just something about this side of the world. You know?"

I did. "Mason's team is there."

Logan frowned at me. "I know."

He was confused.

Hell. So was I. Why had I said that?

Quincey was giving us both a tentative and nervous smile. "I—actually—need to head in for rehearsals. Are you..." She trailed off. "You know, never mind. I'll be back tonight."

Logan watched her go. She was heading back in to say goodbye to Nova. Emily was here today, and then she'd head to the city.

"During all of this, she started dancing again?"

I nodded. “Yeah. She explained that it’s a new type of production. She seemed excited about it, but with her dad, we’ve not been fully focused on that. You know?”

“Dierek did sign her?”

“He did.”

Logan was still staring in the direction she’d gone before turning speculative eyes my way. “You want to fuck her, don’t you?”

“Jesus, Logan. Tact.”

I wanted to fuck her, but I wasn’t going to talk about it. I wasn’t even sure if I wanted to think about it. But fuck, yeah. I wanted to pound inside of her and I wanted to do it hard. Goddamn. I wanted to do it long, and then do it again, and again. I wanted to keep going until both our legs gave out, and then I wanted to thrust back inside of her one more time.

Fuck, though. *Fuck.*

He looked around. “No one else is here. Are you going to fuck her?”

“She’s Nova’s mom, or the one most likely to fill that role.”

“If you’re not going to fuck her, what are you going to do when you fuck someone else?”

“Would you shut up.” It wasn’t a request.

He wasn’t fazed. “That’s an issue. If you do fuck her, and you don’t want to keep fucking her, she’s a chick. That’s going to be a problem.”

“She’s not like normal chicks.”

“Your situation isn’t normal. You didn’t think that through when you offered to bring her in here.”

I hadn’t, but I wasn’t in any hurry to kick her out.

Not that it would ever get to that place.

I glared at him. “We just tackled one issue. I don’t need you creating another one.”

“I’m not creating it. It’s there. I’m pointing it out, and I’d not only be a bad best friend, but a bad SBCer, and a bad lawyer if I didn’t point it out to you. You think you could love her?”

“Logan!”

I was getting a headache. A giant fucking one. It was named Logan Kade.

He kept on, nonplussed, “You don’t love anyone, not like that.” A beat. He seemed to consider it. “You love your sister. You love me. You love Mason. I think that’s it. You’re fond of the soccer kid.”

I had to grin at that. The soccer “kid” would have something to say about being called a “kid.”

But... Logan was right.

There was something wrong with me. There’d always been something wrong with me.

“She told me that I should’ve been with Valerie.”

His eyebrows went up. “What? She did?”

I nodded. “It was the night of the surprise baby shower from you guys. I sat her down to tell her about Duke, and she knew it. None of it fazed her, and she said all that about her sister.”

He whistled under his breath. “Is it true? *Should* you have been with the sister?”

I considered it, considered Valerie.

I’d already gone down that road.

I shook my head. “No. Valerie was nice, and I did like her. I cared about her, but something was missing. I don’t know. She wasn’t the one for me, so I never made a move for more. We were simply good doing what we were doing.” I considered him. “You think I messed up? Not going for Valerie?”

“I mean.” He winced. “That’s hard for me to answer. Only you know, but I do think you have a future problem on your

hands if you hook up with Quincey and it goes bad. You guys are acting like you're a married couple, both Mom and Dad to Nova. I love your kid, but boundaries at some point will need to be decided."

"She just escaped a bad situation."

"I know." He held his hands up. "I totally get that. I'm only saying, think for yourself in this situation. You know?"

I grunted. I knew what he was talking about.

"So, she's dancing?"

"Yeah." A wave of pride rose through me. "She dances a lot every day anyway, but she told me not long after that night that she had a part in a show coming up. Between rehearsing and everything with Duke, it's like she's a ghost. When she's home, she's with Nova. When she's not with Nova, she's gone."

"That's discipline."

I nodded, agreeing.

"Okay." He clapped me on the shoulder. "We celebrating tonight? I fly out tomorrow."

I smiled at him, just smiling.

"What?"

"Emily is leaving in an hour."

His mouth pursed together. "That means...?"

"Welcome to the life of being a parent. We ain't going anywhere unless I can bring my daughter."

"Right." He took a deep breath. "Nova's like the opposite of Mason's kids. She's, like, perfect. Not loud. Or hardly ever loud. Mason's kids are *hellions*."

I raised an eyebrow. "You surprised about that?"

"I'm just saying. Valerie must've been super nice because you were a *massive* dick when we were kids."

I glared. "We're toilet training. Guess what shift you just signed up for?"

## QUINCEY

Screams ripped through the room, and I was out of bed and sprinting before I opened my eyes.

That was Nova.

Nova needed me.

I burst through the door but drew up short. Nate was already there, and he was picking her up. Cradling her to his chest, he glanced at me over his shoulder. “I don’t know what’s wrong.”

I rushed to him, and I couldn’t stop myself. I took her from him. Probably not the right thing to do, but I needed to hold her. *I needed her.*

Her little body trembled in my arms, and tears ran down her face. She was pale, and a blood-curdling scream was coming from her.

I’d read everything on infants.

What was I forgetting? What could this be?

I checked her forehead. She didn’t feel like she had a temperature.

Nate checked her diaper. She was still dry.

He stepped back, his eyes wide and panicked. His hair was sticking up all over, and he’d come straight from his bed. No shirt. Only boxer briefs.



Another scream left her, and I cursed. I was the one trembling more now. “Car.”

“What?”

“ER.” I was starting for the garage, even as I spoke. I wasn’t taking a chance. When there was something seriously wrong with kids, they declined fast and fierce. I. Wasn’t. Taking. A. Chance.

Nate was coming behind me. “We could call Emily?”

“No.”

“My parents?”

“No.”

“Your mom!” He took my elbow, holding me back. “Stop.”

I turned on him, almost hissing. My heart was pounding so hard. “I lost Valerie. I’m not losing Nova!”

He drew back, his face closing up. Then he nodded. “Hold on. I will drive, but we both need clothes.”

“Grab blankets.”

I heard him cursing, then he was running behind me.

I grabbed my phone and purse, and I was crying as I put her in her car seat. I was in the seat next to her, trying to comfort her, and I was fumbling on my phone. I wasn’t totally beyond being rational. My mom would be a good person to call, but we were still going to the ER.

Nate had pulled on sweats and a hoodie. He had a bag with him, and I glimpsed him holding some of my clothes, then he was getting in his seat.

My mom answered at that moment, her voice drowsy. “Quincey?”

I put her on speaker. “She won’t stop screaming. What’s wrong with her?”

“Dear.”

I heard a male voice on her end, then she said, “It’s Quincey. Nova’s screaming.”

She came back, sounding calmer. “Quincey, honey. Did you check her temperature?”

“Her forehead seemed fine, but—” As I spoke, Nate reached into the bag on the passenger seat and handed me a thermometer. I took it, and added, “I’m taking it now.” I moved Nova’s arm aside and put it in her armpit. She was wiggling around, still crying, but some of the screams had lessened. I waited for the beep. “97.”

“Okay. That’s in the normal range.”

I was looking her over. “There’s no rash on her. She’s not coughing. No mucus.”

Dear God. What was wrong with her?

I felt tears but pushed them away. Not the time.

I was so scared.

“Hey.”

I looked up. Nate was watching me in the rearview mirror. “It’s probably just ear pain. I had this when I was a kid, too. My parents told me stories of how I’d scream because my ears were hurting.”

“Oh, yes. It could be that. A doctor would need to look,” came from the phone before Stephanie laughed. “Valerie was always so sensitive, too. The slightest thing, and she’d be screaming her head off.”

They were both trying to help, but it wasn’t helping.

I needed to hear she was okay out of the doctor’s mouth.

I needed to see her quiet and sleeping peacefully.

Nothing else would do it, but I didn’t say that to either of them.

“Quincey, dear. Why don’t you sing to her? Distract her.”

A pain went through my chest. “I’m not the singer. That was Valerie.”

Nate pushed in a CD, and “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” came through the speakers.

Nova stopped screaming almost immediately. Her eyes got big, still watering, and she listened for a beat. I saw the next scream coming. Her eyes closed. Her face turned red, and the throat gods opened the way again.

I leaned over her and started singing with the music.

She stopped again, looking at me.

It lasted a beat.

“Nate!” I said.

Nate began singing with me, and my mom’s voice came over the phone. I was waving the device in front of Nova, and she tried grabbing for it. A slight squeal left her, then a hiccup. She got red again. Another scream was coming.

I started bobbing my head to the music.

She was distracted again.

I moved my hands around, the phone with me.

It was working. I needed something new every three seconds, but the screams were stopping.

She took in a deep breath, giant tears hanging from her eyelashes.

She looked so tired, and I could see the pain in her eyes.

My heart felt like it was ripping out of my chest.

We pulled up to the hospital. “We’re here, Mom.”

“Okay. Let me know when you know.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I hung up before she could respond.

“Hey, hey. Wait.”

I’d been reaching for Nova’s seat belt when Nate handed me clothes from the bag he brought. He pushed them into my hands. “I’m dressed. I’ll get her out. You dress. We’ll hand off. You go in, and I’ll park the car.”

Right. That made sense.

I took the clothes, not caring one iota what he grabbed me. I was blind in looking at the clothes, just identifying what they were and pulling them on.

I'd forgotten shoes.

He was outside Nova's door now and lifting her from the seat. He saw my feet and nodded to the front. "I grabbed a pair for you."

I was so grateful but so panicked at the same time. I reached forward, grabbing a pair of yoga shoes that I kept by the door, and slipped them on.

Nate had Nova cradled against his chest and was lightly bouncing her up and down when I stepped out. He handed her over. She wasn't screaming, but she was still fussing. Her head burrowed into my shoulder. I knew another cry was coming.

I felt Nate brushing my hair back before he stepped around me. "Okay. Be back."

The ER doors slipped open for me as I went in. A security guard met me just as Nate was pulling away.

I was waved through a metal detector and went to the front desk.

After checking in, I was pacing with Nova in a corner when Nate came in.

Damn.

I hadn't noticed at the house, but the memory of him with no shirt and only in his boxer briefs came back to me. He would've made the most physically fit male dancers envious, and I was remembering it all now because I wasn't the only one noticing him. Half the females in the room were gawking at him. The front desk nurse had her mouth on the floor before she jerked upright, a bright smile on her face. He only looked at her for a second before finding me.

He stalked my way.

Only looking at me.

A few women a couple seats away from me sucked in their breath, but he bypassed them and stopped right before me. “Give her to me. You look ready to fall over.”

I wasn’t, but I did have to go to the bathroom.

Some of my panic had lessened, so other requirements were needing my attention.

I slipped away, a little breathless for some reason, but as soon as I finished and stepped back into the hallway, I heard Nova’s screams once again.

*Valerie, help me.*

I knew she wouldn’t answer me, but I sent the silent prayer without thinking about it. My panic was back, full bore, and I wasn’t beyond asking anyone for help. As I returned, seeing a few women trying to help Nate with Nova, my whole body locked down. I wanted to take their arms and rip them away from him and her.

They were mine. No one else’s.

But Nate looked up, seeing me, and he shifted farther out of their reach.

He met me halfway through the lobby, and by now, we were center stage. Everyone’s attention was watching us. As I cradled Nova against my chest, a weird and warm sensation came over my back. I smelled lilac, Valerie’s favorite perfume, and I froze for a second. In the next instant, Nova’s entire body rippled as her tension left her. She burrowed back into me, and she was asleep in the next breath.

Nate met my gaze, both of us surprised.

“Did she?”

I nodded. “She’s asleep.”

A half-laugh came from him. “Jesus. Wish I could do that.”

When we were called, we were led to a room. Three nurses came in with us to ‘help out.’ A couple of nurses stood outside the room, and I heard someone telling them to get to their

patients right before a doctor came in. She was tall, thin. Her dark hair was cut short, and she had no-nonsense eyes. She skimmed over us, lingering on Nate before her attention went to Nova.

It never wavered from Nova after that.

---

EARACHE.

That was the final diagnosis.

We were given some medicine to put in Nova's ears, but with Nate's history, the doctor told us we might as well get used to this happening.

"Is there anything we can do to prevent it?"

"As of now, not really. Clean her ears regularly, which I'm sure you're doing already. I had one kid who constantly had earaches until he turned sixteen. I had another who had nothing wrong with him, and now he's the one we worry about as an adult. So, it's hit-and-miss sometimes. Just keep an eye on her ears. Use the drops for her ear, and it should clear out in a couple of days."

She gave us a phone number to call for an after-hours consultant since ER visits weren't always necessary, but we were also told it was better to be safe than sorry.

As we were bundling Nova up, who was now loving all the attention she was getting from everyone, all the nurses coming in to say hello to her, the doctor asked me, "You're that dancer, aren't you?"

I was startled. Of either of us, I'd assume Nate would be recognized.

"Yeah."

She nodded again, washing her hands and grabbing a towel. "My daughter dances. You're a local god to her. Can I get an autograph? If that's okay? If not, this is doctor/patient confidentiality. She won't even know I ever met you."

“Oh.” A warmth spread through me. I took the pen and paper she offered and signed my name. “Her name?”

“Erin.”

I wrote a small message, adding a heart at the end, and handed it back.

She took it, holding it and making sure it didn't tear. “She's going to scream when I give this to her.” Then the moment was done. A professional mask came back, and she nodded to Nova. “Make sure to call her pediatrician in the morning. Fill her in on the visit. She'll be able to pull your file.” She went over to Nova and leaned down.

By this time, Nova was enamored with her.

The doctor smiled. “Hey there, little angel. You feel better and be good for your parents, hmmm?”

Nova started babbling back, waving her hands in the air. She was trying to tell the doc about Miss Penguin.

The doctor gave us another smile before heading out. “Hope you both get some sleep after this. Have a good rest of the night. Can't wait to see your next production.”

A few of the nurses were now giving me new looks, but it wasn't long until we were both heading back out to the parking lot. Nate had Nova in his arms.

All eyes were on us, and I couldn't blame them.

The sight of Nova in his arms, I would've been melting myself.

I *was* melting.

I was also a little embarrassed by panicking, but the doc said it was better to be safe than sorry. So I'd hold onto that.

“I'll go get the vehicle.”

“Is it far?”

“Not far. The lot's right there.”

“We'll walk with you.”

“You sure? You can stay in here, stay warm until I pull up?”

I wanted to walk with him.

I also didn't want to take Nova from him. She was loving being in her daddy's arms.

The sight was making me teary, and I swore I could smell lilacs again.

I fell in step beside him. “It's not far. We'll go with you.”

“Okay.” He shifted, hitting the auto button, and his vehicle was warm by the time we got to it.

“You want to sit by her again?”

I considered it, but she was going to fall asleep before we pulled out of the lot.

He put her in, and I went to the passenger seat. “I don't want to keep her awake if I sit by her.”

He nodded, finishing up.

When he shut the door, Nova started to fuss again. I started a low croon, and she quieted.

When we pulled out of the lot, I kept on until we were a few blocks away.

“You want some coffee?”

He indicated a drive-thru for a coffee shop up ahead.

It was nearing five in the morning by now. Coffee didn't make sense.

I nodded anyway.

He pulled through, ordered two coffees for us, and handed mine over.

It was when we were leaving the city that he said, “You were good back there.”

“The coffee place?”

“No.” A small grin from him. “The hospital. Before the hospital.”



I gave him a look, sipping my latte. “I was a mess. You had to bring clothes for me.”

His eyes darkened on me. “But you kept it together, and you didn’t waste a minute. You knew to go in right away.”

My throat was closing up, and I didn’t know why. “I just wasn’t going to risk anything.” I looked out my window. “I’m sure Valerie would’ve done better. She probably would’ve just known an earache was coming on and stopped it before Nova was ever in pain.”

“I don’t think it works quite like that, but give yourself some credit. I would’ve stayed and made calls. My parents. Eventually, I would’ve gone in, but Nova would’ve been in pain longer with me. You didn’t let that happen. *You* did that.”

I did what needed to be done

I would do what needed to be done.

“Why are you being so complimentary to me? You’re the natural one.” I looked back at him. “Ever since you found out about Nova, you’ve never wavered an instant. It was immediate. You were all about her. You never questioned anything or complained about anything. You uprooted your entire life for her.”

His eyebrows rose slightly, and he sighed, settling back in his chair. “When you told me about her, you were trying to take her away from me. No one was going to do that. I did what I had to do. She’s mine.”

His eyes slid my way, and I felt a message was there.

Right.

She was his. Not mine.

His...and Valerie’s.

**NATE**

Quincey was quiet on the way back from the hospital.

Granted, we were tired, but I was wired and ready to fall the fuck apart. I kept glancing at her, but she was turned toward the window.

“Hey.”

“What?”

She still wouldn’t look over.

“Hey. Look at me.”

“What do you want?”

I didn’t want to wake Nova, but dammit, I needed Quincey to look at me.

“Quincey.” I went soft this time, gripping the steering wheel hard. “Please, look at me.”

Her head dipped a little. Her chin tightened, and she looked.

Silent tears were covering her entire face.

I cursed under my breath, but we were home. I pulled into the driveway.

Quincey hesitated, but she saw I was moving to pick Nova out of her seat. She walked without a word into the house and into her room. I took Nova through my room to her crib, and after making sure she would remain sleeping, I went back to my room.

Jesus.

Shit.

I was tempted, so tempted, to sink onto my bed and let my own crap out, but no. This conversation needed to happen. We'd been enemies, then we were civil, then we were forced allies, and now... now it was more. A hospital trip made us more.

I went to her room but found it empty.

I checked her bathroom. Also empty.

Good. That meant this conversation wasn't going to happen when Nova was sleeping close by. Grabbing her monitor and testing it to make sure I could hear Nova sleeping, I went in search of Quincey.

She was in the studio.

I shouldn't have been shocked.

Music was on, and she was dancing furiously. It was her therapy.

Her eyes were closed. The music was loud and abrasive, it was angry. She was matching it perfectly.

I waited, knowing she was different. She needed to get this out of her. This was her way of falling apart. She did it through movement.

And I ignored how I wanted to grab her, how I wanted to peel her clothes off her, how I wanted to taste her and suck so hard that she came right then and there. I was ignoring how I wanted to push her against the wall, sink inside her, and—I had to stop, because dammit, I wanted her.

I'd been wanting her for a fuck of a long time, but everything had been put on the back burner for Nova. And now that was done and over with.

Logan's words were in my head about what I was doing after this?

Hell.

I bought a house here. I'd do anything for Nova, but this morning woke me up.

I wanted to do this with Quincey. It felt right to have her beside me, have her be the one holding Nova. *Only* her being the one to hold Nova.

She gasped, finally seeing me.

*Finally.*

“I wanted to fuck you the first moment I saw you.”

Her eyes got big, but she wasn't surprised. She knew.

I advanced. “Then you hit me with three punches. Someone I cared about was dead, I had a daughter, and you wanted to take that daughter away. I hated you at that moment. Detested you. I loathed your father even more because who the fuck do you both think you are? Coming after me. If you fought me over Nova, I would've taken you to court. I would've won, and you knew that. It's why you signed that paper. Nova is mine. You can't do shit about it. Your father can't do shit about it. Logan was asking me the other day what I wanted? Because I'm going to be real again, I miss my friends. They're my family. At first, I gave Valerie up for them, then I gave them up for Nova. I'm not giving anything up anymore. I'm going to be really selfish here.”

Fear sprang in her gaze, but she didn't shift away. She didn't look to the side.

She didn't cower or tremble.

She did nothing but stared right back at me.

I advanced again, lowering my head, gentling my tone. “I don't love you.”

A small wince from her. She couldn't hide it.

“But I want to fuck you, and when taking Nova to the ER with you, I didn't want anyone else beside me with her. I don't know what that means, but... Right now, I need to fuck you, and right now, I really, *really* hate seeing you falling apart without me there to comfort you.”

One last step. I was so close to her.

She was breathing hard, ragged.

So was I.

I watched, waiting. I needed to see her decision.

She looked away. "I'm sorry for what I tried to do. I think about it now, and I despise myself."

I moved in, touching her chin.

I raised her face.

The tears were there again, swimming in her eyes, waiting to be shed.

I cupped her face with both my hands and wiped under her eyes with my thumbs. There. She blinked, and they were gone.

A new awareness was coming up. It was like she was starting to see me for the first time. Then her mouth opened. A small 'oh' and that was all I needed.

I moved down, my lips finding hers.

She gasped, opening her mouth wider. Her hands clamped on my arms, and she surged up on her toes. I pulled her entire body against mine and lifted her, carrying her to the bed in the back of the pool house.

"Nate, I—"

"Shut up."

We were done talking.

## QUINCEY

“Q uincey, honey. We need you on the line.”  
Right.

I snapped back to reality and tried to stomp down the flush I knew was already starting. I’d been thinking about Nate, Nate’s body, how his body felt over mine, inside mine, how he intertwined our hands—and I was gone again.

“Quincey.”

That was Matthew, a hiss from him.

Shit.

We were in our last rehearsals with Patrice, and I wasn’t paying attention at all. I ducked my head down and went to my place. Matthew stepped behind me, his hand on my waist, and we both raised our hands up.

“What’s going on with you? Patrice has not been happy with your distraction. And gotta say, neither am I.” His hand squeezed my side for a bit.

Right.

I closed my eyes, but I didn’t have time for my usual waves of self-condemnation.

“I’ve just been distracted. Sorry.”

I looked over. Patrice was frowning at me, but she was nodding at what Miss Aimes was saying to her. We had only today and tomorrow with our choreographer. She was flying

off, and then we'd finish going through the entire production with Miss Aimes. Everything would get polished, smoothed up, and perfected, and Patrice would be back for our first show.

"All right. We're going to go through it one more time." Patrice signaled, and the music started.

I went through the steps, but I wasn't present.

I was back in bed, in Nate's bed, which had become our shared bed over the last week. So much had happened and changed over the past three months. I signed with Dierek. I auditioned and was cast in this lead, and then everything with my father. All of it seemed to be stumbling at a fast pace, so fast that I couldn't get my head on straight. I focused on two things. Nova. And dance. I let Nate and his team take over handling my father, which I needed.

Logan said everything was fine, but I knew better.

My father would try again.

The fact he'd stayed away from me this long only meant he had something else cooking up.

But Nate.

Me and Nate.

Matthew had me in the air, and I was moving with him. My legs wrapped around. My back arched. My head was up. I was floating through the air, but I was back there.

I was in Nate's arms.

The first time in the pool house.

Then after.

It was a week later, and we'd settled into a routine.

I woke and spent the mornings with Nova until Emily arrived.

Nate would work.

I'd go dance.

We'd reconvene, and Emily would leave at five.

Nate, Nova, and I would have dinner together, and we'd spend the rest of the evening with Nova. Games. Chasing after her. Car rides. Singing. Lots of singing. Bath time. She'd go to sleep, and Nate would find me.

He'd take my hand and lead me to another room in the house.

After we were spent, we'd go to his room, and we'd go again, this time quieter.

There were mornings when I woke him, or he woke me, and he'd be moving inside me when we'd first heard Nova starting to wake.

It was the closest experience I'd ever had to a family.

I was nearing thirty. Dancing. Sacrificing. It was what I did to reach my goal of becoming a principal dancer, but now having Nova, and now being with Nate, I was getting a taste of something I'd never thought possible.

"No, no. Stop!" Patrice's voice cut through the music.

Matthew had been about to launch me in the air. We were both poised and ready to go, but we looked over, pausing.

I'd not been present, but I knew my footwork. I didn't think anyone could tell. I had everything down. The looks. The yearning. The love. The awe.

"This isn't working."

She strode over, her eyes narrowed. She looked over Matthew.

A new awareness was coming over all of us, not just me. This wasn't a good look. If they were going to critique or fix, they did it immediately. She came over to us, and she was walking around us. Then she settled back, looking me up and down.

Her gaze wasn't moving from me.

"This isn't going to work."

Fear slammed against my sternum.



I shouldn't have been daydreaming. That was a lesson learned early on. They could always tell when you weren't feeling the dance.

"You're going to do a solo at this time."

Matthew made a sound, jerking farther back from me.

She ignored him, her gaze fully on me. She asked me, "You have time to learn a new piece?"

A sound rose from the other dancers.

This wasn't done, not when our choreographer was going to leave in two days.

She heard and motioned to everyone. "Calm down. It'll be fine. It'll pick back up, but in this segment, I want Quincey to be the only one on stage."

A whole new murmur went through everyone.

"Yes, yes." She was talking to herself, nodding and walking around me once more. "Yes. I want to do a new solo piece for you, but I need to think about it first. Give me the day. Or wait. You come with me." She turned. "Miss Aimes."

"Yes?"

"Run through the rest with the dancers. Start at the end of where she and Matthew would finish."

"Uh..." Miss Aimes was looking at Matthew. "What should we have Matthew starting from?"

"He'll run in with them and go to his normal place. We'll use her understudy today. I'd like Quincey to come with me for the afternoon."

Matthew was frowning at me, but I held my hands up in a slight shrug. I didn't know what was going on, either.

"Yes." Patrice wasn't waiting. She rotated on a heel click and motioned for me. "Quincey, if you may?" She strode off, and I hurried to pull off my pointe shoes, then darted to grab my bag and go after her. She was halfway down the hall by the time I cleared the room.

“Come, come, Miss Quincey. We need to get into our feelings this afternoon.”

I followed her to one of our back rooms, and she cut the lights except for two.

“Okay. I want you in the middle and hunched over. Look like you’re in pain.”

Whaaaa...? Okay.

I did as she said.

She had moved to a corner.

“I’m going to go through the moves in my head, but for now, I want you to dance by yourself. But—” Her voice raised on a sharp note. “I don’t want you dancing as a woman. You’re going to dance as a man. I want aggressive, fierce, and raw. I want beautiful lines. Grace. But fierce. I want you to make the crowd gasp at the things you can do, and I know you can do them. I’ve seen you move.” She waited for a beat.

The music from the show started playing.

“And go.”

I hesitated, but then instead of the music, I heard Nova’s laughter.

I began to move.

I heard Nova’s babbling.

I moved faster.

I saw her picture for the first time.

I saw Valerie opening the door with her in her arms.

I saw her on Valerie’s lap as we laughed in her kitchen.

I saw Nova in my arms as Valerie was talking to Nico in the living room.

I heard the phone call to tell me that Valerie had died.

I saw my mother as I walked into the room, how Guy was helping her stand.

I saw Valerie in the coffin for the wake.

The funeral.

I was holding Nova.

When the coffin was lowered into the ground.

The first time Nova spent the night.

That first night with her in my father's house.

Nate with Nova.

The first time they met, as he held her, as they studied each other.

I saw Nova waving Miss Penguin in the air.

Nate's home.

I kept moving. Spinning. Throwing myself in the air. My back arched.

I pushed off, looking as if I was levitating, and it was all Nova.

I was dancing to her.

The hospital.

Smelling Valerie's favorite perfume.

How Nova quieted.

How I felt walking out with Nate at my side.

Then Nate.

Feeling Nate.

Touching Nate.

Him touching me.

How he claimed me.

*"I want to fuck you."*

I was spinning, spinning, spinning, and I stopped on a gasp. My back arched out. My arms in front of me, and I pushed up, then I began moving backward. My fingers and arms were moving as if they were ribbons.

I was going to Nate.

He was embracing me. I was feeling loved by him.

I was loving him back.

I switched, bending almost all the way down so my head was behind my ass, and my arms were in the air. The ribbon was still moving. I was attached to the sky above, to the ground below, and I was moving again. Round and round. I was going faster and faster.

Tears were streaming down my face.

The music was building.

The tempo was increasing.

My spins kept going, going, matching the same pace.

Until it stopped.

This was the moment when Matthew was supposed to dip me to the floor as he covered my body with his.

I flipped my body over as if I were him, and I was staring at the ground. I was panting. Sweat was rolling down my body.

I had blended my movements and his movements.

Now it was done.

And I was broken.

The music cut out. I couldn't move, not yet. The emotion was pounding through me.

“That was...magnificent.”

Patrice strode from her corner. She added, “You can do what I want you to do.”

I was almost gasping, the emotions were still rolling through me, but she moved to me. She was speaking as if she were waiting for my own opinion on the weather.

I looked, straightening now. I stood, the sweat falling down my face.

She wasn't looking at me. She was focused on her phone. “Do you have your own studio? I heard that you did.”

“What?”

She put her phone away and smiled at me. “I’m going to need the afternoon to go over your steps, but tomorrow is my last day. I’m going to have everyone asking me questions, so I’m thinking total privacy is needed for us to get this piece down. Could I come to you?”

“Tomorrow?”

She frowned. “No. I won’t need that long. This evening. We’ll go through everything. Is that doable for you?”

“You want to come to my place and go through these steps?”

“Yes. Is that an option? I like what you did just now, and I don’t want to lose its momentum. If we finish in time, I can be here tomorrow for everyone else then.”

She was coming to my house. Well, Nate’s house. “I dance in the pool house. It’s not that big.”

“That won’t work. New plan. You go eat and then come back. Meet me in an hour. I’ll have everything ready to go. It’s going to be a long night.”

She strode off, and I was left wondering what in the hell just happened.

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## NATE

“WHAT’S GOING ON?”

Quincey had called, explaining that she needed to rehearse this evening. She sounded excited but nervous, and I knew something was different. This didn’t sound like a normal event for her.

“She wants to do a new piece with just me. It’s a solo. It’s last minute, so we have tonight to go over everything. It’ll probably be late.”

Late. Quincey. Downtown Seattle.

I wasn't going for that.

“What time are you going to be there?”

“She wants to meet me at six.”

“Will there be others there?”

“No. It sounds like it'll just be her and me.”

That's all I needed to know. I was up and moving out of my office, going in search of Emily and Nova. “That's fine. You do your thing, and we'll be excited to see you when you're done.”

They were in the toy room, and Emily was on the floor as Nova was throwing stuffed animals across the room. I came to the doorway. Emily looked up at the same time that Nova ran to me.

“You sure?”

“Babe. It's your thing. Do your thing.” I knelt, picking Nova up, and immediately she was wriggling to get free. I put her back down, and she ran back to pick up Miss Penguin. She was bringing her back over to me.

“Okay.”

“Okay.” I frowned, not sure why Quincey was feeling bad at being asked to stay late for extra time. “We'll talk to you later.”

“Okay.” Now she sounded relieved.

We hung up, and I asked Emily, “Interested in overtime tonight?”

She smiled at me.

**NATE**

The dance studio was a large brick building, and there wasn't anything special about it. A simple sign hung over the door, so that and the address were the only indicators I was even pulling up to the right place. That and the girl lingering in the doorway, peering outside.

I parked and headed for the door, and seeing me, she glanced at her phone.

I raised my eyebrows, then she let me in.

A gust of heat blasted me as she stepped back inside. I followed, the door swinging shut behind both of us.

“You're Nate?”

“Jesus. Now you're hoping I am, aren't you?” I meant it as a joke, but fuck. She was someone's daughter.

I was now looking at females this way.

She tensed.

“I am, by the way. Next time, ask for ID, or you could've made me text you.”

She raised an eyebrow back at me. “Yes, Father?”

I grunted. “Better.” Now it was my turn. “How do you know my sister?”

When I first brought up Quincey, Aspen told me she knew a few dancers. I never cared before, but I called in a favor

figuring it was after hours, and this place would be locked up tight.

“She took one of my community classes. I almost fell off my chair when she called tonight and asked if I had keys to this building.”

I nodded toward the inside of the building. “Are you in this production?”

“I have keys because I teach a class here on the weekends. The whole building is empty except for the showcase room upstairs. It’s Showcase 1. There’s a watching area that you can sneak in and hang out.” She began edging back toward the door. “Word of advice?”

“Yeah?”

“I overheard a couple of dancers leaving when I was here earlier. Your girl is up there with Patrice, and that’s a big deal. Don’t let either of them know you’re here.”

“Noted.” I gestured for the door. “How far is your vehicle from here?”

“I’m parked around the corner. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’d be more worried about your vehicle. That’s a brand-new Mercedes-Benz G.” She gave me an up and down. “Too bad you didn’t visit your sister more when she lived here.”

She gave me a wink and slid out the door.

I gave a short nod before I headed for the stairs, intending to heed her advice. I knew the dancing world had its own culture and rules. I didn’t want to mess anything up for Quincey.

The hallway was dark, half the lights were turned off, but the room where Aspen’s friend said they’d be in was empty. It took a little until I heard music coming from a room near the back of the building. I was going on a guess, and there was a door on one level. A few stairs went down, then a pair of



double doors were right next to it. The music was coming from all of the doors.

With the setup, I was wondering if they'd moved to some form of a stage.

I chanced it, moving the door, and it was quiet.

I could breathe easy, and it was also dark.

I slipped inside, heading up the walkway.

Quincey was on the stage. Her choreographer was beneath her, standing.

“No, no, no. Whatever you felt earlier today, that’s what I want you to feel. I need emotion.”

Quincey was dripping in sweat and panting slightly. Her hands were on her hips, her feet apart. She looked hot in both ways.

My phone started buzzing, and I reached into my pocket, hitting the button to stop the buzzing. Moving through my screens, I was hoping that I was hitting the screen dimmer, but I moved farther up and backed into a corner before I pulled my phone out.

**Mason: Call me when you can.**

**Logan: I know Mase is texting you. Don’t listen to anything he says.**

I took a breath, then silenced my phone and put it away. I loved my friends, but not tonight. Being here, sneaking in here, I felt like this was a sacred environment. This was Quincey’s world.

I wanted to soak it up.

I moved to the very back, the very far corner, and I eased down into one of the seats.

As I watched Quincey go through her steps and adjust to what her choreographer said, she was breathtaking. Everything up until now had been a whirlwind. Crisis, then crisis, then crisis, and another crisis. I was waiting for the day Duke showed up at the door or the day when Quincey broke, but so

far, neither happened. I knew Quincey thought I was handling everything with ease, but I wasn't.

I was faking it.

Faking it until I hoped there was a day when I felt like I got it.

That day wasn't today or yesterday, and I doubted it'd be anytime soon.

What I was doing in the meantime was doing everything possible to ensure that my family was safe, and that meant Quincey now. I didn't know when that started. At first, it'd been about pulling her in and taking her away from Dick Duke. Then it began about setting an environment where she could feel safe but also where I controlled everything.

That was the dick side of me.

She'd been a loose end. I tucked her in, pulling her under my power so she couldn't do anything to hurt me. Or even attempt it.

Then it changed.

And it wasn't when we took Nova to the ER. It wasn't afterward, though, that was a whole different level of nice. It was before all of that. I couldn't pinpoint it.

No. I *did* know.

I was thinking and remembering, and there'd been one time.

We were both giving Nova a bath. She splashed Quincey, a bubble hit her in the eye, followed by a plastic hippopotamus, and the smile Quincey gave Nova when she handed her the hippo—it was then. It was small, but she loved Nova with every fiber of her being. I saw it, and I felt it then. That was the first chink in my armor.

Now it was mostly gone.

Not all of it.

Some of it.

Enough where I needed to admit that I had feelings for this woman.

Who was I kidding? Of course, I had feelings for this woman. I was here, waiting to surprise her for a night away, and I was almost giddy about it. But I was also content to sit, watch her, and wait.

I could sit here for days, and I'd be okay. That, right there, was another clue to me.

“Miss Quincey, arch your back and grunt like a man!”

Yes. It was a blaring clue to me.

I didn't care.

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## QUINCEY

IF I HEARD Patrice tell me to grunt like a man one more time, I was going to bend over and fart like a man.

I would never do that, but I was daydreaming about it by the time she said we had it. I collapsed on the stage, legs spread out, arms on both sides of me, and I didn't want to move, like ever. Every part of me was aching, and I knew I needed to go downstairs, dress, drive home, and then crawl into bed.

I wanted to cry.

I'd been dancing for almost fourteen hours straight today. That was so much more than normal.

Patrice called out, “Okay. I'm going. Must get to sleep and be back in the morning. You can take the morning off. I'll see you later today, Miss Quincey.”

I raised an arm. “See you, Miss Patrice.”

She left, and I could've fallen asleep where I was laid out on the stage.

I might've except the floor was disgusting, but then I heard movement.

I jerked upright. “Who’s there?”

Someone was there.

A shadow separated from the back of the seats and moved down the aisle.

“Hello!” I shoved to my feet. Who the hell—fear and fury were in my throat, but then I heard a soft chuckle.

I was back to wanting to collapse.

“I knew you’d go late, but I didn’t think it’d be this late.”

Nate was moving down the aisle, coming to the stairs, and coming up to where I was.

I almost swayed on my feet. “What are you doing here?”

“Emily’s got Nova tonight, and your mom was going to check in with her, too.”

“What?” My voice broke because what was he saying?

He came over to me, eyeing me. “There’s a five-star hotel two blocks from here. I was thinking we could spend some time alone there.”

I was hallucinating. Patrice had seriously worked me too far tonight.

“I’m making this entire conversation up, aren’t I? This is a weird subconscious wish I’m having where you show up, whisk me off my feet, and take me to a hotel for the night.” I pretended to pinch myself. “Wait. That hurt. I must be awake.”

“You’re funny. I never knew that before tonight.”

I grinned, but seriously, I was tired.

“I need to eat.”

“We can get food.”

“I might need you to carry me and pretend you’re smelling lilacs.”

His grin was instant. “I always smell lilacs.”

“Good, then. Only smell that when you pick me up.”

“I’m going to pick you up?”

I nodded. “If you’re going to make a romantic gesture, you have to go all out.”

“And all out means picking you up and carrying you out of here?”

“At least.”

His eyes were warming, then suddenly he bent, and I was whisked up and in his arms.

*Whoosh!*

I squealed, hitting his shoulder. “I was kidding. Totally kidding. Put me down. I’m heavy.”

“Chill. You’re like a buck fifty.”

“One fifty?!”

He just chuckled, spotting where my stuff was and heading over. “I’m going to have to put you down so you can grab your things.”

I considered teasing him, but the fact he picked me up at all had the little girl in me swooning. He set me down, and I grabbed my bag, putting my phone inside, then he was picking me up once more. This time, I was thrown over his shoulder with my ass in the air.

“Hey!”

He laughed. “You didn’t tell me how to carry you, and I like this way the best. Makes it easier to manage your buck fifty.” He smacked my ass.

“Hey!”

My bag was falling. “My stuff is falling—” No. I grabbed it, looping it up with my fingers.

He paused. “Is everything okay? I don’t want to turn around and give you whiplash.”

I laughed, but ooh, my ribs were even hurting. “I’m good. I got my stuff.”

“Good. Where’s your car?”

“It’s on the ramp.”

“Will it be safe for the night?”

I frowned. Was he serious about the hotel? “Yeah. It should be. We’ve had cars stay there overnight before.”

“Good.”

He carried me downstairs, out the front door, and right to his SUV.

“Nate. I was joking.”

“Hush. I’m wooing you.”

I laughed, but he opened his door and placed me on the seat. The gentleness of it took my breath away. A tingle went through my body as he straightened back up, looking right at me. He was so close. I could feel his breath, and his eyes fell to my lips.

Then a wide and full smile lit up his face. “You gotta wait for that.”

He was gone, the door shutting behind him in the next instant.

I wanted to laugh. I wanted to shake off the very real emotions I was just feeling, but he held my gaze as he walked around the vehicle. Getting in on his side, he reached over and took my hand.

Butterflies were flying all over inside me, but I squeezed his hand tighter.

When I saw the hotel, “Nate.” I was awed, my voice a whisper.

“Hold that thought a second. I need to do this properly.”

A valet came to the door, and Nate handed over his keys. “Bring her bag to the room, please. 2810.” The valet nodded, and then Nate was rounding to my side. He nudged another hotel staff member out of the way who’d been about to open my door. Then he was there, and he grinned, ducking down once more.

“Nate!”

He picked me up out of the car, backed up, and then straightened. I was over his shoulder once more.

“Oh my God! Put me down.”

I knew my face was red, but these people were seeing me in my tights and the baggy sweatshirt I liked to wear when I was rehearsing. No one needed to see that. Ever. I had cold sweat plastered all over me.

Nate strode past everyone as if he owned the hotel.

Hell, for all I know, he did.

But I wasn't looking. I didn't need to add to my mortification.

“I thought you were joking about the hotel.”

“Nope.” He stopped in front of the elevator.

I started to lift up, assuming he'd put me down.

His arms tightened around my legs. “Hold tight, Quince.”

Quince.

That was one of two nicknames I was called, but damn. I loved hearing it come from Nate.

The elevator arrived, and he stepped in, turning around. Four or five people were waiting behind us.

I almost screamed and looked away. That was so embarrassing.

Nate drawled, “Excuse us, folks. She's injured. We need the extra space.” The doors slid closed as he said, “Appreciate it.”

I jostled against his shoulders. “They saw my ass.”

“It's a good ass.”

“In my dirty leotard.”

“No one cared about your leotard.”

I groaned. “You're not making it better.”

“Not trying.”

I had to laugh. “When you commit, huh?”

He laughed again. “When I commit, I *commit*.”

Nate took us to a corner suite on the second floor. He carried me over the threshold. I took in everything he’d done to prepare for tonight. Or I thought I was going to. He bypassed a table set for dinner. I was staring longingly at the bread, and he went into the bathroom.

I was set down, but only on the bathroom counter as he went and started the tub. It was a very large tub, big enough for five people. When the water was running, there was a knock on the door, and he told me, “Stay.”

He went to the door.

He came back with two glasses of wine in hand, and he handed me one. “I thought you would’ve snuck off.”

“No. I mean, when you commit.” I grinned at the water. “I’m expecting you to undress me and put me in the water.”

“Like you think I won’t?” A spark lit up in his eyes, and the wine was taken.

He moved between my legs.

I expected a fast undressing.

I would’ve been disappointed, but no. I was so very not disappointed.

He smoothed his hands up my legs, his finger sweeping inside my leotard.

I gasped, but he moved farther between my legs, his finger dipping and sliding inside me.

“Ohhh.” I started to fall back, my eyes closing.

“No. You keep them open.”

I did, but they were lidded, and I rested my head against the mirror. I was gone. Nate was moving in and out of me, and I gasped as he hit a deeper angle inside me. But he wasn’t done. His hand went up, and he pushed my sweatshirt over and



off me. He tossed it on the counter, then he leaned down, moving my leotard aside.

His mouth found my nipple, and he closed around it, sucking on it hard.

“Nate!”

I went to slide my hands through his hair. I wanted to touch him. I needed to touch him.

“No.” He caught my wrist, his face lifting. He slid two fingers inside me as he pinned my other wrist to the mirror behind me. He let me go, only to grab both of my wrists together, and he breathed into my ear. “Don’t move.”

He held me in place.

I was starting to shake.

I *needed* to touch him. Now.

His fingers continued to move—thrusting, sliding, building—while his mouth moved back to my breast. Then my other. He was sucking, tasting.

I couldn’t touch him back.

I tried, and he growled. “No.”

That growl hit me between my legs, making me throb even more.

I was so wet, and I was starting to pulsate.

He brought both my arms down behind me. He adjusted me so he was half leaning over me, his hand still working me.

I felt a scream building.

From my stomach, my chest, my throat, my neck, and it burst out of me as he pushed me over the edge. My whole body tightened around him. The waves were pulsating in me.

I gasped. I had no bones in me anymore. He had melted all of them.

“Holy crap.”

He chuckled, his body holding me in place as he moved his mouth to my shoulder. “Now you can touch me.”

I looked at him, rueful. “*Now* I can?”

His smile was triumphant. “Fuck yeah, you can.”

“Put me in the water.”

“Oh shit!” He’d forgotten the water. He turned, seeing it was at the top, but the grate had kept it from spilling over. He turned it off, checking the temperature. “It’s too hot. It needs to cool off.”

Good.

I slid off the counter, taking both straps of my leotard, and I tugged it off.

He was watching, his eyes dark and primal.

I went over to him and slid down to my knees.

“What are you doing?”

I grabbed for his belt. “You think only one can play at that game?”

I undid his belt, reaching for his zipper.

He was looking down, his eyes almost molten. “Apparently not.”

I pulled his zipper down, undid his top button, and then I reached inside for him. “You’re definitely not the only one.” I wrapped my hand around his dick and paused with a small smile on my face. “Now remember, no touching.”

A low growl came from him, but then I moved forward and took him in my mouth.

He groaned. “Oh, dear God. I’m really loving this game of ours. We need to play it every day.”

Yes. Yes, we most definitely did.

## NATE

The call came in this morning, after I was getting in from leaving the hotel. Quincey went back in for more rehearsals, and that call—it was burned in my memory. I'd been feeling good, happy with how things were with Q and I and then that fucking call came through.

*The phone rang, and seeing it was a blocked number, I went to my phone.*

*Hitting accept, I said, "This is Monson."*

*"You don't know me, but I'm Nico Mancini."*

*I froze, mid step. "Why the fuck are you calling me?"*

*He laughed. "Maybe you do know me."*

*A growl ripped from me. "You got two seconds to explain this call, or I'm hanging up and contacting police I know."*

*A second laugh. "You can't touch me."*

*"You misheard me. I didn't say the police. I said police that I know."*

*He was quiet now, because we both knew there was a difference. You call the police, they're supposed to follow protocol. You call you police you know, that protocol was really fucking iffy and after Royas' police visit he called in for me, I made sure to reach out and get to know a couple. Just because I'm not dumb.*

*"Talk."*

*He bit out, "Fine. I'm calling you as a favor. Don't forget that."*

*"I doubt that."*

*He sniffed. "Whatever, man. I figured you should know that my lawyer made me take a deal. My time's been shortened, and I don't want anything to come back and bite me in the ass. So because of that, I'm letting you in on the know about a call I got last week."*

*"What call?"*

*"Royas."*

*I froze for the second time, before another growl was working its way up from my stomach. It was burning a path on its way, and it hurt to fucking talk around that burn. "And?"*

*"And he was willing to throw money my way, wanted me to say that Val never told you about the kid because she was scared of you. Said you threatened her in your relationship with her." He wasn't done, adding in a lowered voice, "And also he wanted to know if I had a stash of something extra. You know. Something that could be found somewhere else. He didn't say, but the way I took it was that 'somewhere else' wasn't going to be on any of my property. You get me?"*

*"I get you."*

*Fuck.*

*I got him.*

*I got him real good, and fuuuuuck Duke Royas.*

*"You're telling me why again?"*

*He was quiet for a beat. "Look, whatever. I'm just saying I did care about Valerie. I made mistakes, but I would've cared for Nova, too."*

*"You're going to stay the fuck away from her. That's what you're going to do."*

*Another beat of silence from his end.*

*He spoke slowly when he spoke, "Yeah. I got you."*

I was replaying the conversation in my head, over and over again.

Duke Royas tried to set me up in two different ways.

“We’ll handle him. Don’t worry,” Logan said.

I glanced over in my vehicle.

Logan had flown in for this meeting. He didn’t know the extent of the call, just that I wanted to meet with Royas. Because of that, he was smirking at me. One foot was kicked up on the dashboard, and he was lounging back, his phone in front of him. I didn’t want to know what game he was playing, but it was annoying.

“Who picked the back alley of an abandoned warehouse, fifteen miles outside of the city for this meeting?”

Logan went back to his game. “He didn’t pick the location.”

“Who did?”

“Me.” He was punching at virtual buttons on his phone, and he cursed. “Damn. Fuck. They got me.”

“Logan.” I took the phone from him. “Why did you pick this location?”

“Truth?”

That got a scowl from me.

“I thought it was funny, and I was hoping to talk Channing into sending some of the guys from that motorcycle club he knows.”

Well.

Okay.

I was calm. I already wanted to do murder, but Logan didn’t know.

He couldn’t have known.

Except this stupid fucking game.

Except he kept wanting to call in that motorcycle club.

Nope. I wasn't mad.

It wasn't like we needed more gas thrown on the fire.

Not at all. Meeting here, calling in the MC—that wouldn't turn a campfire into an inferno. Not one bit.

I rolled my window down.

So calm.

I tossed his phone out the window.

“Hey! What the fuck?” He shoved open his door and scrambled around the SUV. “What the hell, Nate?!”

“This is a guy who could try to take Nova from me, and you thought this place would be funny? You better be kidding about the MC because if this was Taylor's dad or you were dealing with Mason's kids, you'd never want to get an MC involved, and you know it. And let go of the fucking MC. Channing's made it very clear he wants nothing to do with them.”

He shot me a dirty look before picking up his phone. Studying it, he growled before stuffing it back in his pocket. “If that had been broken, you and I would've had problems.”

“You and I do have problems.”

He came back, and I was tempted to lock him out. So tempted.

That would've been immature, right? As immature as tossing the asswipe's phone out the window, for sure.

Mason would've done it.

He got inside and shut the door. “Listen. I'm sorry. You're right about all of that. And I'm mostly joking about the MC, but I did call Channing.”

“Did he actually *take* that call?”

“He hung up on me after he threatened to send one of his guys after me. But look, the court case against Dick Duke got tossed out, and he didn't fight it. I don't trust this guy. I don't think it's above him to try something shady.”

That was a fucking *understatement*.

I shifted back and resumed glaring out the dashboard window. “He better not do a goddamn thing. I’m the one blocking him from Nova now.”

Logan frowned at me. “How’s that all going?”

“All what going?”

“With the missus. And her family. You said Graham looked like he had connected with Quincey. Any movement forward?”

I shook my head. “No. She called her mom one night because she was worried about Nova, but that’s it. Quincey’s been busy. I don’t think she’d even have time to see her family.”

“Right. You said she’s in a dance production.”

“I have tickets to the premiere night. Aspen’s flying in for it. She wants to see Nova, too.”

“Right.” He was glowering at me.

I sighed. “Why are you glowering at me?”

He cocked his head to the side with an extra bit of sass than was needed. “Why wasn’t I asked to go with you?”

“You kidding?”

“No. Why would I be?”

“You’re annoying me. Why are you annoying me?”

Logan sighed this time. “I don’t know, and I’m annoying myself.” A low rumble emanated from his throat. “I’m bored, and I’m antsy. And I miss having you in Boston. It’s not the same.”

“Well.” I moved the mirror. Dust was spitting up on the road behind us. “We are all older. We had to grow up at some point. Spread our wings and fly and all.”

“I know. It’s just not the same.”

The vehicle kicking up the dust was closer, close enough that I could see it was an SUV.

I nodded to the mirror. “Heads-up. They’re here.”

Logan looked back. “Fuck. I suddenly realize how shady this looks. I feel like we should have guns.”

I shot him a frustrated look. It was too late to change locations. “Think better next time.”

He grunted and smirked. “Will do.” He followed me, getting out of my vehicle.

The SUV went past and did a circle, coming up and parking a few feet away. A big security-like guy was the driver, but he remained inside. The back door opened. Duke got out, followed by who Logan had informed me earlier was his lawyer. He matched the description, and Logan went forward.

“Mathias.”

Yep. The lawyer.

He nodded to Logan. “Kade. This is, uh, an unusual place for a location.”

Logan grinned. “Really? I looked into your other clients. This seemed perfect for you.”

Duke came forward, stopping around six feet from me. He regarded me, his eyes frosty. “I received a phone call the other night. You spent the night with my daughter at the Blaque Hotel.”

Jesus. This guy.

*He was pissed at me?*

Red sirens were blaring.

He had a guy either at the hotel or following Quincey. That shit would stop now.

I shared a look with Logan. He had his professional mask on, so nothing was showing through it, but I knew he was surprised. I hadn’t told anyone that my relationship with Quincey had progressed.

“Quincey is no longer your concern.”



“She’s my daughter. Who she fucks, I need to know.”

A low rumble was coming from me now, and I was envisioning splattering his blood on the rocks behind him.

Logan moved forward a step, half blocking me. “Let’s all take a step back. I, for one, would like the option for safety. I’ve never seen this beast come out of Nate before, so I’m not sure what kind of mayhem I’ll need to cover up later.” He flashed them a smile before turning fully toward Mathias. “Now, Matty—”

Matty’s eyes went flat. “Are you kidding me?”

“What? I like the name Matty. There’s a certain ring to it. Just need to make sure to enunciate the tt and not make it sound like Maddie. Never mind. Second thought, you’re right. Instead of Matty, how about I-ass? That’s got a better ring to it.”

My best friend. I didn’t think the delinquent would ever grow out of him.

And I loved him all the more for it.

Duke spoke up, “I want you to stop sleeping with my daughter.”

This guy.

I inclined my head forward. I hadn’t heard that right.

“You what?”

“Speaking from personal history, Nate has a really awful time following orders. No. Really. You tell him *not* to sleep with someone, and that’s the person he fucks. So, save your breath. That’s not going to work.”

“Have you been tested for delusional disorder? What world do you live in that you think you can tell me to stop seeing your daughter?” I moved forward.

Logan edged me back, hissing in a way so everyone would hear. “There’s no such thing as Delusional Disorder. I looked. The closest thing he hits is Narcissistic Personality Disorder. He checks *all* those boxes.”

Duke looked at Logan as if he were a fly to swat away.

That pissed me off, too, but thinking of Quincey living with this man? Living under his rule?

I shook my head. “You fucked her life up.”

His eyes sharpened. “Excuse me?”

“You made her feel guilty about having a relationship with her mother, her sisters, her brother. You’re like cancer in her life. That’s why she wants nothing to do with you any longer.”

His eyes sharpened even more.

He didn’t like being insulted.

Logan made a soft sound of delight. He saw it, too.

Oh, boy.

Who was I kidding? I wanted to go in on him.

This was my kill.

“You’ve failed at being a father. You isolated your daughter. You’re the cause of any problems she had. You’re the baggage that she’s had to work through letting go, and she hasn’t even mourned losing Valerie yet. She’s too busy working on getting your demons out of her head.”

His mouth went flat. He *really* didn’t like the demon analogy.

“You’re the worst father I’ve ever met, and I’ve met some shitty ones. Trust me. You are the lowest of the low. Everyone you think that you’re above, you’re the dirt under their shoes. You will never have your daughter again, and you’ll *for sure* never have your granddaughter again. I don’t want you to ever even see Nova, and there’s not a goddamn thing you can do about any of it.” I edged forward another step.

We both had lawyers here, but I was beyond caring.

“We called this meeting because I had a call this morning.”

Logan frowned at me.

Duke didn’t. He went still, very very still.

I took a step forward. “A certain ex in jail informed me about a phone call he got, about a couple things you wanted from him.” My nostrils flared. “You fucked up, Royas. Since he was still in jail, I’m assuming you called him on their line. It was recorded. The call he made me? Blocked number. I’m betting he called on his lawyer’s phone, with his lawyer sitting across from him. Know why either is significant?” I didn’t wait. “Because if you go through with your second question to him, I’ll point everyone in that direction. Every mother fucking person I know. Judges. Police. Investigators. I will raise holy hell in my defense and all those calls are going to get put into the evidence pile. You set yourself up, and you didn’t even know it until now.”

I got him. He wasn’t moving, so I know that I got him.

Rocks moved as the lawyer stepped forward. “What call are you talking about?”

I motioned towards him. “Inform your lawyer of your mistake, or trust me; I will. You try to set me up? Fuck you.” My voice was soft, almost chiding. “I’ll do everything in my power to not only keep Nova away from you, but also your daughter.”

It’d all been a head game.

I narrowed my eyes. “That was your last shot at control over a situation completely out of your fucking control. You’re going to leave your daughter alone. You got me?”

Logan stepped next to me. “Your daughter is the one who predicted what you would do.”

Duke was still glaring at me, but at those words, his head jerked to the side. That surprised him.

My tone went mocking. “She saw you coming long before you made any moves. Want to know something else you failed at? Your daughter knows you, but you don’t know your daughter. And now you’ll never know her again.”

Mathias made a sound, but I couldn’t discern what it was. If it was a signal or an urge to stop this, I didn’t care.

Duke stared back at me.

I waited, expecting something from him.

But nothing came.

He had nothing.

We'd taken him by surprise. He had no moves left.

As if on my same wavelength, Logan scoffed. "Let's go. He's done."

We headed to the vehicle.

Logan got in his seat and said as we started to leave, "When the fuck were you going to tell me that shit?"

I glanced at him. "When I wanted to detonate the bomb to take him out."

He narrowed his eyes at me, and something flashed there. Something good. He lounged back in his seat. "He really did all that?"

"Yeah."

"Only guy we know in this scenario in jail is Mancini. That's who we're talking about, right?"

"You're right."

"Do I want to know what he wanted Mancini to say?"

My fingers curled tight around the steering wheel, real tight. "No."

"You going to tell me at a time if I absolutely need to know?"

I gave him a look, a slight grin on my face. "You know I will."

He nodded, his tension easing up. Then, he laughed. "You're like the new Mason."

I shook my head, feeling more sad than anything. "I'm just a father, and a partner now."

I gave him ten seconds.

He only needed five. "So you and the baby guardian-mama, huh?"

## QUINCEY

I was in Nate's sauna, my towel wrapped around me because he said his friend was here. My whole body was aching. We were doing doubles for rehearsals to make sure everything was ready to go, and our first show was in a week. I was ready, but I was sore.

So sore.

The door opened, and Nate came in wearing a business suit.

"What are you doing?"

He started shedding his clothes.

"Nate."

"Taylor flew in to surprise Logan, and both of them are going to watch Nova for a few hours. I told him I wanted private time with you down here."

"Where are they now?"

"In the toy room."

"Oh."

The shoes were first.

The shirt was next.

The pants.

His socks.

He pulled off the T-shirt he wore under his business shirt.

Then his hands paused just above his boxer briefs.

I sighed. I so loved his boxer briefs.

“Am I going to be alone here?”

“We’re in the sauna.”

“It’ll be great for our lungs.”

“I don’t think this is healthy.”

He gave me a wicked grin before taking his boxers off and coming toward me. “Well, I’m fully hydrated, and I was thinking of playing our game again?”

“What?”

But he had whipped my towel off, and he lowered me down on the bench.

He didn’t come over me. He moved so he was at my feet, and then he rested a hand just above my navel right before he lowered his face.

His mouth found my clit, and I was gone.

I arched up, but his hand held me in place. That’s why it was there.

“Nate.” I was already panting.

He was magical with his mouth. His fingers were magic. His dick, too. Holy. Everything about him was magical.

His tongue slid inside.

Pleasure burst through me, almost ripping me in half. It was intense and overwhelming, and just as I thought I was getting used to it, he did something new, and I was soaring right back up all over again. And again. And again.

I was writhing in place, but he held me down as he was sucking and tasting.

His tongue moved in, flicking over me.

He was working me up, and just as I thought I would burst, he pulled back.

I groaned, now biting into my arm. The type of scream he was getting from me would've scared everyone in the house. I felt another sweep of his tongue, and I bit farther down, my legs moving in place.

He moved farther up. Both his hands palmed my hips for a second, but then he switched his angle, and his tongue thrust back in. His hand moved to my nub, and he was rolling it in a smooth circle. Both, at the same time, and I was exploding in his arms.

I had a moment before he rose over me.

His gaze was dark and hungry. "Are you clean?" he rasped out.

His need was piercing.

"I—yes."

"Birth control?"

"Yes."

"Can I?" He moved up. "I don't have a condom here."

I reached down, took his cock, and pushed him back on the bench. I sheathed myself on him, and that was my answer.

His hands grabbed my ass, and then I started rolling my hips, a whole new need rising all over again.

It was my turn but for both of us this time.

He panted into my neck. "I could start loving this. I swear to God."

I paused but shuddered, and I moved even harder over him. A new burst of energy was taking me over.

---

I WAS DEAD.

I had died.

I was in heaven.

Nate lifted his head from my shoulder as I was draped over his body. We were both sitting, or he was. I didn't know what I was.

"I don't think I can move. I think you broke all of my bones."

He chuckled, a hand smoothing down my back, but he only pulled me closer. "I had to come see you, and then I saw you, and I had to eat you."

I laughed. "Nice. Well, I loved it, every second of it, so feel free whenever the urge hits you."

He laughed. His hand went back to smoothing up and down my back. "I have to tell you something."

"Oh." I tensed and pulled back to see his face. He was still inside me. "If you are going to say any words that rhyme with friends, Logan, Taylor, or Duke—I don't want to hear it."

He frowned, tracing a strand of hair down the side of my face. He moved it back, his fingers trailing over my neck and down my arm. "How'd you know about your dad?"

I groaned, lying back on him. I pressed my forehead into his shoulder. Nova liked to do this, and I could understand it, but I had no idea why. "He called."

Nate tensed. "He did?"

I nodded, still pressed into his neck. "He told me that he saw you, and he was beyond disappointed in my choice of bedmate. He said I could do so much better, and once I woke up and returned to his estate, he'd consider who he thought might be willing to be his future son-in-law."

A moment.

Nate was like cement now.

Then he exploded. "Are you kidding me?!"

I leaned back, my arms curling around his neck. Loosely. "Why are you upset? I actually think it's a good thing that he's calling. Now I know what his move is, stupid lectures. He has



to feel like he still has some sort of control over me. I'd rather know what he's doing than what he's planning. You know?"

"You're not taking any more calls from him."

"Nate." I frowned. "I know what my dad is like. His words aren't hurting me. A few months ago, I would've been devastated. Not anymore. I'm making a lot of progress. I feel like half a human now."

He was quiet, but he was still so tense.

"Nate?"

He shoved up to his feet, and I let out a yell because he took me with him.

My legs tightened around his waist when he wasn't going to let me stand on my own. His hands went under my ass, grabbing two handfuls, and he hoisted me higher. I readjusted, much closer than I had been on his lap.

His eyes were grilling right into mine.

"If I talked to Nova like that?"

Everything wilted inside me.

He saw it. "Exactly. If I called her and said any of the shit that he's said to you? That'd be okay?"

"Of course not." My chest was hurting just thinking about that.

"Then do me a favor and don't let him talk to you that way."

He didn't get it. If Duke was doing this, then he wasn't plotting to hurt me in another way.

But I got what he was saying. I'd kill him before I let anyone talk to my daughter like that.

Not—I meant Valerie's daughter. My goddaughter.

Some of the fight faded, and he rested his forehead against mine, still holding me. His fingers flexed in my ass. "I don't want him to hurt anyone I care about."

Pleasure flooded over me, centering right where my heart was.

“That shit could leak to Nova in ways you couldn’t even think of. None of this can touch Nova.”

Right. Cold reality crashed back into me.

Nova.

I couldn’t let Duke hurt me, and somehow that could get through to Nova. I understood what he was saying, and he was right.

He was being the dad to Nova that my dad never was to me.

“Quincey?”

I missed the Quince.

“Hmm?”

“You’ll stop taking calls from him?”

I nodded. “I will.” I pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “Thank you for being a good parent to Nova.”

The fight completely left him.

“She’s not the only one I care about here.” He was staring right at me.

My heart squeezed.

Did I dare feel... Of course, he cared about me. We had magical sex nights together. There was a whole bunch of caring going on there.

I tightened my arms around his neck. “Back at you, you know.”

He grinned, his eyes soft. “I think Logan would cover another hour.”

“Yeah?”

His hands were flexing over my ass again, and he began rolling me over him.

I tightened my legs, grinding with him, and soon neither of us cared.

## QUINCEY

Logan's girlfriend was gorgeous. Her hair looked smack on the line between dark blond and a caramel light-dark color. When she turned her head one way, I saw blond. The other way, caramel. It was pulled in a messy fish-braid, and I loved it.

Loooooved it.

She also had sparkling warm eyes and a warm aura that oozed from her. I liked her immediately.

I'd started to feel comfortable with Logan. He flew out so much, and after he helped against Duke, meeting his girlfriend was a big deal to me. She'd been at the surprise baby shower and around the day after, but there were so many of them. Nate and I weren't *together* together, or together how we were together now, so they all seemed like a cohesive "them," and I was not one of "them."

Now I didn't know what I was, but I felt more "in" than I had been before. I wasn't all the way. Maybe an arm. Or a hand. Or an elbow.

One of those.

Maybe an ankle.

Yes. I felt like I had an ankle in.

And tonight, I felt like I was getting a shin in, too, or half of my calf muscle. Just one, though. Not both.

We were at Keela. The atmosphere was private, and elegant, and romantic.

I was trying not to think about the romantic part because I didn't want to get ahead of myself. Nate and I were sleeping together, but he'd not said anything about a relationship status. I was operating on the assumption that we were sleeping together, and that was it. My priorities were Nova, dancing, and Nate's bed. I was fine keeping with that status quo unless something changed.

"Logan mentioned you're in a dance production now?"

We'd been seated. Logan and Nate were conferring over the drink menu, but I'd eaten dinner enough with both of them to know they were probably talking about anything but what kind of wine to order. They were like two giggly boys at times. When I focused on Taylor, she was holding back a smile, and I had a feeling she knew instantly what I'd been thinking.

I flushed, laying my hands on my lap and straightening more in my seat. "I am, yes. It's a new type of program, so it's exciting."

"That's amazing."

"And you're a nurse?"

She nodded. "It's hard work, but addicting."

The guys had quieted. Logan's gaze rested on Taylor, a softening, but also a very focused look came over him at the same time. As if feeling it, she looked over, and the two shared a gentle smile.

I wanted that. Badly.

Pain sliced through me, and I had to take a second because it rose so swiftly and powerful that I felt it in my throat. I felt seared.

Glancing to Nate, seeing his gaze on me, I couldn't discern what he was thinking or feeling. I gave him a small smile, and then his gaze gentled. "Did you want some wine tonight? We ordered red, but I know you don't usually drink."

"Graham was all insistent on some pink drink for you."

I was surprised, seeing Logan grinning at me. He had a hand under the table, his arm veering toward Taylor, and I glanced down. They were holding hands.

Another dart of envy pierced me, but it wasn't as strong as the first.

Small miracle.

"I'm going to stick with water because of the production, but I wish I had tried some of that pink drink. My brother looked enamored with it—"

"What the fuck?"

I stopped, confused at Nate's biting tone, but he wasn't staring at me.

He was glaring beyond Logan and then at Logan. His jaw clenched. "You did this?"

Logan didn't play dumb. "I made a call."

Nate shoved up from the table. "You overstepped." Then he looked at me. "I will do what you want. If you want to leave, we'll go. If you want to stay—"

But then I saw who he was talking about.

Graham was leading the way, his hand holding another's behind him. I saw Britney trailing.

If it's just Graham and Britney—wait, I was wrong.

Britney was talking to someone behind her, and my chest was effectively being pushed down by an elephant's foot. Calihan was with them.

Calihan and someone behind Calihan. Another male.

It was a double date. Just like us.

Wait. Were we on a double date?

Of course, we were.

Why did I keep doubting that? Nate had never given any indication that we were just screwing co-parents. Well. Had he? Note to self: square away what we were because that was

going to drive me nuts. I needed to know. The whole rolling with the wave wasn't going to work with me.

I'd been kidding myself, but we were back to Calihan.

Graham, he was fine.

Britney, she was fine.

Calihan's date, he seemed fine.

Calihan, she had a hint of something mean in her gaze when she saw me, but she didn't pause. There was no surprise. They came knowing we would be here. Nate was right. Logan *had* overstepped.

"Quincey?"

I folded my hands back together on my lap and rolled my shoulders. I wasn't running, but I did pull my dancer mask on. Calihan wasn't going to see anything get to me tonight, and she faltered, her eyes narrowing when she noticed I had my "cold bitch" mask on.

Some dancers were great. Nice. Bubbly.

Some weren't. Some were just mean.

I'd endured that all my life. I'd been taken aback the last time, but not this time.

I murmured to Nate, "I'm good. Maybe I'll need that wine after all."

I felt Taylor move closer to me.

"Monson."

The greetings had started.

Logan stood as well.

"Kade."

He and Graham shook hands. Graham reached around, giving Nate a good-natured tap on the arm. Nate lifted up his head in a nod back. Then the maitre d' came over, and we were being led to a more private room.

Nate kept an eye on me, but Taylor was the one who walked beside me. She leaned over. “What just happened?”

“Graham and Calihan are my siblings. Calihan isn’t happy with me.”

“Okay.” She patted my arm. “Logan knew?”

I hesitated, then shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Nate’s furious, and I don’t remember ever seeing Nate mad at Logan, though I don’t think the love of my life is caring about that right now.”

Right.

We were shown to a larger table. There were only two others in the small room, and neither had large parties. Four or five, that was it. I went down one side of the table, feeling Taylor behind me. I heard her say, “Nuh-huh. You’re in trouble.”

Nate was rounding the table, coming to take the seat beside me.

I was grateful for both of them, but I’d be fine. Now I knew the score with Calihan, I was properly guarded. When we all sat, Nate was at one end, and Calihan’s date at the other. I was to Nate’s right. Taylor. Logan. Across from me was Graham, and Britney and Calihan sat across from Logan. Her date between both of them.

The drinks came soon after, then we gave our orders.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the table.

Graham broke it, clearing his throat. “So, Logan. You just visiting Nate for this trip?”

“No.”

Graham frowned.

Logan leaned forward and smirked. “I’m here for mental warfare.”

“This have to do with Duke?” Graham nodded in my direction. “I thought that got cleared up a while ago.”



Logan opened his mouth.

Nate growled, literally growled. “You’re my fucking lawyer. Act like it.”

Logan closed his mouth, then a slow smile spread over his face. “Have I mentioned how much I’ve missed you?”

Okay.

I was the elephant in the room, and it was time to put it to bed or get it out of the way. Before Taylor could say anything, I leaned forward. Everyone’s attention came to me, and I asked Calihan, “Are your claws out tonight?”

Logan’s eyes sparked alive, skirting between Calihan and me.

Calihan’s gaze cooled, and she cocked her head to the side. “Only if I need them out.”

“Like last time? Because you’re right, I was there. In the house. Standing. Breathing. I’m sure they needed to come out then, too, right?”

Her eyes narrowed, and she was bristling.

Britney gave her best friend a heavy look before leaning forward, half blocking her from our end of the table. She pasted on a bright smile. “We bought tickets for your premiere night, Quincey. We’re so excited to come and watch you again. Have you missed dancing?”

Calihan snorted behind her.

Britney stiffened but didn’t react.

I looked at Nate. He was still glowering at Logan, then I looked at Graham. He was frowning at Calihan behind Britney. And Britney, for her part, was trying. The smile she was giving me was half-pleading and half-desperate. I suddenly had a hunch that Calihan hadn’t thawed one bit and wondered at how many rants Britney had had to listen to from my sister.

Logan and Taylor were sitting back.

Taylor seemed apologetic, but Logan was watching me steadily.

He was assessing me. No. He was measuring me.

“Are you angry that I’ve come back into the family?”

Calihan scoffed, reaching for her drink.

“Or are you angry that Valerie left Nova for me to raise?”

Her hand froze.

That was it.

It made sense now. All of it.

I sat back, shocked myself.

“It doesn’t matter. Nova is Nate’s and Valerie’s. Not yours.”

I only had eyes for my sister. The rest of the table ceased to exist for me. It was just her, me, and Valerie’s ghost.

“You didn’t want children.”

“I loved Nova.”

“Loved?”

“Love. I love Nova.”

“You haven’t asked to see her. You haven’t asked to watch her. Nothing.”

“Because of you. If it wasn’t you, I’d see her every day if I could.”

Everything about that response stung me, over and over again. She was taking a needle, and she kept puncturing me all over.

“Calihan,” I started.

She jerked forward in her seat. “It’s you. You shouldn’t be in the family. I just wish you would’ve left us alone. Take Nova. Fine. But go away. Move away. You’re just going to hurt everyone.”

“You don’t get to talk for me,” Graham was seething. “You can speak for yourself, but that’s it. I, for one, am ecstatic that Quincey’s coming back to the family. A dinner like this? Never would’ve happened two years ago. Four years ago. Now I’ve gotten to see her three times in three months. That’s progress, and I want more.” He regarded me, his mouth thinning. “I want the relationship where I can come over for dinner four nights a week. I want you to call me if you need Uncle Graham to pick up Nova from baseball.”

“Softball, honey.”

“From softball. Or soccer. I don’t care. Hockey. Speak for your goddamn self, Calihan, or better yet...*don’t*.”

Calihan gasped and shoved her chair, standing up.

I leaned back in mine. “You’re running?”

Her stormy gaze swung my way. “It worked for you last time.”

I stood, but I was slower, calmer. “No, it didn’t. Running hasn’t worked for me at all. I’m standing now, and I’m fighting.”

She snorted, rolling her eyes. “Really? Because from where I’m standing, all I see is Nova’s daddy doing the fighting. You’re standing behind him, letting *him* do all the work.”

I felt the slap from that, too, but it wasn’t as bad as the others. She was right. I glanced over at Nate, who was watching me carefully.

“She’s right,” I said to him.

“Quincey.”

“Duke is my problem.”

“No.” This one came from Logan, and his tone was firm. “Listen, it was a dick move on my end to invite them. I did it for a reason, and I’ll explain it later. Nate will still be pissed, but he’s been pissed at me before and vice versa. He and I will be fine. But you and your family, you cannot take on your father. Sorry, but you can’t. He’s a special type of animal. Let

me and Nate handle him.” He said to Nate, “You know why I called them, and I’m not apologizing for that.”

“We will talk later.”

“I approve, by the way.”

I frowned. What was Logan talking about?

Nate raised his eyebrows. “I can die happy now.”

Logan grinned, leaning back and reaching for his wine. “From an audience standpoint, you’re losing.” He was saying that to Calihan, but then his tone shifted again. It grew colder. “Also, Quincey’s family to Nate now, which means she’s family to me, so when you take her on, you should just assume you’re taking all of us on. Keep being a bitch, and we’ll start coming back for you.” His eyes slid toward Taylor. “Your turn.”

Taylor turned to me, then Calihan. Her eyes had been warm, sparkling before. There was a hauntedness in them now, one that ran deep, and I could feel it inside of me. It was that strong.

I frowned, already wanted to reach out to her, but then she turned to Calihan and spoke. “It’s not my place to say anything, and normally I wouldn’t, but you lost a sister. I’d think you wouldn’t want to lose another.” She held a hand up. “I’m saying that as someone who understands the pain you’re feeling right now. I understand it *very* well.”

I loved her.

Calihan looked taken aback.

She opened her mouth, scanning the table. Graham was watching me. Britney was watching me.

Calihan was alone. It wasn’t a feeling my sister grew up experiencing a lot.

Not me. That’s almost all I experienced.

A wave of emotion rolled over me, a good emotion.

“Calihan, you can be angry with me for staying away from the family. You can be angry if I hurt Mom, or Graham, or

yourself because of my absence. You cannot be angry with me for Valerie's decision, and if you want to be angry with me for loving Nova, then you and I are done because I will never give her up."

She sucked in her breath, blinking back some tears. "You weren't there. You weren't around—"

"I was, actually. Nova was born, and I reached out. A lot. I was there when Nico tried coming back around."

Graham spoke up, "She was there when Valerie got one of Nico's calls."

Calihan blinked again, weaving backward from the table. "I didn't know that."

"You're mad that Val is gone. Be mad. Fine. That's part of your grief, I get that. But stop taking it out on Quincey. You know what it's been like for her living with Duke. You *know*."

Calihan looked effectively shut up.

I was ignoring what Graham said, and I was choosing to appreciate Calihan's silence.

She looked down, and a moment later, she sat down. Reaching for her wine, she held it toward me and gave me a forced smile. "Let's hear about the new production you're in, Q. And then I'd like to see any videos or pictures you have of Nova. My aunt card is dying to be punched."

Logan looked at the guy on his left. "Who are you?"

It lessened the air around the table. Most everyone chuckled, relaxing, but then I glanced at Nate.

Not Nate.

Nate was not relaxed.

Nate was pissed.

**NATE**

**W**e ate.  
We drank.

We laughed.

I stewed.

Quincey, Taylor, and Logan all knew I was pissed. The others didn't, and if they did, I didn't care.

Once we left and were in the vehicle, Logan opened his mouth.

I shot him a look. "Not yet."

He closed it and sat back.

We rode back to the house. Taylor and Quincey went inside.

Quincey glanced back, concerned. I shook my head. "We just have something to hash out. I'm sorry he called your family without your permission."

Logan was waiting in the kitchen.

Quincey grabbed my hand, giving it a slight squeeze. "Go easy. It was a good thing he called them. Calihan and I needed to have that moment. It'll make it easier to reach out, to be honest."

I lifted my head in a nod, but it was hard. Every muscle in my body was screaming to fight, but this was Logan. He was

my brother, my best friend, and fuck if we hadn't endured worse over the years.

He said good night to Quincey as she headed to the room, then locked eyes on me. "Where?"

I didn't answer, just leading the way into the basement and into one of the back rooms.

He looked around, whistling. "Why haven't you shown me this before now? This would be a sweet movie theater room."

I ignored that. "You were testing her?"

He stood to face me.

Neither of us was sitting.

Anger and so many emotions were churning over in my stomach.

"Yeah." He raised his chin. "I don't give a fuck that you're pissed. You're sleeping with her. I know you. I know how you are as Nova's father, and I know you wouldn't start sleeping with her unless you had feelings. Do you love her?"

"Do I—HOW'S THAT ANY OF YOUR BUSINESS?!"

He didn't react. "Because you're family to me. Because if it wasn't for her, you'd have Nova in Boston already, and you know it."

"What?"

"You love her, and you're going to stay here, and I can tell."

"I—" I held my hands out, feeling fucking confused. "You're asking about shit that I don't know myself. I *can't* know. It was about Nova, then we went right into the fight to get her and keep her, and now... you're way ahead of me."

"I know."

"Is there more going on here that I'm not seeing?"

"No." But he stopped.

"Logan?"

“Mase, and now you, are both getting your own families. I can tell. It’s always been about our group for you. It’s not anymore. It’s about Nova and Quincey for you.”

“You’re getting *way* ahead of me. I’m not...” I was still at a loss here. “Logan, is this about you?”

I let that simmer, and then the answer was clear. It was.

Maybe?

No. It was.

I focused on him and said slowly, “I think this is more about you than me. You knew there was bad blood with Quincey and her family. You invited them on purpose.”

“I wanted to see if she’d fight or if she’d run. She can’t run forever—”

There was a wince there, and I got it. I got all of it.

He kept on, “If you’re going to be with her, and if she’s going to be Nova’s mom, then you need someone who’s going to fight.”

“She’s already Nova’s mother.”

“I’m getting that.”

“And if she hadn’t? If she hadn’t fought today?”

“Then she’s not worth it.”

I nodded slowly.

He was venturing into my relationship, so turnabout was fair here. “Like you think you’re not worth it? For Taylor?”

He closed his eyes, turning away.

“You fell in love with Taylor in college. You’ve not proposed, but I know you. You love her with everything in you. It’s not her who’s the problem. Am I right?” I waited a beat. “You think you’re the problem?”

I was right.

I saw it.

His shoulders were lowered, and he wasn’t answering me.



“What’s the issue, Logan?”

His eyes were torn. He looked all twisted. “Stop, Nate.”

“No. You’re in my relationship. I’m coming into yours.”

“Nate—”

“What’s the issue, Logan?! What’s the issue?”

He threw his hands up, turning away. “I was a fuckboy growing up.”

“Yes. So was I.”

“You weren’t like me, and you know it. I was—I fucked. That’s what I did. I had a bad feeling, I went and got ass. If I marry her, how do I know that I won’t resort back to that? That I won’t be like my father?” His voice broke. “That I won’t destroy her like my dad did to my mom? You can’t know I won’t do that. I don’t know if I’ll do that.”

Jesus. He thought he was like his father.

Mason should’ve been here for this.

But, dammit. He wasn’t. I was. And I’d been the one to push him.

My voice came out quiet. “You’re not like your father.”

“Push comes to shove, I might be. I was when I was younger.” His tone was so bitter. Haunted.

“No, Logan. No.” I shook my head. “You’re not like your father. He didn’t care that he was cheating on your mom. *He* didn’t care. Not you. You care. You already care, and you’ve not done anything. You love Taylor so much, but dude, you have to let some of your demons go. The fact you’re scared about this is *why* you won’t do this. Taylor balances you. She’s your *anchor*. That’s what you need. That’s what Mason did for you growing up. He was the stronghold, and you could go off and do the shit you did. I see it. No one else would work for you. No one else could be your literal other half. I don’t give a fuck what you think; you will only love her and do right by her. The same with children, because if you’re having those worries about you being a husband, I know what you’re

thinking about you being a father. You're wrong, Logan. You'll do amazing at both."

He nodded. "I was expecting you to rip into me, and I was ready for it. I had all these great arguments, but basically, I was going to say, 'Fuck you. You deserve the best.' And this is what you're saying to me."

"You love Taylor. If you're waiting for permission to be a husband and a father, consider this it. I didn't know Nova existed, and I'm pissed that I lost out on those months before, but I have her now, and I have to move forward. I have to do right by Valerie and be the best father I can be."

"You're already a great dad."

"I know. And you will be, too."

Logan drew in a ragged breath, then that emotion was gone. It took some effort before the old Logan was smirking back at me. "Are we good? Is our Soul Brotha Connection couples therapy session done?"

I wanted to laugh, but I stared at him long and hard. "I love you. I love Mason. But I'm going to say this once. If you or anyone else *ever* pulls something like that on Quincey again, there *will* be a rift between us, and it'll be one that won't get healed."

I was dead serious.

Logan saw it, and he straightened. The amusement left him. "I know. That's why I had to see if she's worth it."

I wasn't going to ask if he thought she was. I knew he did. He threw down for her at the dinner against her sister. So did Taylor. Quincey didn't know what it was like to have a family like I did, but she would.

I clapped him on the shoulder, and we both headed upstairs.

He went upstairs to Taylor, and I headed to my room.

Quincey wasn't in it, so I poked my head into Nova's room. She was sleeping. Not wanting to risk waking her, I headed back and around to the other side of Quincey's room.

Her bathroom light was on, her door closed.

I let out some tension that I hadn't known I was carrying and went over to her bed. I sat and waited.

When I heard her shower start, I stood and crossed the room.

Opening her door, she was standing under the spray of water, her head down.

Did I love Quincey?

I didn't know.

But I cared about her, and that was strong enough for me to know this was worth it. What the 'it' was, I didn't know myself, but I was willing to find out.

That decision made, I headed inside.

I was stripping when she saw me, and she gasped, but then her eyes darkened as I stepped inside with her.

"Was it a good talk?"

"Yes." And then there was no more talking.

I hoisted her up and pushed her against the wall the same time my mouth dropped to hers. Then it was just her, me, and a whole fuckuva lot of sex.

## QUINCEY

“**G**irl. You have been busy.”

That was an understatement. I was meeting Ricci for coffee because the few phone calls we’d had weren’t doing the trick. She slid into her chair across from me. We were holed up at a table in the far corner, the coffee shop bustling on a Sunday afternoon, and I gave her a look.

“You’re telling me.”

Ricci cupped her hands around her mug and leaned forward. “No. I want *you* to tell *me*, please. You’re in the new production?”

I nodded.

“I’ve seen the pictures on the gossip blogs. I want to know everything.”

I frowned. “Gossip blogs?”

She sat back, her eyes widening a bit. “You don’t know?”

“No.”

What could be on a gossip blog? They never cared about Seattle dancers, and Nate was known, but he wasn’t famous.

“There are pictures of you at dinner with your baby daddy and a whole bunch of speculation about the both of you. You didn’t know? For real?”

I shook my head, dazed. “Why would they care?”

“Because Nate is gorgeous, and young, and wealthy. A friend of mine reached out. She knows one of the bloggers, and she was told that they started getting more traction every time they posted a picture of Nate. I’m assuming it’s the same for the other sites. Sometimes you get famous just by knowing famous people, and your baby daddy knows some famous people.”

“I wish you would stop calling him that.”

“Oh.” She winced. “Sorry, but honestly. What’s the scoop? You guys were at a dinner, and the way he was looking at you? It was making *me* all hot and bothered.” Then her eyes bulged out. “Oh my God. Your dad. He must be going crazy. You know how he is, thinking he owns you and can control you.” She edged back, frowning to herself. Her finger began tapping against her mug in a distracted and absentminded way. “Wait. You said he backed down from the court thing against you. You think he’s letting you go?”

I sat there.

“No.” She answered her own question, her gaze falling down to the table. “That doesn’t seem like him. Anyway.”

I wasn’t a part of this conversation.

She flashed me a smile. “How’s it going? Also, I had a date last night.”

“Ricci!” I lunged for her, my excitement more because I needed a break from the questions, and I grabbed her wrists.

She squealed, letting go of her mug, but she caught my hands in hers and squeezed. “Yes?”

I laughed. “Tell me about the date.”

She laughed, letting go of me and sitting back.

I sat back, too, finally feeling some tension easing when she started talking.

She met him online. He seemed nice. His name was Marshall. They went to dinner and had drinks afterward, and she ended with, “I slept with him, but he was gone this morning, and I’m pretty sure I’ll never hear from him again.”

She was looking at me as if I was supposed to say something.

“I have no experience with online dating or dating in general. It’s been years since I went on a date.” I wasn’t including Nate because I hadn’t told her about the “us” that was happening, so I wasn’t counting him.

“He wasn’t that good.”

“Nate?” I frowned.

“Huh?”

Right. “Your date.”

“Wait. Why were you thinking about Nate just then? Is there something going on between you two?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

I drew in a breath. Ricci always knew me the most out of everyone.

“You are! You totally are. I can see it. And pfft you. You were just lying to me about not having experience dating.”

“Any current experience.”

“Whatever’s going on between you and Nate is current. You’re a liar.”

She was right.

Dammit.

I sighed and then told her everything. Almost everything. I kept back the part where he got mad at his friend last night.

“Wow.”

“I know.”

She looked like she was having a hard time breathing.

I raised an eyebrow. “You okay?”

“I know I shouldn’t, but I’m imagining having sex with that man, and I’m about to come right here.”

“Ricci!”

She started laughing, half falling out of her chair.

I couldn't fight my own grin.

Then she sobered and straightened back in her chair. “You need to listen to what I'm about to say to you and understand that it's coming from someone who loves you. Go with him.”

“What?”

“You said you're worried he'll want to take Nova to Boston. If he does, go. Seriously. Get away from here. Get a new start, a fresh start. Get away from your dad. If you're here, you're going to always feel him over you.”

“But my mom and Graham...”

“They're here, and they love you, but I know you. You're almost glowing, and that has to do with Nova and Nate. Stick with what's making you happy. You can dance there if you want to keep dancing.”

“Emily—”

“There'll be people there who can help.” Her mouth curved down. “I will miss you, but you can visit. You can fly back, see me, see your mom, Graham, whoever. See Calihan if she pulls the stick out of her ass.”

I'd never considered the thought of going with him if that's what he wanted.

“Nate hasn't said anything. I might be creating a problem that's not even there.”

“I'd say it's there. He's seriously close to his friends, and they're there. He's only here because of Nova. He can work from everywhere, right? He invests in companies? That's what he does.”

I nodded. “Yeah. He does really well.”

“What about his family?”

“He doesn't seem close to his parents, but he is to his sister.”

She set aside her coffee and leaned over the table, taking my hands. She linked our fingers, and she gave me a solemn look. “Just promise me that you’ll consider it. I like the happy look you have going, and I want you to keep it.”

My throat closed up with emotion suddenly, but I swallowed it away and nodded. “I will.” I squeezed her hands. “You’re a good friend.”

She snorted. “I’m the best kind of friend there is. I get to regale you with stories of my online dating adventures, and you get to tell me what it’s like falling in love with someone like Nate Monson.”

Her words were teasing.

I didn’t think she meant them.

But I stiffened at hearing them because she was right.

I knew I’d been falling for him, but it was done and complete.

I was in love with Nate Monson.



**NATE**

**L**ogan and Taylor headed back to Boston, and Quincey had been quiet through the rest of the week. She was quiet normally, but it felt like more. Dinner with Nova was a bit more subdued, and even bath times, she was there. She was active. She was tickling and making Nova laugh. She was holding her when Nova wanted to be held. She was doing everything right, but... it was like she was pulling inside herself.

I didn't like it.

I hated it, actually.

I tried to draw her out in bed, and it worked. She'd come alive in my arms, but once I shifted out of bed, she was withdrawing. She was a shell of herself.

I had no idea how to stop it.

I brought it up in conversation, and at first, it sparked her back to me, but that waned after a few days. Her mother and stepfather came over for visits. They reached out this week more as well, wanting to see Nova. I waited, but Quincey was the same with them. I was toying with the idea of having Graham stop by for a surprise visit, but I didn't want that to backfire on me.

I worried it was dancing, but she was the same on her rest day, too.

Her premiere was coming up, so maybe it was that?

God. I was hoping it was because I was wracking my brain, and I had no clue what it could be. The more she pulled away, the more I became fixated on keeping her here with me.

I was at a loss, so I was on the phone with my sister.

“I don’t know what to do.”

I ran it down for her already.

She was quiet for a moment, a long moment. “You’re sleeping together?”

“Yeah.” I explained that.

“And you had the talk about where you guys were as being together together?”

I frowned. I hadn’t explained that. “Err, no.”

She expelled a snort. “You gotta talk to her.”

“I did. I tried.”

“Try again.”

“Aspen, you don’t get it. She’s not—”

“She’s female. Sometimes, you have to try more than once.”

“I did.”

Why was I fighting my sister on this?

“Try. Again.” She sounded exasperated. Then “Hey!”

A rustling sound.

“Nathaniel.”

I gritted my teeth, hearing my brother-in-law on the phone. Not because I was hearing Blaise, but because he’d taken to using my full name, and I wasn’t a fan of my full name.

“Asswipe.”

He grunted. “I’ll accept that.”

“Blaise!” From Aspen. She wasn’t amused.

His voice sounded from afar. I was guessing he turned away. “I’m a dude. You are not, and thank God you aren’t, but let me explain it to him real simple. Nate.” His voice was clearer. “Chicks want groveling. They want to be princesses. It’s not their fault. They were taught to want that before they’re out of the womb, man. You need to pamper her, and I’m not talking wining and dining. I’m talking you make them feel loved and cherished and respected. They’ve got like a Mason jar of feelings, and depending on your chick, it could be clear, or it could be all muddied up. I’m betting yours is muddied up from what Aspen’s shared with me, so you’re the rag. You gotta get in there and wipe that jar clean. Make it sparkle and shine and all that jazz, and when it is, typically, your chick will love you forever. You want her to love you forever?”

*Love?*

“Uh...”

*Love?!*

Blaise sighed on his end. “Oh, boy. That’s situation number one to handle. What do you want? You need to figure that out. When you do, either leave the jar alone or get in there and start cleaning.”

“You are—”

Blaise turned from the phone. “What am I?”

“I don’t know, but give me the phone back. Also, I love you. A lot. Also, I don’t expect to be treated like a princess.”

“I’m aware. That’s why I fell fucking hard for you, and you love me a lot because I make sure your jar is cleaned, babe.” Blaise was sounding smug. “Peace out, Nathaniel. Listen to me. I know my shit when it comes to women.”

Aspen was back on the phone, and she rumbled, “I hate to give him some credit, but he’s not wrong. It does sound like you need to know where you are sitting and then go from there.”

We talked a bit more, but the meat of the phone call was done. And I wasn’t sure if I had been helped or not. I needed

to know what I wanted.

Got it.

I could do that.

But...

What did I want?

## QUINCEY

I woke to kisses on my back.

Nate's hand moved the blanket off me.

I was rolled away from him, half on my stomach, and I felt him kiss down my neck.

My shoulders.

He tugged my tank up and rolled it off my head, then went back and began kissing down my spine.

Pleasure was pulsing through my body.

I shivered, a good shiver and my insides were melting into one giant throb kind of shiver. I needed him. I wanted him.

I began to roll toward him because I was going to have him.

He held me down. "No. Let me do this."

"What?"

But my breath hitched because I liked this. A lot.

I was excited about this.

But I growled because *I* wanted *him*, even if he was the one to start this.

He moved my underwear down, and then his mouth was there, and I was gasping.

"Nate!"

I heard and felt him chuckle at the same time.

It was sending me reeling.

His lips moved, searching me, and he was holding my hips in his hands. He was keeping me anchored for him.

Oh.

My.

God.

I couldn't—I gasped when his tongue hit deep, and I grabbed for the bed to keep myself in place.

I didn't need to worry. His hold on my hips was strong. He was holding me exactly where he wanted, and as a silent scream worked up through my throat, he angled my hips higher, and then I felt him line up behind me.

He lay almost over me, moving and grabbing my wrists in both hands, then he thrust in.

It was intense.

It was exhilarating.

I couldn't stop writhing in place, moving with him, but he held me still. This was all him as he pounded me out.

In. Out.

Deep.

Hard.

He was working me, bringing me to the edge.

I felt his mouth on my neck again. He was tasting me, then he slid around, and I turned. I needed to taste him back. Badly.

His mouth found mine, and he started going faster.

“Nate,” I breathed as his tongue slid inside.

His hands let go of my wrists and moved back to my hips. He flexed, his fingers digging into my skin, then he reared back. He paused and thrust back inside. He was almost slamming into me.

I loved it.

“Harder.” I gasped.

He paused. His hands squeezed my ass now. “You sure?”

“Yes. God, yes.”

I was panting, wanting to twist around to him, knowing I couldn’t, knowing he needed this, but dammit, I liked rough sex. I wanted it even harder.

He pounded into me, gripping my ass as he bent over me. I arched up, pushing back from the headboard, and he gripped me around the neck. He angled my head, his mouth finding mine, and his tongue swept inside, keeping in rhythm with his thrusts.

He growled. “You gotta come, Q.”

*Q.*

My climax tore through me, almost snapping me in two, and I cried out, folding over.

The waves pulsated through my whole body, making me feel like I had an entire other heartbeat for a moment. It was so strong.

Once I’d come down, I felt Nate pushing, digging deep, deeper, and then he stiffened over me, his own release sending a whole new wave of pleasure coursing through me.

God.

That was—holy fuck.

We both collapsed, with Nate half on top of me.

He started to move off me, but I snaked a hand out, grabbing him. “No. Stay.”

I liked his weight.

Who was I kidding? I loved his weight.

I loved this.

I felt connected to him in ways that I never knew was possible.

And he didn’t love me back.

No. I pushed that thought away. It didn't matter.

He was here. I was here. We were both together.

Now.

Keyword.

Now, not later.

I'd worry about *later* later.

I pushed all those negative and self-sabotaging doubts out of my mind or to the back of my mind.

I needed him again, and I moved, groaning from the effort but also feeling frenzied at the same time.

Nate lifted his head, his eyes finding mine. He smiled. "Hey."

"Hey."

He stated, "I'm cleaning your jar."

"Huh?"

"Nothing." He moved in, placing a kiss to my cheek and then finding my mouth again. "I called you Q."

I smiled. "You called me Q."

Q!

I loved it.

I whispered, "Keep calling me Q, and you can do that any time you want."

He nodded, his mouth falling and he was tasting my throat. "Jesus. I think I'm addicted to your body."

A full-body shiver wracked through me.

"You're not alone."

I was running my hand over his shoulders, his arms, his stomach, his muscles, and I then I dipped down and found him. My hand wrapped around him, and he closed his eyes, falling back as I showed him how much I enjoyed how he woke me up.



It wasn't long before I moved over, straddling him, and then we were moving all over again.

This time, I rode him. Hard.

## QUINCEY

Nate went to check on Nova, and I slipped into the bathroom.

The premiere was tomorrow night, and the nerves were starting. They were mingling with the after-daze of what Nate and I just did, but they were there. They were starting to prickle and tingle, and I smoothed a hand over my stomach, trying to push them out of me. It was an imagery technique. I was gathering them, sorting them out of the happiness Nate just made me feel, and once I pulled them all together, I imagined I was wrapping them up in a net, and then I was moving the net up through my stomach, up my throat, up, and out of my mouth and then I was removing them from my body. All of them. I wasn't letting one stay inside, and it worked.

I felt better.

They'd start again, but I'd shut down my mind and do that all over again.

It's how I handled show days. I got nervous every time. I'd just forgotten how bad the nerves could get.

"Hey." Nate came into the bathroom, Nova in his arms.

She saw me and held her hands out. "Mama."

I froze. My heart was in my throat.

I looked at Nate, and he was just as surprised, but a slow smile spread over his face. "She called me Dada the other week."

“Are you serious?”

Why hadn't he told me?

“Mama!” Nova shrieked, throwing her body toward me.

Nate had her, but he moved in closer so I could take her. I was half-dressed, and I didn't care. Nova nuzzled into me. I was melting all over again. Resting my cheek on top of her head, I smoothed a hand down her back. Nate had changed her for the day, and she smelled so good.

*Take that, nerves. I got a 'Mama' today.*

I pressed a kiss to her head, trailing my fingers through her hair.

Nate's smile softened, taking us both in. “I was going to ask your schedule for the day.”

I rested my cheek back against Nova's head. She was in a cuddly mood this morning.

Everything was golden and rainbows today.

It was going to be a great day.

I told him, “We have rehearsals all day today.” I wrapped my arms tighter around Nova and began rocking back and forth.

I could've held her all day.

I didn't want to go in today.

I didn't want to let her go.

“I was thinking we could do lunch today? Could you get time off to meet with me?”

My heart skipped a beat. “You'd do that?”

But why wouldn't he? He'd already done so much for me. The hotel. Fighting for me. Why was I surprised?

*Because you're basking in happiness, and you know it won't last.*

No! I froze, hearing my own thoughts attacking me.

Nate nodded, dipping back into the bedroom.

He came back a moment later, his clothes with him. He put them on the counter and started to strip, heading for the shower. He turned the water on, testing it before glancing back at me.

He hadn't taken his sweats off, and I was waiting.

*He doesn't love you. He told you himself.*

I tensed, but Nate caught my look. He grinned, his eyes darkening, and I forced myself to relax.

Then he said, "I want to talk to you about something."

The mood deflated after that statement. I felt the serious undercurrents from him, and I knew. I had known.

No, no, no. I wanted to hold Nova tighter to me.

I didn't want to lose this, any of this. Her. Him. Me. All three of us being here together.

I couldn't, but I saw his eyes. He was serious, and he was giving me a sobering look.

A gnawing dread started to fill me.

"Yeah?" My throat was scratchy.

Nova felt my tension and started to wiggle around.

She wanted to get free, but I held her for a moment longer. I couldn't take these moments for granted.

When she moved around like a worm, I knew my time was done, and I knelt, letting her to the floor.

She started for the shower.

I kept a hand, pulling her back.

Nate moved to block her. "But not now. I just want to reserve a time with you to talk."

Suddenly, I didn't want to talk.

The dread was rising, spreading. It was reactivating my nerves for tomorrow at the same time until I was a mess of bad feelings twisting like a tornado inside of me.

I felt the ground beneath me start to shake. It was going to fall out.

I knew it. I just knew it.

*It's been too good.*

I bent down and swept Nova back up in my arms. I pushed that thought away. I'd literally just got rid of my negative thoughts, but I couldn't stop the prick of ice in my stomach.

*Too good for too long.*

Nova started crying, grabbing for my hair, and pushing away from me at the same time.

*Nothing good lasts for you.*

I was thinking and trying to ignore myself at the same time.

“Since I have the show tomorrow, can we talk after?” I was trying to shut my brain off, and I glanced at Nate as I asked this.

A whole other chill went through me at his look.

Nate had gone completely still.

*He told you he doesn't love you, but he knows how you feel. It's time. He's going to end things.*

I felt exposed.

*It was a matter of time before you lost him, too.*

I turned, Nova still fighting to get free. “I need to feed her.”

He nodded, not saying a word.

I left it like that, feeling...

The day started out so good. How could it turn so drastic, so quick?

Maybe it hadn't. Maybe I was imagining all of it?

Yes. I was.

I must be.

Right?

I didn't know, and I didn't like that I didn't know.

I couldn't lose them, either of them.

That's all I did know.

I couldn't lose them...

## QUINCEY

“He said he wanted to talk?”

I was filling Ricci in on one of my breaks. I had my Bluetooth in my ear, and she was on my phone.

Nate texted earlier, saying he needed to postpone the lunch visit. It'd been a suggestion, and I never confirmed, so I was calling Ricci because I didn't know how I felt about it.

“Yeah.”

“What happened after that?”

“Nothing.” I was weaving through some other dancers in the hallway. “I was feeding Nova, and then Emily came, and the moment kinda passed.”

“Did something happen before that? I mean, babe, you called specifically to tell me that Nate wants to talk. Considering you are both shackled up together and sleeping together, that's telling me there's something significant to this 'talk,' and that's why you're calling me about it.”

I hesitated, but Ricci was right.

I was pushing out the door, stepping out into the street.

“I—I've been pulling away from him.”

“Pulling away? You told me that you had great sex, and then bam, this came up. You were pulling away before that?”

“Yeah,” I confessed.

I'd been so stupid.

Ricci sounded confused. “Why would you do that? Are you okay?”

I hesitated again, but this was why I called her. I needed to talk it through with someone.

“I’m in love with him.”

Ricci snorted. “Duh. Who wouldn’t be in your shoes? He’s a great guy, and you’re living with him. You’re both raising Nova. If that’s not the recipe for falling in love, then I’m clueless about how the world works. But, babe. What’s wrong with falling in love with him?”

“I’m worried that he’s tired of it.”

“Great sex.”

I sighed. “I know, but I pulled away from him.”

“Yeah. Not connecting the dots here. Wait. I’m not saying this to upset you, but how you’re thinking right now, could this be because of your dad?”

“What?” I reeled on that one.

“Yeah, like your father’s programmed you to think everyone’s going to leave you or something like that? I don’t know what your dad’s said to you, but I know he used to say things to you. You’d pull away from people. I saw it over and over again, and I always knew it wasn’t healthy. Is that what’s happening here? Do you think maybe you’re sabotaging yourself?”

“No—”

But.

But...

A memory pierced me, coming at me hard and fast.

*“She doesn’t really love you.”*

*I stared up at my dad, and I just got off the phone with Mom. “What?”*

*“They don’t love you.” His eyes were so cold. “You can’t believe what she says. I know your mother. She only thinks*



*about herself. She cares about you, but she doesn't love you. Not really. Not deep down. At least, not like the rest of her kids."*

He said it so casually, as if he were helping me in the long run.

He looked at me as if he were doing me a favor, but there'd been no remorse. Nothing. He meant what he said.

Searing pain burrowed deep in me, because it wasn't the first time he said it. Or the second.

It'd been the thirtieth by then.

I was six.

And it *still* hurt.

He said it about everyone.

It happened so many times it was common practice, and... Was she right?

But no. "Ric, he doesn't love me back."

"What?"

"He doesn't love me."

People were moving around me. Someone shoved into me, dipping around.

"Move it, lady."

"Fucking—" a guy cut me off, darting around me.

I heard them all. I felt them all, but I was locked in this phone call.

"How do you know? He might love you."

I was a blister. I was raw and bleeding, and I was trying to pop my own sore, trying to get the healing started because I *needed* it.

"He told me. He doesn't love me."

"When?" She got quiet.

I shrugged. "Does that matter?"

“Yes! It matters. When did he tell you that? Before or after you started sleeping together?”

“When we first started.”

“Oh.”

Yes. Oh.

Oh, damn.

Oh, fuck.

*Oh*, oooh.

He didn't love me while I loved him, and when he woke me up like he did this morning, I loved him even more. If this kept going, I'd keep falling. Harder. Faster.

I'd be so deep, there'd be no way out when he'd end things between us, because he *would* end things. There was *always* an end when someone didn't love the other one.

I'd been falling hard and fast since the first time I saw him.

“Honey.” Her words were twisted in sympathy.

“I've been pulling away because I'm trying to protect myself. It's not working, Ric. It's....” It was hurting to breathe.

It was hurting to just stand here and have this conversation because once I said the words, it'd be real. Once I told someone about it, I'd have to deal with it.

I'd have to leave.

But I couldn't.

I would never leave Nova. Not ever.

“I love him.”

A soft sigh from her. “I'm so sorry, Quince.”

*Me, too.*

“Are you absolutely sure that he doesn't love you back?”

“Yes.”

*I don't love you... But I want to fuck you.*

“Okay. This is what we’re going to do. You are not going to think about this anymore. Set it aside. Push it to the back of your head because you have a show tomorrow. You’re going to do your show, and you’re going to ace it, and I’m going to be there for you afterward. You can come stay here that night.”

“Ricci,” I started.

“No. Hear me out. You need a night away. A night to compose yourself. You’ll be fresh off the show. You’re going to be exhausted, have adrenaline in you, and your emotions will be all over the board.”

“He wants to talk tomorrow night.”

She got quiet again. “What do you think he wants to talk about?”

I needed to move.

I needed to keep walking, get my food, and head back to rehearsals. I was losing time, but for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to move forward. It was as if this phone call took precedence over everything.

“Probably what he wanted to talk about today. I think he could feel how much I loved him, and I think he’s going to end it between us.”

“No. You don’t know that.”

But I did.

I felt it.

“Are you going to tell him how you feel?”

The pit of my stomach dropped out. I was gripping my phone so hard. I whispered, feeling like a coward, “I don’t know.”

“Babe.”

“I know. I know. A part of me just wants to tell him, roll the dice and see what he says, but what if he decides this isn’t the right environment for me? For us? Then I think... just shut up and keep him as long as I can keep him? You know?”

“I don’t like that you’re thinking of this.”

“What if it’s the truth? I could lose Nova.”

“No. He would never do that.”

“Nothing’s protecting me. I can’t lose her. I can take the pain. I can pretend, lie, take the hits as long as I have her.” My eyes closed, and a tear slipped out, I told her. “She called me ‘Mama’ today.”

She gasped. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Now I was crying and smiling at the same time. I was feeling nuts and probably looking nuts.

“That’s wonderful!”

“Nate heard it. He was there.”

Oh God. Was that why he decided to end it? Because he heard her call me Mama?

No. I couldn’t believe that.

I could believe a lot, but not that. Nate wouldn’t be like that. He’d never been like that with me.

*He has with others.*

No. I shut those thoughts down. Nate didn’t deserve me having those thoughts about him.

*He made you sign that paper. You can’t fight him for her. Are you forgetting he did that?*

“I think you should just tell. Would that actually be that bad?”

“Yes!” I hissed, already feeling the rejection from him, already seeing the rejection from him. “The only good scenario that comes out of this is if he feels the same, and he’s told me he doesn’t. I can’t keep deluding myself. No good will come out of me telling him my feelings. None.”

I needed to keep him to keep Nova, and that meant I needed to handle myself.

I used to hate him.

We'd been enemies at first.

I could do that. Hate him, fuck him, and still love Nova.  
Still have Nova.

I could do that. I would do that.

It was the only way.

I needed to hate Nate Monson again.

It was the best idea ever.

I turned, feeling energized because it was the best way I  
could stay.

I could stay with Nova.

I could stay with Nate.

And I wouldn't get hurt.

"I do—"

I wasn't looking.

I had forgotten where I was.

I thought I was in the middle of the sidewalk.

I wasn't.

I was on the edge, and I stepped out, forgetting...

---

"HEY, LADY!"

---

A BLARING HORN.

Screeching brakes.

Someone was screaming.

---

I'D FORGOTTEN where I was.

Then everything went black.

## QUINCEY

The beeping woke me up.

Then the pain.

There was so much pain.

It hurt. Everything hurt.

“She’s awake.”

That—what?

A rustling sound.

“Miss Royas? I’m Dr. Cass. How are you feeling? How’s your pain tolerance?”

I didn’t—what?

I opened my eyes.

The light was blinding, and I cried out, trying to roll over.

I couldn’t.

I wanted to get away from that light.

“Miss Royas.”

That same voice, but it hadn’t been the one saying I was awake.

I didn’t want that one there.

I knew who that one was, and he shouldn’t have been allowed in my room.

Right?

My room?

I looked around.

The guy said he was a doctor.

The beeping.

I was in a hospital room.

What happened?

I tried to think...

Thinking hurt.

I had a headache.

Why did my head hurt so bad?

“Miss Royas, we’ve been checking your vitals, and you’re doing so much better...”

He droned on, and I stopped listening.

I didn’t know who he was.

I didn’t know what he was saying.

I was trying to remember—it happened in a flash.

I was flooded with memories.

Nate.

Ricci.

A phone call.

I was outside.

Nova.

Nova.

Nova.

Nate.

Hurt.

Pain.

Longing.



Love.

Then—the car.

I remembered the car now.

I was hit by a car.

I was going—I didn't remember.

Why didn't I remember?

I needed to remember.

Nate.

The memory flooded me, and I almost gasped.

I loved Nate.

I was worried about him knowing.

I was worried about losing Nova.

Nova.

Where was Nova?

Her laughter was in my head.

I could remember it. Her.

Her laughing.

Her running.

“Dada!”

Nate.

The memories were flooding.

Where were Nova and Nate?

I needed both of them. Now.

Where were they?

They were my family.

I sat up, trying to look for them.

“Miss Royas.”

A nurse.

I didn't know her.

“You need to remain lying down. You can't pull out your tube.”

My tube?

I tried talking. Nate. Nova. I needed them both.

I couldn't talk.

The tube.

Nova.

I opened my eyes, and the nurse was looking at me.

I tried to motion. I could write.

“Quincey?” Her lips parted. She was surprised.

I looked behind her.

My father was there.

I felt a dip, and the beeping increased.

“Her blood pressure is skyrocketing.” The nurse again.

No shit.

I opened my eyes and pain. All the pain, again.

The room was bright. Too bright.

A shadow moved, falling over me. That helped.

The nurse moved there.

Turning my head, I felt like my neck was in cement. I saw my dad and a doctor by the end of my bed.

I croaked, trying to talk.

“Don't talk yet, Miss Royas. Let's wait until we can remove the tube.”

I wanted the tube out now, but I lifted my hand, gritting as more waves of agony sliced through me, and I motioned to write on something.

“She wants to write. Here you go. We have a board and marker next to you.”

The nurse again. She was being nice. Helpful.

I took the board, the marker. It felt funny in my hands, and I had a hard time grasping it at first.

I wrote, slipping a few times.

NATE?

The nurse frowned. “Nate? I’m sorry. I don’t know who Nate is. Is that someone you want us to call?”

I began writing again, feeling Duke moving forward.

NOT HIM HERE. And I drew an arrow toward my dad.

Understanding dawned, followed by horror. The nurse looked at my dad. “Oh.”

“I think that’s enough for her today. We should let the doctor finish his evaluation.”

Duke was across from her now, reaching over.

He was going to take the board. I tried to move it out of the way, but he plucked it from me.

“That’s enough, sweetheart. You need to rest—”

“No.” The nurse’s voice was firm. She reached, took the board from him, and returned it to me. “She’s an adult, Mr. Royas. If she’s able to communicate with us, we need to hear her wishes.”

I tried glaring at him.

He barely flicked his gaze to me, his entire demeanor becoming chilled. “Excuse me. This is my daughter, and you will not speak to me like that.”

She stepped back, her head down.

I ignored whatever she was about to say, and I wrote again.

I DON’T WANT HIM HERE. WHY IS HE HERE?

The doctor had come around, standing next to the nurse. He read the board, glancing at my father before answering.

“He was your emergency contact in your file. We followed the procedure because you were unconscious. You would like

your father removed from the room?”

YES. I underlined it, almost stabbing the board if I could've.

He gave a nod, his shoulders setting. “Mr. Royas, you’ll need to leave the room at your daughter’s request.”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She was hit by a car.”

I was back to writing.

WE ARE ESTRANGED. I NEED TO UPDATE MY FILE ASAP!

“Yes. We’re getting that.” He frowned, seeing my father still hadn’t left. “Mr. Royas. Now.”

A growl came from my father before his gaze fell to me. “You will regret this. You’ve messed up. You stepped out in front of that car. You were trying to kill yourself. The courts will see that now. They’ll believe me, and they’ll strip you of your guardianship. You have proven you’re unable to take care of yourself.”

My lips parted.

Searing pain raged through me.

No! No! No!

Accident.

CALL NATE MONSON. NOW. PLEASE.

I shoved the board at the nurse after writing his phone number.

I had no idea how long I’d been in the hospital. A day? Was Nate concerned? Would someone have called? Oh God. The production. Miss Patrice.

My solo.

I felt a tear coming, but I hardened myself. This wasn’t the time to fall apart. It’d be proving what *he* was alleging.

“I’ll make the call right now.” The nurse took the board, moving stiffly around my father, and I caught the side of her own glare toward him before she stepped out into the hallway.

“Mr. Royas, until anything has been decided, you need to leave her room. Now.” The doctor wasn’t fucking around. “If you remain one more second, I’ll call security.”

Duke blasted me with another condemning look, his mouth flat and thinning. “I’ll see you in court.”

He left, and I couldn’t stop the tear this time. It rolled down my face.

“We’ll get it all sorted.” The doctor tried to give me a reassuring grin, but it was falling flat, too. It didn’t reach his eyes. “When the paramedics brought you in, they told us it was an accident. That’s what the witnesses told them, so that’ll be in the report.”

Good.

I closed my eyes, feeling some relief.

Good.

I let all the tears fall.

## NATE

“Does she know I’m coming?”

Aspen asked that after we both got into my vehicle. I’d just stowed her luggage in the back, and I began easing into the line of traffic leaving from picking up other passengers. It was lined back to back with cabs and vehicles. This airport was a mess, so it took a little before I could answer.

“No. I’m half considering putting you up in a hotel tonight, so when she sees you, it’ll be a surprise after the show tomorrow night.”

“I didn’t fly overseas to hang out in a hotel alone.”

I threw my sister a look. “Like you’re not going to crash the second you see a bed?”

She huffed, folding her arms over her chest. “It’s the thought that I want to stay up as long as I can. I want to hug and cuddle with my niece. I want to love on her and play with all her toys with her, and I want to be the best aunt she’ll ever know.”

“I think you’re beat since Quincey’s her aunt.”

“Quincey’s her mother now, her second mother. *I’m* her aunt.”

Nope. She was right. She was totally right.

I threw her a grin just as my phone started ringing. “I love ya, sis.”

She reached for my phone, grinning back at me before frowning. “It’s an unknown number.”

I frowned. I started to ignore it, but there was a nagging.

It was faint and in the back of my mind.

I’d had this feeling before.

“Answer it.”

She did, hitting the speaker button.

I said, “Hello?”

“Is this Nate Monson?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m a nurse at Seattle Hospital, and there’s a patient who wanted us to call you—”

An alarm spiked in me.

I gripped the steering wheel hard. “Who?”

“Quincey Royas.”

The blood drained out of me.

Fear flooded me, and I almost jerked the wheel to the side.

The world was tilting upside down, swinging around.

I’d never had this feeling before.

No. I had. One other time, a time that I never wanted to remember.

*Please, God. Please not that. Not. That.*

Aspen gasped. “Is she okay?”

*I love her.*

I loved Quincey.

If I hadn’t known before, I knew now. It rose in me, taking me over, and it was pounding through every cell in my body.

I loved her, and now I knew I couldn’t lose her.

*I wouldn’t lose her.*

*Please, God.*

“She is alive, yes.” From the nurse.

That was some relief. Some. Not enough.

“What happened?”

“I’m not at liberty to update you on Miss Royas, but she was very adamant that I call you. Please come, and by the time you get here, we’ll have the appropriate paperwork filed so you can be looped in.”

Looped in.

I’d be looped in, you bet your ass.

I growled but hit the signal because the exit for the hospital was clear fucking the other way. “I’ll be there. Get that paperwork done.”

“Wait.” Aspen touched my arm. “Who’s her emergency contact? Would she have gotten that updated?”

Jesus.

Christ.

I was praying as I asked the nurse, “Did you call her father?”

She hesitated before saying, “Just get here.”

Get there.

Yes.

That was all I was doing.

I was going to get there, *now*.

Aspen was on my phone, but her one hand came out to squeeze my arm. “She said she’s alive. She’s asking for you. Those are two good signs. Let’s go from there. Now.” She held my phone up. “Who do I need to call?”

“Everyone.”

I wanted a fucking army there for her.

My parents. Stephanie and Guy.



Her siblings.

My family.

My friends.

Her friends. I wanted the goddamn cavalry to arrive because they called Duke. I knew they did the instant Aspen asked.

So he was there or had been there.

She was there, helpless to him.

She'd be lying in a hospital bed, needing me, and he would've walked in.

Torment slashed through me.

I just needed to be there.

I had to protect her, shield her...

I had to love her.

I had to tell her that I loved her.

I wasn't aware that Aspen was holding my hand until she squeezed it, using her other hand to go through my phone. "She'll be okay." A pause, her voice dipping low. "It's not like with Owen."

No.

It couldn't be like with him.

My voice broke, and I blinked, needing to see and clear my vision. "I love her, Aspen."

She squeezed my hand hard. "I know you do."

## QUINCEY

They were removing my tube when I heard holy hell being raised in the hallway.

“I will be going in there. Now *move*.”

The door was opening—a hand appeared, stopping it. A nurse shoved her way between that voice and my room. “You can’t— Sir! You need to wait.”

Two hands went under her arms, and she was lifted clear from the doorway. A second later, one of those hands came to the door, and it was shoved open.

Nate walked inside, a glower set firm on his face.

He stopped just inside, seeing me, and seeing what they’re in the middle of doing. He closed his eyes.

Alarm rose as I saw him waver on his feet, but then a smaller hand grabbed his arm from behind. Recognizing his sister as Aspen came around him, holding him up, I relaxed.

He’d be okay. He had family with him.

Then I gagged as they pulled the tube out.

Ooh.

My throat was burning.

Holy crap.

I coughed, feeling it spasming down to my lungs.

I wouldn’t recommend getting intubated, ever.

“You okay?” Nate came over, taking my hand. His other hand went to my shoulder. He began rubbing it in a slow, comforting motion. “Is she okay? Why was she intubated?”

The doctor glanced at me.

I nodded, saving my throat for better things, like breathing.

Nate’s hand kept going, and I leaned into him. It felt nice.

It felt loving, and that sent a whole different burning through me, but I pushed past that. It wasn’t the time or place.

“Miss Royas was hit by a car. The paramedics worried about a head injury, so she was intubated, but her CT came back fine. She will need to stay for a few days to follow protocol, make sure everything is fine.”

“Is it?” He was scanning over me, deep bags under his eyes. “Is she okay?”

He also looked like he’d aged five years.

He cared.

That realization warmed me, but I was Nova’s other constant.

Of course he would care.

“She should be fine. She took a hard hit, but no ribs were fractured. She has a broken wrist and a badly sprained ankle, but those seem to be the extent.”

A whoosh of air left Nate, and he sank down into the chair beside my bed, still holding my hand, and his other hand resting on my shoulder. “She’ll have to stay for a few days for that?”

“It’s the protocol following a suspected head injury. Her CT was fine, but we want to make sure it stays that way.”

Nate nodded, heaving another sigh before finding my gaze. “Hi.”

I tried to smile, but that hurt, too. “Hi.”

“You were hit by a car?”

I took a breath. My lungs hurt, but they were working. It felt better to have that tube out. “Yes. I forgot where I was on the sidewalk. I guess I needed a car to remind me.” It was a weak joke, but this was where we were.

It was hitting me that I wouldn’t be dancing tomorrow. Or, glancing at my casted wrist, for a long while.

“I’ll check in with you later on. We’ll get your file updated as well.” The doctor gave me a smile before leaving the room.

Aspen moved to stand where he vacated, and she glanced at a bag of my items that a nurse left on the bed stand. “Do you need me to make any calls for you?” Her eyes flicked to her brother, who was still holding my good hand so tightly.

I nodded. “Yeah. Is Nova...?” I turned to Nate.

“She’s fine. Aspen called Emily on the way here. She’s going to stay and watch her as long as we need her.”

“And I’ll head back to relieve her later as well.”

“You need to sleep. You had a long flight.”

She glanced at her brother. “Kinda got some adrenaline now. I won’t be sleeping for a bit.”

“Still.” He was frowning. “You could crash. Emily said she’d stay the night so let her, unless I come back.” But he threw me a look.

“Yeah.” His sister interpreted that look. “I’m thinking you’re not going to be leaving from here. Emily and I will work it out. You guys don’t need to worry.”

“My mom.”

Both focused on me.

I added, a small cough coming first, “Stephanie can watch Nova, or I think she could. She watched her for Valerie.” Also, “They don’t know about me.”

God.

So many didn’t know.

“The production.” I looked at Nate, unshed tears swimming in my eyes. I couldn’t hold them back any longer.

“I know,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Her mouth turned down. “I’m sorry.”

I nodded, drawing strength from Nate and his sister.

I turned to Nate. “I have to call them.”

“You want me to stay?”

“I will,” Aspen spoke up quickly. “Sorry. Before you do that, I’ll make the calls to your family if you want to give me their names? I’ll get their numbers, and we can make a plan for Nova. You just get better. Spend time with my brother and reassure him you’re not going anywhere.” Her words came out rushed. She was trying to make me feel better, but I saw the sadness in her gaze.

I felt it. A hollow ache was tunneling inside me.

Before I could ask, though, she had my contacts open.

I gave her the names. She got the numbers, and she left after that.

“I didn’t know your sister was coming.”

“Surprise.” A dry laugh clipped out from him. “She was going to surprise you after your show tomorrow night.”

Right.

The show I wouldn’t be doing anymore.

“You don’t think they’ll wait for you? I mean, not for the premiere, obviously, but later on?”

I shook my head. “When a dancer gets injured, it’s really important to rest. Some take an entire year off. They won’t hold the spot for me. They’ll replace me, say to let them know when I’m ready again, but the spot is gone.”

“I’m sorry.” Nate tightened his hold on my hand, his fingers sliding through mine. He bent forward, his forehead touching the side of the bed for a moment. “*Jesus*, Q. You got hit by a car. I mean—*Jesus*. Don’t do that again, like *ever*. I

need you here. Not over there with Val. You got me? Please say you got me. I need you to get me.”

Oh man.

Man!

Those words—tears were coming.

I blinked them away. They needed to go away.

But, man. *I need you here.*

Those were his words.

He looked like he was struggling before he closed his eyes, and a calm came over him. When he looked at me again, he was more in control but there was a look there. It was shimmering under the surface, and I didn't know what to take from that.

Hope?

Gah. I was scared to have hope.

He asked, his voice hoarse, “What do you need?”

I couldn't hope, but I loved him.

I knew I loved him.

I knew he didn't love me back.

Having all that said, I told him.

“I need you.”

His eyelids shuttered, then he gave me a nod, and he climbed into bed with me.

**NATE**

The nurses came in to do their checks, but for the most part, Quincey slept in my arms the rest of the day and evening. Aspen called later that evening, and I didn't think about it. I hit the speaker button and put the phone between Q and me.

“Hey.”

“Hey. How's Quincey doing?”

Quincey gave me a tired grin, but she didn't lift her head from my chest.

I answered for her, “She's tired. In pain.”

Quincey closed her eyes, her head folding and burrowing into me. I just wrapped my arm tighter around her, then falling to rub up and down the side of her back. Her whole body let out a release of air.

“I bet. I'm so sorry.”

“It's not your fault, Asp.”

“I know. I still feel it, though. But the reason I called: we got everything sorted.”

“Who's we?” Quincey asked, her voice so drowsy I felt it seeping into my bones.

“Oh. Hey, Quincey. Did you hear me before?”

“I did. Thank you.”

“She's in pain, Aspen. She's going to save her energy.”

“Her voice, too. I saw that tube come out. I still have nightmares from seeing—anyway, I need to fill you in. So, I’m hoping you both are okay with this, but I got to the house. I filled Emily in on everything, and I was ready and willing to stay here, take care of Nova. Emily was planning on spending the night, too, just in case.”

Quincey was tensing in my arms.

So was I. “What changed?”

“Well. The calls started, and when I’m saying ‘the calls,’ I’m meaning a ton of calls. Quincey, your mom was the first. Then your brother. Your sister. They were all worried about you and wanted to come and see you. I told them to hang tight because you needed your rest. I also told them Nate would be there anyway. After that, it was a Patrice lady. A Matthew. Ricci. Then, Nate, it was our people. Logan. Mason. Matteo. The girls all called, too, wanting to check in themselves. Taylor. Samantha. Heather. Channing, too. Then I found out that they’d all talked to each other. They talked to Quincey’s brother, and well, they’re all coming to town.”

Quincey frowned.

“What?”

“Yeah. And I’m at your mom’s house. Quincey, is that okay? Stephanie said she used to take care of Nova for Valerie, and it’d be okay if she was here for the night. Tomorrow night, too, if Nate is going to stay again. I’m assuming he will because I know my brother, but I wanted to run this all by you guys.”

I glanced at Quincey.

She nodded.

I spoke for her, my thumb running back and forth over her back. “She’s fine with that. Emily knows Nova’s schedule. Did she help with that? Stephanie wouldn’t know her current schedule.”

“Yep. That’s all been settled. Emily is here with us, but she’s going to be leaving in a bit. We both wanted to wait and make sure that was all fine with you guys. If it is, I’ll take care



of Nova with Stephanie. Emily was going to be at your place to meet the first arrivals. They're all planning on staying at your house. I have no problem bunking at your mom's, Quincey. I kinda like your mom's house, to be honest. It's old and big, but it's cozy. Not that your house isn't, Nate, but I don't know. I can feel 'grandma' here, and it's lovely."

Lovely. I grinned. My sister was becoming an adult.

"That's fine with me," Quincey said, her voice a little hoarse. "Thank you for doing all of that."

"Of course. It's the least I could do. Oh, Nate. Blaise wants to do a Skype call with you later. He asked how the jar cleaning is coming."

I closed my eyes, feeling Quincey's gaze.

"It's going just fine, thank you. I'll call him later."

"Okay." Aspen laughed.

I could tell she was going to sign off. "Aspen?"

"Yeah?"

"Call Mason and Matteo. I know them, and I love both, but they don't need to fly in for a visit. Neither have time with their schedule right now."

"I did, and they both told me to tell you to stick it where it doesn't shine. Mason said he has a bye week, and Matteo said the flight back and forth is short. Considering Matteo's size, I'd just agree with him. He told me he'd sit on you the next time he saw you if you tried to tell him not to come."

I chuckled. They were being tame because my sister was the middle-woman.

"I feel bad."

I tensed, hearing Quincey.

She was saying into the phone, "They already took time out for the baby shower. They don't have to come for this."

This.

She was referring to herself as “this.” As her getting hit by a car was a “this.”

I wasn’t down for that. I was *really* not down for that.

She kept on, “I’ll be fine, but wait. They’re coming for you.”

I just kept frowning at her.

She noticed. “What?”

“They’re coming for you. You were hit by a *car*. They tubed you because they were worried about a head injury. Are you kidding me?” I was just getting started. “And stop saying “this.” You aren’t a *this*. You’re a goddamn person. Jesus Christ. They’re coming because we’re all family. You’re included in that, Q. Do you not get that?”

“Nate,” said Aspen.

I sat up, my frown just getting sharper. “This. Fuck “this.” You’re not a *this*.”

Her eyes widened, then teared up until she stopped them. I didn’t know what she did or how she did it because they were there. They were about to spill, but a second later, they were gone. Her eyes were blazing, an inferno in there, but she masked that, too.

“Your friends are not coming here for me. They don’t know me.”

“They don’t need to know you. They know you’re important to me, and you got *hit by a car*.” My voice was shaking. I was so furious. My hands, too.

I needed to walk.

I needed to get this out of me, or I’d lose it, and I’d say shit that wouldn’t be conducive to either of us.

Shoving off the bed, I called to Aspen, “I gotta walk, A. I’ll be back.”

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## QUINCEY

THIS WAS the beginning of the end.

I felt it in my gut.

Nate's sister signed off, sounding awkward, but that was on me, too. She was so sweet, so pure, and I'd made this awkward, all sorts of awkward.

It was me.

This was the time when Nate would learn I wasn't worth it. Because they always did.

One by one, people had that realization, and they stopped reaching out. They stopped trying. It'd be Duke and me like it'd always been. I felt cursed, and I was kidding myself by thinking I could break free.

No.

I was being irrational.

I was on meds. I was banged up and hurting in a hospital bed.

I went and got hit, and now I was here. I'd need time before I was fully healed. Who knew what battle Duke would pull because it was a matter of time before he'd bring that motion forward, claiming I'd been trying to hurt myself.

With my history, a court would probably believe him.

It wouldn't matter in the end. My father didn't know that I had signed away any chance I had to contest Nate for Nova. Maybe this was for the best?

Nate was upset with me, and with Duke circling, it'd just get worse.

It *always* got worse.

A part of me knew I wasn't thinking rationally, but I mean, hello. I got hit by a car. My father was going to say I did it deliberately, and would Nate believe him? I hadn't been able to bring myself to warn him because I didn't want to see the

moment he might consider it. Because there'd have to be that moment. One moment.

A hesitation to wonder if she would? Was she like that?

Did I have to worry about her doing that now?

Then that might spring to the question of: should Nova be around her?

That sliced me the most, digging deeper than all the others.

I was being irrational.

I needed to stop these thoughts. Nothing good would come out of it.

I loved Nova. I loved Nate. No. I wouldn't walk, and I was too selfish to stop loving Nate. I couldn't. I'd never be able to make myself hate him. So... what then?

*You're a mother now, Quince.*

I closed my eyes, hearing Valerie in my head.

*Why did you leave Nova to me? Why not Graham? Calihan?*

*Because you were supposed to have her. She's yours, Quince.*

*Yours and Nate's.*

*It had to be you.*

*But why? I don't understand. Why me?*

*You'll understand when you're supposed to.*

*It's something I always knew, deep down.*

That made me pause.

Was I actually talking to my dead sister?

I must've hit my head harder than I thought. I mean, they were worried about a head injury.

I couldn't help myself. One last thought.

*Will I be a good enough mother?*

*You'll be the best mother.*

*It's the second reason I chose you.*

I hoped she was right.

If she wasn't, then I'd just blame my head injury.

**NATE**

**I**t was three days later when they were letting Quincey come home. Thank the fucking God.

This was all a new experience in some ways and way too familiar in others. The hospital. Car accident. Those things had happened so much to the people I loved and me, so it was an old hat. But when that happened to your little girl's new mom and your partner—it was terrifyingly new.

And I hated it.

Felt fucking exposed every day Quincey wasn't here, home, next to me.

I raked a hand over my face and sighed, sitting back in my office chair. I'd been trying to get shit organized, and my meetings for the next week dealt with or postponed, but my mind was racing. I felt like I was scrambling, trying to catch up, and I couldn't. I just couldn't.

I didn't know what all I was even catching up to also. It was like a foreign entity, one that I couldn't quite grasp or understand, and it kept slipping out of my hands. I was paralyzed with fear, thinking I wouldn't be able to grab it in time, only to watch it slip away once again.

Fuck if I understood what was going on with me.

A soft knock sounded on my door, and I looked up.

Mason was there. He lifted his head in a nod to me. "Mind if I come in?"

I expelled a ragged breath, my hand falling to my desk, and I nodded at the same time I moved my seat back. “Yeah. Please.” I stood as he came in, shutting the door.

I went over to the liquor cabinet. “Want something?”

“Whatever you’re having.”

I pulled out two glasses and poured brandy into both. Handing him one, I returned back to my desk and wheeled my chair sideways. I wasn’t facing him. I was facing the wall, but I glanced over. It didn’t feel right to sit facing him for some reason. This way was more of a camaraderie feel to it.

Fuck if I understood that, either.

Mason sipped his drink, his eyes narrowing on me. He leaned back in his chair, getting comfortable. “How are you?”

A short laugh burst from me. “You want the real version? The Logan version? Or the PG version?”

“I want the Nate version.”

Right. I just sighed, *again*. “I feel like I’m trying to paddle somewhere without a paddle, and if I don’t get there, I’m going to lose something so precious that I’ll never get it again. Ever.”

Mason’s eyebrows rose. “I have no clue how to respond to that.”

I shook my head. “Neither do I. I love her, and I don’t think I’ve loved anyone before because I’ve never felt this before. My sister, yes. You guys, yes. I love my parents, but we’re just not close, and that’s cool with me. But, man. Mase. With Nova and Quincey? I’ve never felt this before. They’re everything to me.”

He grunted. “Been there. Am there. I get it.”

“Fuck. Fuck, man.”

He tossed the rest of his brandy back, setting the glass on my desk as he hissed slightly. “Forgot that’s a sipper.”

I grinned, then tossed the rest of my drink down, too.

Yeah.

Sipper. I felt the burn, and today, it felt good.

I stood, grabbing the brandy bottle, and brought it back over. I poured both of us a second glass and leaned back. I held my glass up. “Cheers to falling in love and not knowing a goddamn thing what to do about it.”

Mason laughed but raised his glass up for a cheer.

We both sipped. We both hissed.

I eyed him, setting my glass back down. “It’s been nice having you here for a few days.”

“It was good timing. Sucks for what happened, but worked with my schedule. We’re heading back tomorrow. I need to get back in, but it’s been easier since I can watch the game tapes here.”

“Obligated.”

We sat in silence for a bit, and it felt right. It always felt right with my family, but Mason especially.

He leaned forward after a minute, setting his glass on the desk. A serious look came over him, and he looked down before looking back up. “Listen.” He sounded serious, too.

I straightened, rotating to face him more fully.

“At the risk of not wanting to jinx anything, I want to thank you for letting Logan and me help you. With Duke. Before.”

Mason glanced away.

It hit me then.

Mason was nervous.

I didn’t think I’d ever seen my best friend nervous.

I was humbled it was because of me.

“Dude.”

He looked up.

“What the hell are you talking about?”



He started to grin but went sober again. “All that shit that happened when we were kids, when you came back and just how we all were... You were going through shit, but I wasn’t there for you. I’m sorry.”

I waved it off. “Listen. I was pissed at my parents. They shipped me off, and when you’re in high school, your friends are everything. I’m older, hopefully wiser, and I don’t agree with what my parents did, but it is what it is. When I got close to Aspen again, I worked through a lot of my anger at my mom and dad, letting them have it on a daily for a long while. The way I see it, parents are parents. You get what you get, and at some point, you have to accept who they are. But back then, I was angry and shut down. I was messed up, and then losing Owen put me in a whole other tailspin. I didn’t reach out, and you did come to me a few times. I shut you down, and that’s on me. It all worked out how it was supposed to work out. You love me. I know this. I love you. You know this. Same with every person in our group. It’s done, but you coming out and saying that? I appreciate it. Deep. I love you.”

He nodded, his eyes shining a bit. Seeing Mason like that was another first for me.

It humbled me because damn. Mason liked his kids, his wife, his brother, myself, and Channing, and that was about it. He had a fondness for a few others, and he tolerated everyone else, but even he had mellowed over the years. We were all just growing up.

I hoped that I’d still be growing up when I was in my eighties.

“So.” He picked up his glass, lounging back again. “You love her, huh?”

Oh, boy.

“Yeah. I love her.”

“Have you told her that?”

I shot him a look. So Mason. So wise. A dumbass, just like Logan at times.

He smiled back.

I rolled my eyes. “I will.”

“I have learned that the longer you take to say the important shit, the harder it gets to say.”

Yeah.

I seriously loved my family, but yeah.

I needed to tell Quincey.

## QUINCEY

I made a call.

They were letting me go home today. I was cleared to resume my daily life, and I was hella missing Nova and Nate. Not that I hadn't seen them. Nate brought Nova to see me the second day, and she had crawled all over me, playing with a new stuffed dragon that she got from Auntie Aspen. She named him Doug, and Nate said that now Miss Penguin and Doug were the new fixtures in Nova's arms.

I loved it.

The phone calls happened on my second day.

Miss Patrice called. Matthew called. I got another phone number from him, one that I was going to reach out to later on.

Then in the early afternoon, the visitors started.

Graham and Britney came to visit. My mother and Guy came later. Nate came back in the evening. Aspen was with him. Taylor, too. Ricci. No Calihan, but I was okay with that. Cal was... complicated. I understood complicated. That had been me, and that brought me to the call I made.

I thought long and hard, but I needed to do it.

“Are you sure you want to risk this?”

The question came from Carl Mallone, my dad's last PI, and I say the last because Duke fired him. When I called Carl, he explained that Duke wanted him to do surveillance on Nate and me.

Carl refused. Carl got fired.

A new PI was hired, but Carl assured me the second PI wasn't good.

“All honesty, he'll probably photoshop something if he can't find anything and charge your dad double. Your dad will realize he's been scammed and will fire him. I wouldn't worry about the newest PI.”

I wasn't worried, and maybe I should've been, but I wasn't. Not about any current dirt my father was looking to unearth. I was worried he'd get someone to believe his accusation that I stepped in front of that car on purpose, and that would gut me. I didn't do that, and I didn't want Nova to grow up thinking I had done that. So, to end that all, I made the call to Carl.

And now, here I was.

He called back a day later with what I needed.

Now I just needed to find the courage to go through with it, and as I was sitting in my hospital room, waiting for Nate and the nurse to come to get me, the courage wasn't in me.

I just wanted to go home.

I just wanted to hold my girl.

I just wanted to crawl in bed with Nate.

That was all I wanted.

My father was like a pretty snake with fur. A pretty furry snake with doe-like eyes that was poisonous. When you saw it, you didn't know quite what it was, and you got pulled in by the fur and the doe-like eyes. You thought it was a long sort of wiener dog, and you didn't know if you should think he was cute or a new sort of species, but then because you were confused, that was when he could strike and hurt you.

I needed to just shoo the snake out of the house.

That was what I was going to do, and that was why I called him to come here an hour before Nate was supposed to arrive.

*Knock, knock.*

There he was. My furry doe-eyed snake.

“Hi, Dad.”

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## NATE

I HEARD the voices as I approached.

I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but... when I heard what I heard, I couldn't move. Not a foot.

Then I was torn apart.

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## QUINCEY

I STOOD FROM MY BED, then decided to perch on the end. Folding my hands in my lap, I rolled my shoulders back and straightened my spine. I was a perfect dancer in front of the so-not perfect father.

I didn't care.

I was pulling on my armor for one last showdown with him. After that, I'd let myself bleed, and I'd lick my wounds, but I'd be okay.

I'd be okay...

I would.

*I will.*

He stepped inside the room, and I started. “It has to stop.”

My dad's eyes were dead. He was cold.

A shiver wound down my spine because I realized how accurate my thoughts of him as a snake were. I also knew that he wasn't going to stop, ever.

“You need to stop.” He moved farther into the room. “You need to grow up, wake up, and come home. If you bring my granddaughter, I will allow you to live on my premises.”

“She's not yours. Not even through blood.”

“Valerie gave her to you. You are mine. Nova is mine. I want you both at home. This has gone on long enough.”

“Valerie wasn’t your child.”

“But you are. And you are Nova’s mother now. I can help you fight Monson.”

I opened my mouth.

He beat me to it, saying, “I’m aware you’re sleeping with him. And that’s okay. I understand.”

“You do?” I frowned.

“Of course. You’re ensuring your future. You’re doing what you feel you need to do so that he won’t leave you without Nova or worse, destitute. But you’re not. You have me. I can take care of you, of both my girls. But you have to come home, and we have to prepare for battle. Monson has proven to be a worthy adversary, but we can beat him. I’ll need you to tell me everything he’s done to you. That’ll make the case go better. We’ll get enough traction, and then we can take further steps against him.”

My lips parted.

He was mad. Literally.

I asked, “Like what?”

He shrugged. “I know cops.”

Dread sliced my insides, cutting a line down my organs. I was bleeding internally. “Like dirty cops?”

He didn’t answer.

*“I think your dad will set me up.”* Nate said it, and he was right.

I moved farther on the bed. I was no longer perched on it, but I was standing and leaning a hip against it. My arms were starting to tremble. A dancer had complete control over her body. I commanded my arms to go still, but they didn’t.

I stuffed them behind me to hide the shaking.

“I’ll do what I need to do. Monson won’t be able to raise Nova. I’ll make sure of that.”

Fuck.

I knew it then. I hadn’t known it, but I did right then and right at that moment.

I let out a small laugh, a sad laugh. “I was ready for you. I called you. I knew what I needed to do when you came to see me, but I had hoped that I wouldn’t have to do it. I hoped that you wouldn’t be who you are, and there would’ve been a part of you that would’ve come in. You would’ve seen me. You would’ve realized you were being wrong in everything you’re doing, and you would’ve asked to hug me. You would’ve told me you loved me. And you would’ve asked what you could do to make it better.”

A tear tracked down my cheek.

I let it be.

My voice was hoarse, almost cracking. “But you didn’t, because that’s not who you are. And I can’t have who you are in my life anymore, even if you are my father. This is it, Dad. This is the end for us. I want you to stop plotting after Nate or me.”

“You are not thinking clearly—”

“I called Carl.”

He stopped.

I didn’t want to play this card, but he was giving me no choice.

So I played it. “You never paid back that loan.”

“What?”

“To the mafia family in Canada? The loan you took out from them for your casino? You cheated them.” I held up my phone. “Carl sent me the proof.”

If he could’ve killed me, he would’ve. Right then and there.

His hands jerked up, but then he froze.

Those hands stayed up, and they curled forward as if he were imagining it was my neck he was squeezing. His nostrils flared as if he were enjoying that he was pretending to kill me.

“You ungrateful bitch.”

“Drop everything you’re planning against Nate and me, or I’ll send this proof to those people.” I wasn’t bluffing when I told him this, but I was about to bluff what I was going to do next. “Nate knows people who can get in contact with them. It would not be hard to do it, and Carl told me their reputation. They’re not as bloodthirsty as most mobs, but if you fuck them over, you are annihilated. Simply put. Seeing that the proof is coming from your own daughter, I don’t imagine they’d want to reach out to enact their revenge on the blood that’s turning you in. Though I could be wrong. If I am, then I am. So be it because I am more than willing to die to save Nova from you.”

He stared at me, long and hard.

It was a full-on glare.

Hatred and the promise of violence lurked in his gaze, but I held firm. My dancing façade was firmly in place, but also the mere fact I was Nova’s mother and God help those who try to hurt a mother’s child.

*I’m right here, sister. I’m not leaving you.*

I felt another tear slip past and fall down my cheek. I let it go. That was a good tear because I felt my sister there with me, and I felt her support, and I now fully believed in the afterlife.

*I love you, Valerie.*

*I love you, too, Q.*

I almost smiled, hearing her use Nate’s nickname, but then my attention flew back to Duke.

“He will never love you.”

My knees almost gave out from relief because that was his capitulation. He was giving in. He would just spew as much



hate and hurt before he did, though.

My throat closed up. I was used to his hurtful words. Those weren't the ones that would disarm me.

"You don't think I know that?"

He frowned, his eyebrows pulling in. He cocked his head to the side as if unsure how to take that from me.

"I know he'll never love me. I'm not her, but Dad, I don't care. I have enough of you in me to be selfish with him for Nova. Nate doesn't love me. He's told me this. He's never lied to me, but I'll love him. I'll love him for as long as he'll have me. And when the time comes that he finds the one he *does* love, I'll step aside so he can be with her. We'll figure it out. Nate is a good man. I'm Nova's mother now, the one on earth for her, and he won't take that away from Nova. He'll do what's best for her. He's everything you aren't and thank God for that." Another tear fell. "Thank God that I'll know what it feels like to love someone who's like him, who's nothing like you, because I'll be better for it."

His eyes were so cold.

It hit me that he wasn't questioning the proof I had or the ability I had to go through with my threat. I almost laughed at that, because in that sense, he wasn't dumb. He knew I'd do it, no matter if it meant my death with his.

"You're out of my will."

"Totally okay with that."

"You'll cease to exist to me."

"That's how I want it."

He mashed his lips together. I could see him grinding his teeth, but he had nothing else to say. He turned and left, and I reached for the bed. My knees were giving out. I caught myself and had to throw myself half on the bed. One leg got in, and then I was okay.

I wasn't falling anymore.

"You don't think I love you?"

I looked up, freezing once again.

Nate stood there, a stricken look tightening his face.

I couldn't answer. I could say it freely to Duke, but to say it to Nate? Say it to the one who did have the power to shatter me with mere words?

I was back to trembling, but it was my whole body this time. I had nothing more in me to pull myself together. The dance armor was gone. I'd used up all my strength.

"Answer me." His jaw clenched. "You don't think I love you?"

"You told me you didn't."

His eyes were blazing, but I couldn't name the emotion.

I didn't think I dared. I didn't think my heart could take it.

"That was early on. Did you ever think that I could've fallen in love with you since then?"

The question didn't make sense to me.

Maybe a normal person, yes, but... I shook my head. "People don't love me, not unless they have to."

"Are you kidding me?" he hissed out. His nostrils flared.

"My family doesn't have a choice, but anyone else... they have a choice. Why would *you* choose *me*?"

He growled, showing me his teeth, and I jerked back.

"You're fucking beautiful. You're an amazing mother to Nova. Why the hell don't you see what I see? From where I'm standing, the question is why *wouldn't* I?"

But he swept out after that, and I was left...

Confused. I didn't know what that meant because it couldn't mean what...

No. It couldn't.

"...*They don't love you.*"

I was just left, feeling suddenly empty, like I lost something I didn't know I had.

## QUINCEY

Nate was withdrawn to me for a few days.

His friends were kind, but they felt the distance, and one by one, they began leaving. I knew they didn't leave because of it. If anything, I think they stayed longer because of that. They weren't the sort of friends who shied away from real situations, real feelings.

They were the kind that when the tough got going, they just got tighter.

They doted on Nova, but she was taken the most by Taylor and Mason. If either of them were in the room, Nova ran to their side. Taylor would crawl on the floor with her, tickling her. Mason would pick her up and pretend to fly her around the house. The giggles were nonstop. As for my own friends, Matthew and Ricci visited.

Ricci was over every day. She either brought coffee in the morning before work, or she stopped by after work with coffee. Always coffee. Matthew was over a couple of times, commiserating with me because he didn't like my stand-in or the new lead. She was good, though, and I knew he was only saying that to make me feel better.

And about that, I was okay with not being the lead. That not only surprised me, but it *shocked* me. If you're a dancer, you're a dancer. You were born to do that, and that was how it was, but I was starting to wonder if I had evolved somehow? I was a mother now, but what did that look like for the future?

Especially if Nate decided to ask me to move out one day, and I had to be realistic because that was a possibility.

I didn't want it to be. Just thinking about it, and I was close to tears. It felt like I was taking a lit hot stick and poking myself with it, permanently burning me, but I couldn't stop. I had to be prepared for it to come. More than that. I just had to expect it because it would happen eventually.

Probably sooner since we weren't sleeping together anymore.

On the first night, he never came to bed. I went to mine, not sure how to proceed, but his friends were there. He stayed up with a few of them.

The second night, it was the same thing.

The third night.

It'd been like that ever since my hospital visit.

No kisses. No touches. Just coldness.

I overcompensated with Nova. I cuddled and loved on her so much, but she was getting more independent. She no longer wanted us to hold her hand when she ran and walked. We could play with her, but she had to bring us the toys she wanted us to play with. She was becoming a bossy little girl.

That only made her even cuter.

I was sitting in the playroom with Nova, and Nate walked in. He paused when he saw us. He softened, as he always did when he saw Nova, but then he looked at me, and the same distant look came over him. I looked down, all of my insides being twisted up and knotted.

I didn't know what to do. I didn't understand why what I said upset him so much.

I mean, he told me he didn't love me. Why was I the bad guy?

But wait.

Nate wasn't my father.

I'd been trained to keep quiet, to never just ask outright what's going on. You couldn't do that with Duke. If you brought out what was going on under the surface, it was World War III. I was the bad guy every time. I never understood how he did it, but it was a skill I needed to learn. I didn't want to use it, but I wanted to understand it.

Fuck it.

I was hurting.

It'd been so long.

I had thought I could do this, endure this, but I didn't think I could anymore.

I lifted my head and winced. Nate was staring—or more like glaring—right at me.

Déjà vu from my father, though I knew Nate wasn't like him at all.

“What did I do?”

He frowned.

My voice was soft, and I hated that. I couldn't help it, though. I'd already asked. And now that I had, I was wishing I hadn't. I forgot this was the part where I was the villain, where everything got turned on me, and I'd cry and walk away thinking I was an asshole but not understanding why I was an asshole.

*Please don't do that to me.*

“You didn't do anything.”

Huh?!

“What?” I leaned forward, my elbows going to my knees. “Come on, Nate. This has gone on for too long.”

Nova moved to the chair, pulling herself up and sifting through some books. She was pushing them off the chair without meaning to until she had enough room to sit on her butt. There. She was happy, but no books were around her.

She started to climb back down, already eyeing her two favorites.

Nate went over and scooped her up. He scooped up her books, and he opened one on their lap. She started babbling, a word here and there that I could understand.

Penguin.

Mama. (My heart swooned.)

Battybattybattybatty. (I had no clue.)

Back to penguin.

She was done, hitting the page to turn it, and it was a repeat. This page had many more words, and she was reading them all. (She thought she was.)

Nate had been watching me the whole time I was watching her. He asked, “Why do you think I was upset?”

“Because you haven’t touched me since I got back from the hospital.” Was I living in a warped time zone? Right? He had been cold, hadn’t he?

No, no, no. This was how my father started.

I shook my head and sat up to my knees. “Don’t do this. Please. Don’t pretend you’re fine. You and I both know you’re not. You haven’t *touched* me, Nate.”

For the first time, I thought I saw genuine confusion.

It made my heart leap. Some hope? Did I dare?

He murmured, helping to move the pages for Nova, “I was upset with what you thought of me at the hospital, but you went to your own bed that first night. I thought... I thought you’ve been upset with me.”

“Are you serious?”

He nodded, a rueful look coming over him. He frowned. “I *have* been upset, but it’s not at you. It’s at myself. I think I’ve been beating myself up. You’re right. It’s been too long, but a part of me was waiting for you to heal or to say something. And we’ve had guests almost every day. You’ve been going to

bed before me, and I don't know. I now realize I'm an idiot. I thought I was an idiot going to your hospital room that day, but now I realize I've been an even bigger idiot after."

That stung.

He thought he was an idiot just going to my room?

"Oh."

It was hurting to breathe. I felt knives slicing between my ribs.

Wow.

I didn't know what to do with that.

Leave.

Get out.

I had to move. I had to walk. I had to go.

I had to run.

He was being an idiot, *just going* to my hospital room.

I felt the tears, and I swear, *swear*, I wouldn't let them fall. Not now. Not here.

Just going to my room. An idiot. Him.

I had *no* idea what to do with that.

What did that even mean?

My head was swimming. Nothing was making sense, but I was hurting. That was all I knew.

"I-I have to go to the bathroom." I rushed from the room.

I went to my room, shut the door, and then to the bathroom. The door was shut, and I slid down it until my ass was on the floor.

Jesus.

Well, if I hadn't known before that he didn't love me, I sure knew now. He cemented that in.

I was sobbing before I caught myself.

Big deep sobs. They were being yanked out of my body, and I couldn't quiet them.

My hands were in fists, and I pressed them on the tile, trying to stop myself, trying to quiet them. The playroom wasn't that far away. If he followed me, he might hear.

I couldn't have that.

Fuck me. Fuck me for real.

I was so stupid. So so incredibly stupid.

*Get your shit together, Quincey. Close up the heart. Yank the walls back in place and deal.*

Just. Deal.

It was what it was.

I would get through this.

I had Nova.

She was worth everything.

Some heartbreak? Not a problem.

I could handle this.

I'd love Nate from afar then.

I could deal. I would deal.

Right. Okay.

Fuck it.

My chest was being split down the middle. The pain was excruciating.

I'd deal tomorrow. Yes. Tomorrow.

For tonight, I'd lay here and cry.

So I did that.

Nate would be on dad duty tonight.



**NATE**

**N**ova was fussing about everything.

She didn't want her food. Everything I put on her tray, she flung at the wall. The stuff that didn't get immediately flung got shoved to the floor. Then she'd go back to fussing.

I tried singing.

I tried dancing.

I did the food airplane.

I gave her a bottle. That got thrown at a wall, and note to self: my girl might be an athlete.

I checked her temp. She was fine.

I checked her ears. They looked good, but maybe it was still them?

I had a pounding headache.

I knew Quincey wasn't still going to the bathroom. My luck, I'd fucked things up again with her.

My phone was buzzing and ringing all at the same time, and I didn't know that was possible.

"Ahhhh!" Now Nova was screaming and banging. The fork got thrown, and her head went backward. Her little spoon sailed into the sink.

This was a toddler meltdown in full effect.

"Right." I was speaking to myself, but the decision was made.

I checked that I had clothes on. Shoes. I grabbed my wallet, my keys, and then I whisked Nova out of her chair. I left a note for Quincey, bundled up Nova, and then we were heading out. She was put in her car seat, and I got behind the wheel. I synced my phone and was calling, not giving a shit about what time it was in Hungary.

Aspen answered, groggy, “Nate? What?”

A growl came next, and Blaise’s voice. “Are you dying?”

“I’m about to,” I snapped at him.

“Huh?”

Aspen was back. “I got this.”

“It’s two in the morning. I can’t decipher sarcasm right away. Sor-ree.”

“You sure can speak it, can’t you? Go to sleep.” Aspen said on the phone, “Hold on. I can hear Nova. I’m moving to a different room.”

I frowned, pulling out of the garage and heading down the driveway.

A door closed on her end. Some shuffling sounds. Then another door.

“Okay. What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry to wake you up.” I was lying. “No. I’m not sorry. I’m sorry for lying. Fuck. I’m already a failure at this partner shit.”

“Is Nova physically okay?”

“AHHH HEEEEEEEE!”

I grimaced. “I think my ear just started bleeding.”

She laughed. “Did you check her temp?”

“I checked. She’s fine. Her ears look good. She’s not seeping any liquids. She was all fine and dandy until supper time.”

“Did something happen? Maybe she’s becoming a fussy eater?”

“Maybe.”

“Is Quincey there?”

I was quiet.

I’d already called my sister about Nova. I didn’t want to lay both things on her.

“Nate.”

I growled, gripping the wheel tighter.

On the plus side, Nova was quieting down. She loved car rides.

The negative, *I* was getting riled up. Or I’d already been riled up, but now I had to discuss what had riled me up, and that was riling me up even more.

“I fucked up.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

I glared at my dashboard. “You’re picking up your boy’s sarcasm, sis.”

She snorted. “My boy? I’m telling him you said that.”

“Please don’t. Good Lord. He’ll troll me on his own social media.”

“He would, but tell me what happened. Maybe your little sister has some wisdom her dear brother needs to hear, hmm?”

I laughed at that, but this sucked.

“She doesn’t think I love her.”

There was a beat, then, “THEN, OF COURSE, SHE’S PISSED AT YOU! What were you thinking? I love you, but sometimes it’s like you’re emotionally deficient. But you’re a guy. You’re a normal guy—”

“Not like me.”

Blaise had entered whatever room she was in.

I growled. “I don’t need ‘the boy’ to insert his cocky quips right now.”

Blaise laughed in the background. “Tough shit. I’m awake, and I want to hear the drama. Zeke will want a full update.”

Another growl from me. “None of this is getting leaked to your best bud. Not if you want to remain in the family text group.”

Blaise just snorted. “Let’s hear it, Nathaniel. I want to hear how you’ve messed up your relationship before you even made it an official relationship. You hadn’t, right?”

I seriously hated this kid sometimes. “We were enjoying each other, and we weren’t—it went left all of a sudden. We’ve been in a high-stressed environment, figuring out our shit. Her dad’s been threatening us. Then her dancing. Then the car accident. My family was here. It’s been a lot, okay?”

“Dude. Those are all excuses, like *literally* all of them. A conversation takes minutes.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.” Blaise was smug. “But get to the meat. What happened?”

“He loves her.” From Aspen.

Blaise snorted. “Of course, he loves her. She’s Nova’s now-mom, and he’s banging her. If you don’t love *that* chick, then you’re a moron. Wait a minute. Nate, you *are* stupid as fuck sometimes.”

“Ram a stick up your ass, Blaise.” I thought about that. “And don’t make a sexual joke about that. You are with my sister, and she’s right next to you.”

“Ass,” from Nova.

I cursed under my breath. “Let’s hope that’s not one of her new words.”

Aspen started laughing. “You’re at the stage when you need to start watching your language, pops.”

“Thanks,” I bit out.

Aspen said as if I hadn’t been a sarcastic ass, “Also, Blaise won’t. I have my fingers on his tit. If he makes a joke, he’s

getting a titty-twister.”

Blaise started laughing until his voice went three octaves higher. “OW! Aspen.”

She was laughing. “We’re here for my brother, not you. Stop flirting.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Move your hand off my leg.”

Blaise growled. “Nate, talk. I’m up, and the titty-twister got me horny. Let’s figure your shit out so I can handle *my* shit here. And side note, that’s how you handle females. There’s a problem, you deal with it. But you gotta remember, things you don’t think about saying are exactly what you should be saying to them.”

“That makes no sense.” Also, “Stop cursing.”

“It makes perfect sense.”

I clamped my mouth shut, but the growl was there. I couldn’t stop growling, then I heard a softer growl come from Nova’s chair.

I started laughing.

“Was that Nova?”

“Yes.” I was laughing harder. “She’s picking up my habits.”

She growled again, then started laughing.

A layer of tension eased up, but there was so much underneath. My sister was right. I hated to admit this, but I might need some Blaise-wisdom. He *did* tend to understand women the best out of our family circle.

“Did you *tell* her you loved her?” From Blaise.

“No.”

“That’s your fucking problem.”

“Stop cursing,” I said.

Aspen spoke up, “Just go back and talk to her. Tell her your feelings. Tell her everything.”

“Clean her jar. Clean your jar. Clean things that you don’t even think are relevant. They’re probably completely relevant.”

“Clean the jar, huh?” What a fucking phrase. I shook my head but hit the turn signal and slowed down.

It was time to head back. Nova was happy, and I had a game plan.

“If you don’t feel emotionally clean, then it’s not clean. Go with that as your guideline and remember, say the shit you don’t think about saying.”

“That doesn’t help him.” She added, “And watch the language with Nova now picking things up. She’s a sponge.”

“I don’t care. About Nate, not Nova. He has to learn. Why are we teaching him how to be in a relationship? He’s ancient compared to us.”

“Because he’s been a fuckboy most of his life.”

“Aspen.” My mouth was open. “I can’t believe you called me that.” And also, “Language.”

“Sorry. So sorry. It’s—I was around Logan and Taylor a lot last week. He kept telling her he was an eff-boy when he was young, just like you. She kept saying, ‘I know. I don’t get why you keep telling me this.’ And it’d repeat. I have no idea what was going on, so I was quiet, but I picked up the word.”

“You know who else is a reformed fuck—AH! That hurt! Fine. Eff-boy?”

I could hear my brother-in-law’s smirk from across the ocean.

“He’s giving me the look,” Aspen said to me.

“It’s a twinkle. I *twinkle*.”

“It’s a look. He’s smoldering at me.”

“I think most guys smolder,” Blaise commented.

Aspen laughed but added, “Tell her you love her. It’ll be fine. And Nova was probably just picking up the tension in the house. Kids feel everything and watch everything. It’s their job. Love you, Nate. I want to be the first to know when you need help picking out the ring.”

“The ring?!”

But Aspen hung up, and I pushed that thought aside.

One thing at a time here.

First things first, clean the jar.

## QUINCEY

I came out to the kitchen and found Nate and Nova not there. He left a note, but I looked at the food he'd been giving her. None of them were her favorites. They were all her least favorites, so I switched out a few and put her plate back in the fridge. He'd be able to get her to eat just fine when they came back.

Grabbing a bottle of wine, a corkscrew, and a wineglass, I took it with me downstairs. There was a sitting room with patio doors that overlooked the backyard. The pool was covered by now, but the landscaping had been top-notch, and all the lights were soothing to view.

I settled in on a comfortable couch with a blanket wrapped around me. The lights were off where I was sitting as I poured myself a glass of wine.

I was a few sips in when I heard them come back.

Nate walked in. Nova's little pitter-patter of feet. She was in the mood to run. She must've woken up from a small nap. She'd have so much energy now.

Nate was talking to himself, but I couldn't make out the words.

A chink of glasses. The sound of something being scraped against a plate.

Nova's little pitter-patter again, then silence.

Nate was chuckling.



Nova was talking up a storm. Miss Penguin. Mama. Dada. Batty.

Ass?

Had I heard that right?

Nate's bark of laughter told me that I had.

I drank more wine. It coated my insides, relaxing me, soothing, and taking away some of the pain from before. For the next hour, I listened to them above.

Nate fed her. Did the dishes.

I could hear the water being run for her bath.

His footsteps in her room. He stayed in there a bit.

Then he was on the move.

He went... He went to my room? Then to his room.

To the kitchen.

Living room.

He went outside, crossing to the pool house. He looked inside, but the light was off, and he turned around. He was coming back around.

Maybe I moved? I didn't intend to, but suddenly, he turned and looked right at me.

I held my breath, a shiver going through me, and my mouth went dry.

He walked to the patio doors.

I frowned, feeling a drumbeat starting inside me. Slow but strong, it was building, and I didn't know why. I didn't know what was happening.

He came in, closed the door, and moved to sit next to me on the couch. He wasn't touching me, and he wasn't turned to face me. He was sitting there, and he leaned back. Then he spoke to the room, "I'm someone who feels emotions. I do, but they aren't strong. And I know that's not normal, but that's me. It's just how I am. I guess. Maybe I made myself numb, or this is just how I'm built. I'm telling you this because when I

do feel things, I know they're important." He expelled a small pocket of air. "You don't know this, or maybe you do because of Mallone's file, but when I was younger, my parents worried about the influence Mason would have on me. He was angry, and he had reason to be. Me, I wasn't as angry. Not then. I was more of a go-with-the-flow kind of friend, but my parents didn't trust me. So they shipped me off. They shipped all of us off. Myself. My sister. My brother."

I frowned. I had read about the brother in the file, but hearing it from Nate came with more context. I *wanted* to hear this from him.

"It wasn't immediate, but my parents decided they wanted to get back to making movies. We got shipped to a boarding school in Canada, and I kinda lost myself for a while. I was mad at my parents because we didn't have a lot of problems before that. Or I didn't think we did. Maybe we did, and they never registered with me, but they created the problem. I remember thinking that and just getting so mad because they decided who I should see or talk to or who I shouldn't. For a year there, I could only focus on getting back to my friends. It wasn't really just to see my friends. It was more a 'fuck you' to my parents. Like, you tell me who you don't want me to see? Then that's *all* I'll go and see then." A short laugh, one that sounded bitter, came from him. "I lost sight of my own family during those years. When I was of age, I went back to Fallen Crest, and things had changed in my friend group. The dynamics were different. I was pushed out, somewhat, and yeah... that's who I had fought my parents so hard to get back to? I don't know. I was angry and confused, and I didn't know who I was mad at. Mason or my parents? I think I was just mad at myself." A pause.

A deep breath.

He said, "And then my brother died."

My stomach twisted.

I teared up for him.

"I wasn't there when he died. I wasn't there when my sister was struggling. I didn't even know about her struggles. I

shut my parents out, so in essence, they shut me out. I had no idea..." His voice cracked. "I wasn't altogether "in" with my friends, and I really wasn't "in" with my family anymore. I was on this lost island, and I had no idea how I got myself there. It took a few years until I got things right on the friend's side. It took longer with my family, a lot longer."

"You and Aspen seem so close now."

"We are, but I had to work at that, too. My parents dropped the ball on a lot of things. Call it selfishness or workaholics or ... I don't know. They tried to make things better with me a few years ago, but too much damage was done. I more wanted them to shape up for Aspen. I guess I'm saying all this because there have been pockets in my life when I felt things. Hurt. Anger. Loss. Confusion. Concern. But not love." He turned to me, his eyes so clear, so piercing. "When I saw Nova, I loved her immediately and I *knew* she was mine. I just knew. It was instant. I love my parents. I love my sister. I love my friends. But none of them touch what I feel for Nova." Another pause and his eyes growing even more somber. "Or you."

I sucked in my breath, feeling a pain in there.

"You both are different from the rest. You're *more*. Nova is everything to me. Everything, but you—you are, too. I want you beside me. I want to walk with you. I want to hand Nova off to you. I want to laugh with you. I want to help fix dinners with you, for you. I want to take care of you. I want to protect you. I want to touch you. Hold you. Hug you. Fuck you hard. Fuck you slow. I want to put my claim on you so permanently that no one else will look at you. They'll just know you're mine. You and Nova are my family, and it's a real type of family, more real than I've ever felt before." He choked up, raking a hand over his face. "I'm not someone who knows their feelings right away or knows how to articulate them. I'm just not like that, but that doesn't mean I don't feel it. When I got that call that you were hit by a car, the world shifted for me. Everything went clear. You. Nova. You both are mine, and that's how it is. I need you in my life. I need you with me, and I've never told you that. I was waiting until you were ready, and then I think I overshot, and you were ready long before I

told you. That doesn't even make sense to me, but I feel like it does to you? Maybe?"

I reached out for him, needing to touch him.

He was giving me the world. He had taken it, wrapped a bow around it, filled it with love, and he was holding it to me with the palm of his hand.

I sat up, kneeling, and then I crawled over to him.

He caught my wine—the wineglass I forgot I had in my hand—and laughed, setting it on the stand beside him. Then he reached over, his hands went under my arms, and he lifted me onto his lap. I turned, my legs sliding down so I was straddling him, my blanket and all.

He framed my face, his thumbs rubbing over my cheeks. "I love you, Quincey Royas. I would like you to be Nova's mother and my wife for the rest of our lives."

A gargle came out of me.

"Are you proposing to me?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." He was scanning my face, my eyes, falling to my mouth. Lingering on my mouth, he groaned. "I just need you, and I can't lose you. I love you. I love you so much."

Warmth burst in me. That throbbing increased. The drumbeat needing to feel him.

"I love you, too, Nathaniel."

He groaned, grinning. "Only you can call me that. We need to make that clear to everyone else. That's Quincey's name."

I reached up, catching his wrists because he needed to hear this back from me. "You have to know that I love you, too. Everything you said, I'm the same. Nova is my life. I want you to be in there with me, beside me. I want to love you, and take care of you, and protect you. And I will. I promise. Side by side, Nate."

"Nathaniel."

"Side by side, Nathaniel."

He nodded. “I’m really sorry for taking this long to tell you.”

I closed my eyes, resting my forehead on his. “I’m sorry for not believing you could love me.”

“That’s over.” He tipped my head back up so I could see him. His thumbs returned to my mouth, moving under my bottom lip. “Can I unofficially propose to you now?”

Fireworks were going off in me. Sparklers, too.

I smiled at him, feeling light-headed. “What does that mean?”

“That you’ll be my partner for life and my partner in helping raise Nova? That we can have more babies? That you’ll marry me? And that I’ll propose officially later with a ring and probably your whole family and mine to be there because that’s kinda a thing with my group?”

I was nodding even before he finished. “Yes, yes, and yes. Yes to all of that.”

“Yeah?” His eyes darkened, falling to my lips.

“Yeah,” I whispered right before his mouth found mine.

There was a clicking sound.

I heard it. I felt it, and I knew what it was.

I was complete. Everything was how it should be.

Everything was right.

I had found my family, but so had ~~Nate~~ Nathaniel.

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*THIS WAS WHY, Q. He’s always been yours.*

## EPILOGUE

**W**e celebrated Nova's second birthday privately.

That was due to a couple of reasons. One was because of my very recent stay at the hospital and my injuries. The other reason, because this was our first birthday as a family. We wanted it private and almost sacred because that was how we felt. Nova was a miracle for both Nate and me. Having said that, we went all out.

Cupcakes.

Blow-up penguins.

Stuffed sloths in many sizes.

Nate ran in wearing a blow-up T-Rex costume, which was Nova's latest obsession.

There were rainbow balloons everywhere.

Confetti thrown in the air.

The whole thing was just for the three of us.

The following month, we went all out again once my injuries were fine and the doc gave us the go-ahead to travel.

Nate decided it was time we went to Fallen Crest. I met his parents, who I'd been nervous about meeting, but was surprised. His mom gave me a hippie vibe, which Nate said was a part of her new transition in life. His father was reserved but warm. Both parents were transfixed with Nova. They were almost literally wrapped around her finger from the start.

His mom wouldn't stop holding Nova's little finger. She followed her everywhere, and Nova enjoyed telling her grandmother everything they encountered in the house. His dad, who was Gah-pa, sat on the couch with her in the evenings. She crawled all over him, plopping in his lap, crawling around his neck, trying to sit on top of his head a few times. I was pretty certain Nova was attempting to impersonate a cat, and by the time we left their house, it wasn't their house. It was Nova's house. Stuffed animals were in every single room, piled up in the corner and placed in baskets. I finally met Miss Sandy, and she fell in love with Nova as well. This was becoming the norm.

Meet Nova.

Love Nova.

You are now owned by Nova.

It was the pattern.

Miss Sandy fussed over Nova, getting her food ready for her. She would've done everything for her, if I had allowed it, but I was firm. Bathtime was my time—well, mine and Nate's.

After Fallen Crest, we went to Boston.

Nate had shared a house with Logan, so we stayed there, but there was a lot of time spent at Samantha and Mason's home. There were many story nights and laughter. Lots of laughter. Nova loved Maddie, Sam and Mason's eldest, who was practicing her babysitting skills. She did magnificently, and both Mason and Logan commented this was a new side to Maddie. She was very gentle with Nova. Sam explained that Maddie was not usually gentle. She was the personification of her father and her uncle in a little girl's body. Everyone laughed at that description.

“Have you and Nate talked about the future at all?” Sam asked me as we went on a walk one of those evenings. It was just the two of us and a German Shepherd they'd recently rescued. Sam introduced her as Gagely, who was pulling on the leash, trying to memorize every smell in the world.

I shook my head. “We talked about it in terms of where we’re a family. We know that, and I know he misses being here with you guys.”

She cast me a look, Gagely still pulling on the leash. She made a tsking sound, and Gagely reacted, falling in line next to her side. “I have a feeling that Logan is going to move wherever you and Nate settle down.”

“Really?”

She went back to watching their dog, who looked in love with Samantha. I couldn’t read her expression. She had closed down a bit after sharing that.

I felt a pang.

I didn’t want to pull Logan away from these two, but I also knew Nate and I would do what we needed to do for our family. I wasn’t dancing at the moment, and I hadn’t made a decision about what I wanted for the future.

I thought I’d miss dancing, but I was surprised at how much I didn’t. I was content at the moment.

As for Nate, he had investments all over. He could travel, or he could not. But my family was in Seattle, and there’d been growth that I didn’t want to halt by moving away.

Calihan was coming to terms with me being in the family more, though that was heeded dramatically and a lot quicker because Nova was attached with me. As for Stephanie and me, that was a mixed bag. I knew there was a lot of emotional work I needed to do because my relationship with my mother wasn’t an easy one. It was filled with so many thorns put in place by Duke, and while I felt guilty about that and so much shame, I also needed to realize that I couldn’t blame myself for what my father did. But she and I would be good, and it was starting, and I was excited. It was a new feeling for me, letting my mother love me and realizing that love had always been there, just waiting for me.

I blinked a few tears away, thinking about it now.

I shared with Samantha, “I think I need to be in Seattle for a while. There’s a lot of healing that is just starting.”



She looked over, studying me for a moment in silence before saying softly, “I’m gathering that.” A beat later, she continued, “Mason’s contract is up for negotiations not long from now.”

Now it was my turn to look over at her, studying her in silence.

She seemed thoughtful, her eyes looking in the distance.

I had to wonder what thoughts she was mulling over because the air around us shifted, growing more somber.

I almost wanted to apologize, but I couldn’t. It didn’t feel like a bad sort of somberness.

“Everything works out in the end.”

I glanced over again, hearing her light words, and a second later, she smiled to herself.

The topic was dropped after that, and we discussed the rest of our trip. When we got back to their house, Logan and Taylor had arrived, and Taylor came out holding Nova, which I wasn’t surprised.

“Mama!” Nova shouted, struggling to be put down.

Taylor knelt, and Nova ran to me, her legs and arms pumping.

I scooped her up, my heart bursting.

“Mama.” She wound her arms around me, pressing a very wet kiss to my neck and cheek, and the struggling commenced. She had to be put down so she could greet Gagely first and then Samantha. She returned to give me a hug before going back to Taylor.

The three of us went into the house, Gagely leading the way and making a beeline toward wherever I was assuming the guys were.

“Logan was thinking we’d do pizza for dinner?” She nodded to their backyard. “The weather is so nice. He wanted to use your pizza firepit outside.”

“Oh, yeah. That sounds great and delicious.”

“Taylor, you okay with Nova?”

The question was almost moot because my little girl was wrapped around Taylor’s leg.

Taylor laughed. “Always! She’s been going to Maddie, Mason, and me with a trip every now and then to check in with Dad.”

“She’s not shy, that’s for sure.”

I headed to our room, and Nate came in a few minutes later.

“How was the walk?”

I stepped out of the bathroom, yawning. “It was good.” But I frowned. “Sam made a comment about Mason’s contract coming up for negotiations soon.”

He froze. “She did?”

I nodded. “Do you know what that’s about?”

He opened his mouth, blinked a few more times, and shut it. “No. I don’t. I mean... no. I don’t think...I don’t think so.”

Then he saw I was in the process of changing, and his eyes darkened. “Were you going to take a shower?”

I grinned, feeling my heartbeat pick up. “Maybe. Taylor’s watching Nova.”

His answering grin decided for me, then he reached out and locked the door.

I was hustled into the shower the next instant, and it was a good while before we joined the rest.

---

IT WAS LATER that night when I rolled toward Nate. “Do you miss living here?”

He threw me a surprised look, but both of us glanced at Nova. She was curled up, clutching her blanket and her penguin, and her soft snores filled the room. She’d been

sleeping heavy lately, but Nate got up and turned up the volume on the noise machine just to be safe.

He came back to bed, sliding under the covers, and scooped me up. He pulled me to lay on top of him, and I rested my head on his shoulder, turned toward his face. He glanced at me, his voice coming out in a hushed tone. "Yes."

My hand spasmed on his chest.

He noted it before looking back at my face. His hand covered mine, lacing our fingers together. He shifted, one of his legs wrapping around mine. "I don't think that's the question you're really asking, though. What's going on in your head?"

"I need to stay in Seattle." My heart twisted. "I think I'm going to reach out to Dierik and tell him I'm done with dancing. Matthew talked to me about a dance student in Seattle a while ago. She's doing graduate work in dance therapy. I might reach out to her and see if that's something I could do, too."

"You'd like that?"

I nodded, resting my cheek on his shoulder. "I have a lot to heal from because of my dad. It might be cathartic for me. I don't want to dance anymore, not in productions. I think I haven't for a while. I think this is my next step." I looked up again, remembering why I brought this up in the first place. "I'm sorry."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why are you apologizing about that? It's what you need right now."

I lifted my head up a little. "What?"

"I've always known you needed to stay in Seattle." He gave his head a slight shake. "I mean, I didn't really think about it until the past couple of months, but it makes sense. I stayed in the beginning because I didn't want to take Nova away from what and who was familiar to her, but you need to be there for your family."

"You're okay with that?"

He nodded. "Of course." He moved, bringing his free hand to my face and tracing his thumb down the side of my cheek, sending sensations trailing it. Good sensations. Loving sensations. He cupped the side of my face, his thumb moving over my other cheek in a warm caress. "I've gone through my shit. When you and Nova came into my life, I was restless. I needed a purpose, or I was looking for more of a purpose. Logan's got Taylor, Mason has his family, and Matteo is good with his career. My sister's happy. Things were good, but I wasn't complete. Not totally." His eyes pierced mine. "Then you and Nova came, and you guys complete me."

My heart was skipping all over my chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," he whispered, his eyes warming and moving over my face. His thumb went to my mouth, running over my lips in a tender motion. "I love you so much. It's hard to remember what life was like before you. I was a different person then. I am a different man now, and I personally really like who I am now. That's because of you and Nova."

Oh. Gah.

I was melting all over, and my throat was trembling. "I love you, too."

He nodded, a cocky grin coming over him now. "I know."

I laughed.

He sobered. "The reason I said that is because this is your time to heal, and you're just starting. Valerie gave me you. I don't know the reason she didn't tell me about Nova. I think we can only speculate, but a part of me feels that everything happened how it was supposed to happen. I've always felt that she wanted me to come in and love you how I do, that maybe she knew you were mine from the start. But we'll never know."

A tingling sensation went over my body, filling me up, spreading through all of my limbs. It was love, but something else, something deep and connecting. I laid my head down on his chest, just enjoying the feeling.

"She liked lilacs."

He stilled underneath me.

I added, “She liked the smell of them, and they were her favorite flowers.”

Both his arms moved around me, holding me tightly against him. “Then we’ll make sure to keep them around the house.”

I nodded. “I love you, Nathaniel.”

He swept some of my hair aside on my forehead before lifting his head and pressing a kiss there. “I love you, too.”

---

NOVA’s third birthday party was attended by everyone!

Literally, everyone.

Ricci. Emily. Matthew even.

Nate’s parents. My parents, who were now Stephanie and Guy. Calihan. Graham and Britney. All of Nate’s friends. Mason, Samantha, and their children. Logan, Taylor, and their two dogs now. Matteo and Grace. Heather and Channing, and their children. Aspen and Blaise, who made a call and there was a whole group of people who came with them. One looked remarkably like Blaise, and the others knew Heather and Channing very well. A guy followed Mason around the house. It was funny at times and uncomfortable at other times. I wasn’t sure who everyone was in that group, but Nova seemed taken with Blaise. Taylor and Mason were still her favorites among everyone, but Aspen’s husband was competing for the top spot. The ruling was still out—well, except for Grandma Stephanie and Grandpa Guy. They had the top spot over everyone.

There were balloons. Giraffes (blow-up giraffes). Flamingo lawn decorations all over. Our entire backyard was transformed into a petting zoo. There was a snow-cone cart. A chocolate chip cookie baking area. Cotton candy. A whole section for goats, sheep, kittens, ponies, and puppies to be petted. Some sheep, too, and a cow.

Nova loved the cow the most.

We had lilacs everywhere, though that was common for our house. When our lilacs started to die, I bought fresh ones to replace them. There wasn't a day in the past year when we didn't have lilacs, and I swore to keep with that tradition, no matter the expense. Nova knew what they signified, and she often pointed at them, saying, "My other mama." She'd smile at them, blink her eyes, and then take off running for the next task for her to tackle whether that was pretend or just greeting someone. Whatever it was, she tackled it with a zest for life.

We were nearing the end of the afternoon when a microphone was brought out.

Nate grabbed me around the waist and pulled me to our patio. He stepped up, keeping me with him, and Logan brought over the mic. He winked at me. "Nice knowing you."

"What?" I stiffened as he bypassed me, finding Taylor and throwing his arm around her shoulders.

Nate growled. "Ignore him. Goddamn thinks he's so funny."

I relaxed, recognizing the undertones Nate had for Logan. This one was an annoying fondness mixed with laughter. Decoded, it meant he was annoyed by Logan but thought it was funny at the same time.

"Hi, everyone. First, thank you for coming. I'm not going to make my daughter come over here. She looks permanently glued to that cow, and I'm now wondering why we have a cow in our backyard?"

There was a smattering of laughter.

My mom raised her hand up, who was standing next to Nova and the cow. "Her name is Milly. Nova just informed me."

"Right." He called out, raising his voice, "Thank you, Nova's grandmother."

She gave us a thumbs-up, beaming the whole time. Guy was next to her, also beaming. Nate's parents were right next

to them. All four grandparents hadn't moved far from Nova the whole day, actually, but Nate's body tensed and my attention came back to him.

I frowned. What was going on?

His face was tight, his jaw clenched.

He looked nervous.

He glanced at Logan and Mason before swinging his eyes to me. He softened, everything in him relaxing, and he gave me the most tender smile. I almost gasped, feeling moved. He squeezed my hand, and he turned to me, still holding the microphone.

"I never thought I would do this, this way. Competing with a cow for my daughter's attention, or even in front of a crowd, but I love you, Quincey Royas."

"Oh my God," someone whispered from the crowd.

My heart picked up, starting to speed in my chest.

"Wha—"

He said into the microphone, cutting me off, "There's things not-child appropriate I want to say to you, but I'll wait until we're alone. Thoughts that I had when I first met you."

"Oh!" I laughed, remembering that day. "I think I shared some of those thoughts."

He laughed into the mic. "Maybe, but as everyone here knows, life completely turned everything upside down for me after that day, and it's made me not only a better man but also a better everything. Better person. Better father." He winked. "I fell in love with you, and I just became a better man. Happier man. You and I have been through so much, and I know we'll have ups and downs. That's just a part of life, but the night I told you that I loved you, I asked you to unofficially marry me. There was no dating between us, no deciding if we wanted to be in each other's lives or not. We just were, and thank God for that. Thank God for a lot of things. But I knew that night... well, I knew long before that night, but I was still learning this science called

communication, and that night I told you that I wanted you to be my partner for the rest of our lives.”

I was crying.

I couldn't stop the tears.

My heart was trying to beat its way out of my chest.

All the nerves Nate had before were now in me. My stomach was doing butterfly flips and pirouettes over and over again. It wasn't stopping.

“I told you I'd ask you officially later, and well, today's that day. I hope that's all right?” He didn't wait before going to one knee. He looked up at me, pulling out a ring and holding it toward me. “Will you, Quincey Royas, be my wife and become Quincey Monson?”

There was a roar from the crowd, but they ceased to exist for me.

I couldn't move.

I opened my mouth, my tears cascading down my face, and then I whispered, “Yes. Oh my God, yes.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded, my emotion fully choking me.

I'd been content with Nate, with Nova, with my family. But now, I was elated.

“Oh, thank God.” The mic caught that last bit as Nate stood, sliding the ring onto my finger, and then picking me up and spinning me around. There were laughter and more cheers after that, but it was all a blur to me.

It was compounded by everything and everyone, and I had no words for a moment.

Finally, I just wrapped my arms around Nate and said, “Thank you for loving me.”

He pulled back, searching my eyes, and a deeper look came over him. “Thank you for loving me.”



I smiled, and his eyes darkened again before his mouth found mine.

Nova didn't want to leave the cow, so we went to her. The crowd went with us, which Nova was annoyed because she literally only wanted to be with the cow. We didn't care.

There were hugs, kisses, congratulations.

A line formed, coming up to us, and there were more hugs. So many hugs. I was hugged out by the end of the night. When we shared what happened with Nova later that night, she nodded, a very serious look coming over her. Then she stood, hugged both of us one by one, and asked, perched on our laps. "Milly told me that she'd like us to rescue her."

It took a second before the dots connected.

Milly was the cow, and Milly seemed happy, but Mason and Sam rescued their dog, so Nova thought every animal needed rescuing.

Nate said, "We're going to have to move to a farm."

Nova's eyes got big. "REALLY?!"

I gave him a look. "Now she thinks us getting married means we're moving to a farm."

He grinned at me. "Maybe we could get married on a farm?"

I laughed because maybe we could.

---

SIX MONTHS LATER, we got married on a farm.

Nova put in a request to "rescue" some ducks, too.

---

ONE YEAR LATER, Valerie Stephanie Monson was born.

A year after that, Lilac Aspen Monson was born.

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If you enjoyed Nate's story, please leave a review!

They truly help so much.

For more reading, check out the rest of my books.

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Thank you to ALL OF THE FALLEN CREST READERS! Nate did not talk to me. Like, ever. He was very hard to crack, and I honestly felt like I needed to write Aspen's book first before his because I didn't understand myself.

Then I wrote Aspen. And I understood.

I'm an author who really listens to the characters. I let them show me who they are and I'm just as surprised when I peel back their layers as readers are. There's been a lot of mystery and curiosity about Nate, and once I wrote him, I was like —OH! Now I understand.

Nate and Quincey AND Nova!

Gosh. I hope you guys loved them as much as I did and do.

Thank you to everyone who has helped me in creating this book, and for everyone who keeps the Fallen Crest world *alive!*

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More books to come!

# BENNETT MAFIA

## CHAPTER ONE

“Die, you fly!”

I locked eyes with a black fly, or maybe our eyes weren't locked, but he was perched on the rock next to me. He was going down. He had been harassing me for the last hour. I was outside, trying to clean up the yard, but I was going nuts with this damn thing buzzing all around me.

He was teasing me, taunting me. He flew out of the way every time I swung at him. He was too fast, and as he paused on my shoulder, I swung at the same time the screen door opened. I heard its creak across the yard right before a numbing pain exploded in my shoulder.

“Ry—did you just clock yourself?”

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

I groaned, my knees buckling.

I had.

I'd swung with the rock in my hands, and now I felt blood trickling down my shoulder and arm. My shirtsleeve was rapidly turning red.

The fly fucker was trying to kill me, by outsmarting me.

“Shit.”

The door slammed shut, and I heard Blade's feet scuffling down the stairs as he ran to me. The gravel crunched under his weight, and then he slid in behind me. His pants would be ripped up, but knowing Blade, he wouldn't care.

He rarely cared about clothes. We were just happy he wore them, most of the time.

“Fuck.” He swore under his breath, his very tanned and slightly oily fingers gentle as he looked at my wound. His dark eyes seemed to penetrate my shoulder before he sat back on his heels, raking a hand through his dreadlocks. “What were you doing?”

I wasn't going to admit a fly had outwitted me.

When I was doing yard work, Blade made himself scarce. For the years he'd been living with us, he'd been content to clean the inside. He did most of the cooking, cleaning, and dishes, and it wasn't uncommon for us to come home from shopping and find him wearing a maid's apron and duster—and nothing else.

So for him to come looking for me outside like this wasn't normal.

“What is it?” I jerked my head toward the house, hearing the television blaring.

His concerned eyes lifted to mine, and a whole different look slid over him.

My alarm level went up three notches.

Of the three of us living in this little cabin outside of Calgary, or Cowtown as we called it sometimes, Blade wasn't the one who got concerned about things. He enjoyed indulging in marijuana, kept his hair in tight dreadlocks, and dressed like a child from the sixties in a brown vest, no shirt, and a tie-dyed bandana over his hair. Only instead of bell-bottoms, he wore tight, frayed jeans over regular runners. He handled all our computer stuff, and when we walked inside, I wasn't surprised to find he had switched over the news he'd caught on his computer to the main television screen.

I also wasn't surprised to be watching a report from New York City.

“—ennett mafia princess has been missing for forty-nine hours now.”



Ice lined my insides.

A picture of my old boarding school roommate, Brooke Bennett, flashed on the screen, along with numbers to call if she was found.

Found...

As in, she was lost?

I felt punched in the chest.

Brooke was missing.

Dazed, I reached out for a chair to sit in. Blade moved to my side.

“That’s your old roommate, right?” The chair protested. Blade’s hand left my arm, and his voice came from my side. “The one you had at that rich school.”

I almost snorted at his wording, but I was still in a daze. I nodded instead.

Brooke. *Man.*

The news was showing pictures from her social media accounts, and she was gorgeous. Fourteen years. I don’t know why that number popped into my head, but it felt right. It’d been so long since I last saw her, or was it fourteen years since we first met? One of those.

“She was always so girly,” I murmured, almost to myself. She’d been so full of life.

Not me. I’d been a numbed-down, post-traumatized zombie when I walked into that room.

“*Oh my gosh! You must be my roommate!*” She had launched herself at me from behind the moment I entered the room, wrapping her arms around me. Her face had pressed into my shoulder.

Janine had squawked. “*Oh my.*”

I’d ignored my dad’s secretary and had taken one second before the girl let me go and hurried around in front of me.

Her hands went to my arms, just underneath my shoulders and she'd looked me up and down.

I did the same: black oval eyes, stunning jet-black hair, a pert nose, small mouth—but lips formed just like the ones that had been a stamp on my last Valentine's Day party invitation, full and plump.

I was slightly envious, or as envious as I could get since I wasn't usually the jealous type. She had a small chin to end her perfect heart-shaped face, and her eyes were glittering and alive.

That had been the one moment when I truly was jealous of her. Life. She had what I didn't. I wasn't jealous of her looks, though if I'd had a different upbringing maybe I might've been? In a way, that was something I was thankful for. Life meant more to me than looks or things. It meant yearning for safety, smiles, the feeling of being loved.

The other girls had been jealous of her money. For a “rich kids” school, everyone seemed to be pissed about how much money they had. They always wanted more, and they seemed to know who had the most. I was toward the lower end of the wealthy crowd, but Brooke—as it had been whispered around school—was at the top.

There'd been other whispers, other looks, but we were twelve in our first year there. I didn't understand what the word *mafia* actually meant. But it was used often as a taunt by our second semester at Hillcrest. The first semester there hadn't been that kind of bullying. Some girls liked us. Some girls didn't. A few hung out with us, and our room became known as the “hot guy” room. Not because we had guys there. Far from it. I would've died if a cute guy even looked my way. No, no. Our room had the name because of all the posters and photographs Brooke plastered all over our room. All gorgeous males.

It never made sense that some of her pictures didn't look professionally taken, but the posters were real, and who wouldn't drool over a full-length shot of Aaron Jonahson, the best football player in the United States—or the celebrity actor

from everyone's favorite television show, or the so-hot model that'd been a convict first. Brooke seemed to have all the guys covered, but some pictures seemed more like snapshots. Which was the truth.

I found out around the holidays: they were her family.

They weren't celebrities—not in the sense that I understood back then—they were her brothers, all four of them.

Cord was the oldest at eighteen.

Kai was fifteen.

Tanner was fourteen.

Brooke was twelve.

And Jonah brought up the rear at nine years old.

Brooke was quiet about her family, *really* quiet. But when I found out those boys were her brothers, and their names, I was fascinated. I couldn't lie about that. I just hadn't known who I was becoming obsessed about.

Cord kept his hair short, almost a crew cut above his more angular face. Brooke told me he was usually the reserved one, and artsy. She almost hissed when she used that word, as if it was a curse, but then she shrugged. "It's the truth. He wants to be a painter one day."

Next in line hadn't been Kai. She'd skipped over him and chewed on her lip, pausing before pointing to Tanner. As she did, her eyes lit up and a bright smile took over her face.

"Tanner has this shaggy hair that he bleaches blond, and sometimes it's dark when I see him. He's funny, Ry. He's *so* funny, but he also has an attitude. All the girls here would die over him, literally just die."

I still remembered all the emails she got from a tannerinyourmama—almost her entire inbox was emails from him.

When she'd gotten to Jonah's picture, she'd quieted, but a fondness had shone through her. She'd spoken almost as if he

were in the room and words could break him.

“Jonah’s the baby,” she said gently. “He worships Kai...” She’d paused and scratched at her forehead before continuing. “But he doesn’t look like the rest of us.” That’s all she’d said about him.

I’d inspected the picture of her and him together. She had pulled Jonah onto her lap, her arms around him, and his still-baby cheek pressed against hers as he smiled. His skin had a darker tone than the others, but they all had the most luscious facial features. All dark eyes.

Cord and Kai had black hair in their pictures. Tanner’s was lighter, and Brooke’s a lovely shade of dark copper. Jonah’s hair matched hers, with a twinge of curl in it too. Tanner’s was long and shaggy, sticking up all over. Kai’s was short, where a hand could run through it easily and it’d fall back in place—just a touch longer than Cord’s barely-there hair.

I returned my attention to the television now, coming back to the present.

In the photos on the screen, Brooke’s hair was still the length it’d been in school. She’d kept it trimmed just above her waist and had been adamant that no one would cut it. She’d whispered one night about a fight with her dad, that her father went after her with a pair of scissors. But her hair was still long when she told me, so whatever the fight, he hadn’t been successful. And like all the other times she talked about her family, she didn’t go into detail. She always said just enough so I knew what she was talking about, and then she would close up. Her shoulders would shudder before a wall slammed down, and that night had been the same.

A soft sigh left me as I continued to watch the images on the news.

Brooke had her chin up, proud, as her braided hair curved around her neck. In another she struck a sultry pose in a bikini. She could’ve been a model, except maybe she didn’t have the height—not like me. She’d been an inch shorter than me in school, though now I had shot up even taller to five ten.

They teased us about being sisters at school.

I had loved it, though I never said a word. I didn't know if Brooke enjoyed it. She never spoke for or against it, but I could see now why people thought that way. We both had dark black hair. Okay. Maybe I couldn't see why now. That was the end of our similarities. Brooke had a rounder face. I was fairer in skin. My eyes were more narrow. My face a little longer. And taller. I was always taller.

Brooke used to sigh that I could be a model, but she was wrong. She was the future model. I saw the proof now.

She looked like she'd gotten a tad bit taller too, maybe another inch, but that was it. It didn't matter. Brooke could've been a model just because she had turned into a celebrity—which was also why the story about her being missing had been picked up by a news channel from New York City, where I didn't think she lived.

“That's her, right?” Blade prompted again. He shoved back his chair to stand as I heard the sounds of an approaching car outside.

We lived near Cowtown, but we kept to the forest for a reason. The cabin we were renting belonged to a friend of a friend of another friend, and there were probably three other sets of friends before we actually got to the owner. There was a reason for that, just like there was a reason Blade hurried to his computer, turning off the news as he brought up the feed from the electronic sensors outside.

A second later, he relaxed and flipped the screen back.

All was clear. It was our third roommate, Carol. But I wasn't paying attention to her or to the sound I heard when the screen door opened and something dropped with a thud on the floor. Carol cursed.

My eyes returned to the screen, glued there because an image of Kai Bennett appeared now.

Just like the last time I saw my friend, the bile of loathing pooled in my mouth. Kai stared right at the camera, offering

whoever had taken his picture the same look he'd given me before taking my roommate away so many years ago.

While I couldn't remember the last look on Brooke's face, I couldn't get *his* out of my mind.

Death.

His eyes were dead, just like they'd been back then.

A shiver went up my spine. I'd only seen Kai Bennett in person once, but it was enough.

I hated him.

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Read more [Bennett Mafia!](#)

# RICH PRICK

## CHAPTER ONE

Everyone knew who Blaise DeVroe was.

It didn't matter that he'd come to Fallen Crest Academy late in the year—and FCA was *not* a school you showed up late to.

I knew this because I showed up shortly after this year—my senior year—began, and no one, I repeat *no one*, knew who I was. Since my parents decided to have a mid-life crisis and tried to make up for some of their wrongs and bring me back to Fallen Crest, my last year of high school had sucked. FCA was filled with rich, stuck-up people. That meant you had to speak their language to be in their groups, and I didn't. Not because I didn't have money. My parents were movie producers and directors. We had money, and I previously went to one of the most exclusive private schools in North America, *and* a stint in a boarding school in Europe.

I could be fluent in stuck-up-ese if I wanted to.

But I chose not to. I've never been that girl.

I was the library girl.

I was the book nerd girl.

I was the wallflower.

On the whole, I tended to avoid people. I didn't people well. I had an affinity for blending into the background. It's a skill. I'd been perfecting it all my life.

But anyway, Blaise DeVroe was the opposite of that.

He may have moved to this school late in the year, but he walked in as if he already owned it. And to his credit, he kinda did.

The guy who ran the school before Blaise showed up was Zeke Allen. He's this wealthy jackass who's a bully, a muscular douchebag, and who slept with girls and then talked shit about them. He was king of the school by default, I guess—not because he was anything fantastic.

Then Blaise DeVroe walked in.

Guess who gave him a welcome-home hug? Zeke Allen did!

I was there, just coming out of the counselor's office, so I saw it all.

Blaise DeVroe strutted in with that cocky walk all the athletes had, and he was gorgeous. Like, seriously gorgeous. He had the high, arching cheekbones only the prettiest of the pretty-boy models had.

I knew this too because I'd done some reluctant gigs in the business.

But back to freaking stunning Blaise DeVroe. He had a chiseled, square jaw. He could have had his own waterfall off that jawline. Dark eyes. His hair was short, but long enough so he could rake his hands through it and let it be all adorably messy. And his body. Don't even get me started on his body—I was all crushing on it because it was *sick* and I mean that in the hot kind of sick way, not the real sick way. He was definitely not the real sick way at all.

He wasn't as big as Zeke, but he had these big, broad shoulders. Trim waist. And there were muscles everywhere. I swear I saw shape definition in his neck.

Blaise DeVroe: the *hottest* guy at Fallen Crest Academy.

One of the richest guys too.

I didn't hear the story of why he came here—not the real reason. Rumors circulated that his mom was going through a divorce, but there were also whispers about secret siblings. I



wasn't on the up-and-up with anyone, so I never heard for sure if any of that was true. All I knew was Blaise DeVroe had walked into the hallowed and pretentious hallways of the private school in our town, and he was hailed like a long-lost son or something.

*Or something*, as it turned out.

Blaise and Zeke knew each other from childhood. Zeke considered him his long-lost best friend. So it was a coming home sort of situation.

Not that I could talk much about the history of FCA, because I was new myself, but I had been here almost a whole semester before Blaise. And full disclosure, I'd been here when I was much younger at the private elementary/middle school. That was before Mom and Pops decided they didn't like the influence my older brother's best friend was having on him, so they pulled both my brothers and me out of here.

But that's a whole different story.

The story for right now is that I'm being a total weirdo stalker and perving on Blaise DeVroe getting his dick sucked.

Like, right in front of me.

In hindsight, this was probably not the best idea I'd ever had. And I've had some doozy ideas. But this one takes the cake. I just couldn't help myself. As I've mentioned, I usually keep to myself, but something got into me this year. Every time I heard about a party, I couldn't make myself go, but I also couldn't *not* go.

So...I went.

But I stayed on the outskirts, so the people actually attending the party didn't realize I was there. There'd been a big bonfire that our town and the neighboring two towns had a while back. I was there, but I'd decided to make it a camping trip—just for me.

I was there, but not there. And that night had ended weird too, but nothing like this one.

This time the party was at Zeke Allen's lake cabin. Not that his cabin was a cabin. It was a mansion—a twenty-room *mega* log cabin, which no one even blinked at, because that's just normal for these people. Most everyone was staying at the cabin, not trekking back here into the woods like me. I'd set up my tent a bit away, doing my camping thing again (something I love, by the way), when I heard voices. They weren't down by the house, spilling out over the back patio, or even at the lake. Nope. These voices were up the hill, coming from farther into the woods.

I'd done my research. Zeke Allen's cabin was set a good ten miles away from the nearest neighbors. I should've been in the clear to sneak onto their land, do a little freestyle camping, and listen to the party sounds like the loser I was. But noooo. I was about to get company.

As I snuck out of my tent, and realized who it was, I almost crapped my pants.

It was Blaise DeVroe, holding hands with Mara Daniels.

As popular girls went, Mara Daniels was one of the nicer ones. She was on the dance team. Dark hair. Shorter, but athletic. The problem with Mara was that she was friends with the other popular girls. Some of them were nasty—hence the reason I wasn't friends with them. Not that they'd tried to get to know me. Not that I even registered on their radar. But then again, that's what I did.

I didn't engage. I didn't attend. I was on the edge. I was the invisible girl, and here I was, being the invisible girl once more, but man...

When I saw it was him, and then saw how his hand went from holding hers and guiding her to a tree to slipping around and grabbing her ass, something came over me. I couldn't retreat back to my tent. I couldn't even stay hidden behind a tree and just listen.

I know, I know. This was all sorts of wrong, but Blaise was Blaise.

He'd become the guy in my dreams, my weird schoolgirl fantasies. He was my high school crush. Everyone had one. If you didn't, you're even weirder than me, and that's saying something. So when I started salivating over Blaise DeVroe, I kinda just let myself go. I mean, nothing was ever going to happen. Guys like him didn't date girls like me. They didn't even notice girls like me.

I wasn't crazy. That'd make me all sorts of delusional.

I was a realist. I knew my place in life's hierarchy. I was at the bottom. I was not the very bottom—because of my family—but socially, I was barely one rung up the ladder.

Anyway, when Blaise started kissing Mara, when Mara knelt in front of him, when she opened his pants and took out his cock—I lost all train of thought.

I watched as she took his dick in her mouth, as her head began bobbing up and down over him.

And, oh my God.

My whole body was awash with sensations, and I was captivated. Captivated! Entranced. Mesmerized.

I could not look away.

Then I felt throbbing and a warm feeling between my legs, and it was game over. It was all I could do not to make a sound, because I wanted to. So bad. I wanted to moan. I wanted to touch myself, but I didn't. I kept myself reined in, but watch? Oh yeah. I watched.

I couldn't *not* watch.

I watched the whole thing.

I loved the whole thing.

And then at the end of it, I almost died.

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## BLAISE

I was getting my dick sucked while a weird chick watched us.

“Hmmm...Blaise.” My girl moaned, readjusted, and took me in again. She reached up to stroke under, and damn, that felt good. My eyes almost rolled back, but I caught myself and held steady. My hands went to her head. Sometimes a little guidance went a long way, and as I applied gentle pressure, my girl was receptive. So I started to drive her mouth over me. All the while, I never stopped watching the other girl.

I couldn't place her.

I was pretty sure she hadn't been at Zeke's party, but who the fuck knew. He'd invited fifty people, way more than he needed to, but Zeke was a lovable bully idiot. He was mean. Some might say he had a slime effect on them, but he was my best friend. I couldn't judge. I had an attitude the size of fucking Alaska. Anyway, back to Zeke. He liked to go big, and that included his parties and his fuck-ups, and there were a lot of both.

That girl...

I liked her.

Fresh face. I could tell she was light on the makeup. Her face was one of those that would look jaded under a ton of crap, but without it, she looked the way she did right now: innocent and pure. Though the fact that she was watching my blowjob didn't fit either of those adjectives. She was tugging on her lip now, her hand lingering on her shorts.

*Christ.*

Her shorts.

My chick was wearing a bikini top and shredded jean shorts—and those shorts were hardly there. They were more decorative so she didn't get arrested for public indecency. All the girls at this party were like that. Bikinis, and anything else they wore was painted on their bodies. The old school way of thought might've labeled them sluts or whores, but since we were all liberal and progressive, we went with *sexually healthy appetites*.

I, currently, was enjoying my girl's appetite.

She opened her mouth wider, angled her head to the other side, and oooh yeah—I was in at a whole different depth now. Fuck it. I took hold of her hair and started moving. She moaned, but only widened her jaw and spread her knees a little more apart. She was bracing herself.

Fuuuuck yeah.

That meant I could go a little harder, which I did. I shoved her down a bit more, a better angle, and right there. I loved when they let me take over. But then I looked back up to watch Voyeur Girl. My friends and I did not hang out with girls like my voyeur. My dick got harder. I almost cursed, gritting my teeth. I had not expected that reaction, but I'd take it.

The girl watching wore a buttoned-up maroon shirt, the ends tied at her waist. She had a good rack. The shirt was bunched up to hide 'em, but I saw her girls. They would be a decent handful, almost perfect. And she wasn't wearing a bra. There was enough of a tease between the buttons that I could see just skin, just tits.

The rest of her... I had no words.

Khaki shorts that ended mid-thigh, and what a fucking thigh she had.

This girl could model.

Long. Lean. Legs meant to wrap around your waist—I thrust a little harder, and my girl groaned around me. I needed to ease up, but I was almost gone. Almost. Not quite.

Then Mara reached up and massaged my boys. That was enough.

I unloaded into her.

She swallowed like a champ and smiled up at me. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and for a second, the weird chick was forgotten. I grinned at Mara. I always liked Mara's blowjobs, and because I wasn't an asshole, I tugged her up and moved her farther behind the trees so she was hidden from view.

Now was my turn to make her feel good.

Kissing her, I slid my hand inside her shorts and inside her, and when she was done and moaning, I looked over my shoulder. The other girl was still there, still glued to her tree, her eyes still right on us, but this time, she saw me.

Her eyes bulged out, and she inhaled sharply. She jerked back, and I grinned, lifting my hand to my mouth. I tasted Mara on my fingers as I watched her. Then I winked.

She uttered a muffled scream.

Chuckling, I grabbed Mara as she tensed in my arms.

Her head snapped around. “What was that?”

“Nothing.” I kept her tight to my side as she fixed her pants. “Come on. Let’s go back to the party.”

As we left, I glanced back.

The girl was gone.

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Keep reading Aspen and Blaise’s story [here](#)!